


# Libraries are a community's cornerstone

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opinion

Emily David and Kate Lasky | Register-Guard

It's the best of times, it's the worst of times for Oregon libraries and the communities we serve. Many struggle with outdated buildings, health and safety hazards, insufficient Wi-Fi and inadequate space. In one case, there's no running water, and in another, the building is sinking into the ground. Yet, it is these trusted institutions that pivoted quickly and creatively to adapt their myriad services to communities during the pandemic.

The federal government hasn't helped modernize and revitalize libraries since 1997, but that would change if the Build America's Libraries Act, a bipartisan bill co-sponsored by Rep. Peter DeFazio, is passed. As Congress looks at an infrastructure package, this legislation provides us with a unique opportunity right now. It would dedicate \$5 billion to libraries nationwide, of which an estimated \$63 million would be allocated for Oregon. This investment is long overdue and, riding the coattails of National Library Week, which ended April 10, it's time to pave the way for new and improved facilities in Oregon and across the country.

Libraries are the cornerstones of our communities, empowering people of all ages to explore the world through books, the internet and programs that spark curiosity, knowledge and imagination. They connect us to each other and to the rest of the world.

Over the past several years, we've seen a growing reliance on libraries by Oregon's least digitally connected residents. The computer terminals and loanable technology are lifelines to health care, employment and educational advancement.

But we need not look far to see the challenges they face. The Coos Bay Public Library, built in 1965, sits on a former swamp. The fill beneath the building continues to shift due to rising and lowering tides, heavy rains and long dry periods. A 2014 engineering study found that the pilings under the building have failed. Cracks in ceiling beams and support posts are causing concern that the shifting may result in more structural damage that will force the building's closure. In March, the Coos Bay City Council selected John Topits Park as a site for a new library, but there's no funding to have a new one built.

In Lowell, the volunteer-run library that operated out of city hall, serving 1,100 residents and 4,000 in neighboring towns, has been closed since 2018 because of structural damage. The city purchased a former church to house a new library but needs to raise \$240,000 to cover

construction and renovation. Families and local businesses are eager for a 21st-century library, and many have made donations, but funding is an enormous hurdle.

With no running water, the Williams Branch of the Josephine Community Library installed a port-a-potty out back so the librarian could wash her hands, a basic necessity at any time but especially so during the pandemic. This neglected building, which began operating in its “temporary” space in 1977, cannot safely accommodate its staff, let alone library cardholders.

Even with infrastructure issues, public libraries are bridging the digital divide. A senior Williams patron, and frequent library visitor until the pandemic, has been able to check out a laptop and learn how to use the branch’s Wi-Fi. In town, when the local internet service was down for nearly two weeks, the branch welcomed many residents to its parking lot to complete business they would normally do from home. One patron needed to take an online commercial driver’s license test, and another used the Wi-Fi to order supplies and process shipping orders for her home business.

Investing in libraries will help communities come back even stronger. Committed to equity and opportunity, libraries have helped keep people connected during the pandemic and they will bring people together again, with access to technology, training, and programs, in both old and new ways.

After a winter of despair, let’s make this a spring of hope by letting our state and local representatives know how vital the Build America’s Libraries Act will be for all of us.

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