

Opinion

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In our view

Democracy's doorways

"It is terrible that so many library resources were cut, especially in these difficult times when people need their libraries more than ever."

One response to the Lancaster Library System online survey.

Public libraries in Pennsylvania are a booming business with a bleak future.

Walk into any public library in Lancaster County and you are likely to find every computer terminal in use. They are gobbled up by people researching their ancestry, students working on projects and adults looking for jobs.

Books often are piled high at the front desk as readers return or check out books. Businessmen and retirees peruse the periodicals, mothers quietly read Dr. Seuss to their children and atlases are spread across tables as people prepare their vacations.

Library use in Lancaster County has more than doubled in the past decade. More than 1,700 people use the Lancaster Public Library on a given day. Half of the county's population has a library card.

And yet, state funding for libraries is in freefall — dropping from \$94 million to \$68 million since 2008. During the past six years, Lancaster County libraries have seen their share of state money sink by more than one-third — from nearly \$3 million to \$1.9 million. County funding has remained stagnant. Municipal funding is a mixed bag in which communities pledge anywhere from \$5 to a few cents per capita.

As funding has dropped, so have services. The governor's budget gutted funding for Power Library, a voluminous database provided to the library system and used by all public schools in the county. Subscriptions to other online databases including *Ancestry.com* and EBSCOhost have not been renewed.

Local libraries have reduced hours and cut staffs. Elizabethtown Library is closing the week of Aug. 21 as a result of state funding cuts.

Some have suggested that public libraries charge for their services, and libraries have considered

charging for value added services, such as movies.

But not only is it illegal to charge for basic public library services, it is shortsighted.

A library is more than a building with books and periodicals and computers. It is democracy's doorway. Libraries provide the necessary keys for a participatory democracy. Libraries in Pennsylvania operate under the umbrella of the state Education Department. As such, they are the educational institution we use when we have left formal schooling behind.

The Lancaster County Planning Commission is drafting an economic development sustainability component as part of the county's comprehensive plan. Among the items being discussed are ways to improve the quality of life in Lancaster County and to develop a climate where creativity can flourish and fuel growth.

For that to occur, local libraries must have a place at the table. Libraries need stable, sustainable funding sources at state, county and local levels to provide the services and information businesses and an informed public requires.

Industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie understood that need.

Wrote Carnegie: "There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the Earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office nor wealth receives the slightest consideration."

Gov. Ed Rendell has been justly criticized for authorizing \$20 million for the Arlen Specter Library Project Center at Philadelphia University and the John P. Murtha Center for Public Policy in Johnstown while cutting funding for public libraries in the state.

Although the money comes from a bond measure, not the general fund, Rendell's decision sends the message that local libraries must fend for themselves.

That's wrong. It's evident that public libraries serve a need. The question is: Where is the political will to fund that need?