

LONG OVERDUE:

A FRESH LOOK AT PUBLIC ATTITUDES ABOUT LIBRARIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Full Report
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at
www.publicagenda.org

Key findings from a soon-to-be-released report by PUBLIC AGENDA supported by AMERICANS FOR LIBRARIES COUNCIL and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Americans View Public Libraries as Not Only Relevant to the 21st Century, But Essential to Their Communities

Summary: The American people expect and prize public library service in the Internet age. In fact, they see libraries as potential solutions to many communities' most pressing problems, from universal access to computers to a safe place for teens. But the research suggests a troubling "perception" gap, with many elected leaders reluctant to consider libraries a funding priority, and community residents – even those most appreciative of the library – unaware that libraries face stiff competition for funds. This spells a missed opportunity for elected leaders, who could build upon libraries' currency in the community to address a host of contemporary problems, as well as for the library community, which could better secure libraries' funding future by trumpeting the many traditional and innovative roles libraries play today.

Long Overdue is based on telephone interviews with a national random sample of 1,203 adults 18 years and older. Of those, 458 interviews were done with respondents who are civically engaged in the community on a number of dimensions such as voting and volunteerism. Public Agenda also conducted 34 in-depth interviews with national and community leaders in politics, business, education, public health and library architecture to share their perspectives about the future of public libraries in America, as well as focus groups in six diverse communities across the nation.

Libraries Hold High Credibility in their Communities

- Libraries receive the best grades of any of the community institutions covered in this study, with four in 10 giving them an 'A'
- Moreover, libraries seem to have escaped the public's general cynicism about government wasting taxpayer money. A majority of the public says their local libraries use money well. Even among people who rarely if ever use the local public library, a majority gives local libraries credit in this regard.
- Most people say libraries perform an "essential" service in maintaining a productive community, and three-quarters say that if libraries were closed because of lack of funding, communities would lose something important and valuable.

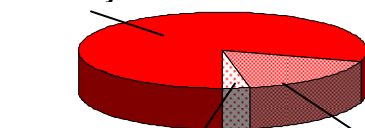
The Public Values Both Traditional and 21st Century Library Services

- Asked what libraries' top priorities should be, Americans pointed most frequently to such traditional services as having enough books for children, having good reference materials and knowledgeable, friendly librarians.
- At the same time, two-thirds say that having enough computers and online services should also be a high priority for their local library.

Libraries: Essential to *Whole* Community

If your public library were shut down tomorrow due to lack of funding, would you feel that something essential and important has been lost, affecting the whole community, or that while something important was lost, it really only affects a few people in the community, or the loss would not be important for your community?

Important loss to whole community - 78%



Not important - 3%

Only affects a few - 17%

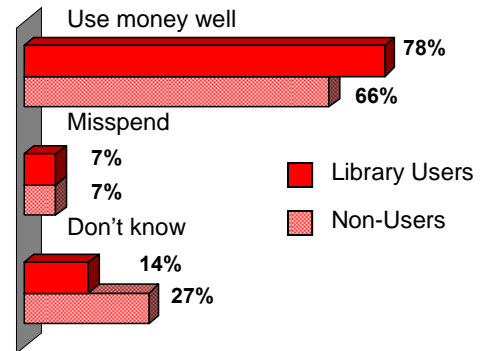
- Seven in 10 favor wiring libraries so that those who might not be able to afford home computers can learn computer skills and get online.

Civically Engaged: Strong on Libraries, But Not Called to Action

- Americans who are active in their communities and vote regularly in local elections are also more likely to have a library card, favor taxes to support libraries and give them good grades for their services.
- Although these highly engaged citizens are even more upbeat than others about libraries, they are no more likely to see the urgency of libraries being at risk for losing future public support.
- The bottom line: The people that local politicians are most likely to listen to are also the most likely to be library supporters. But right now, they are generally unaware of possible threats to library services.

Library users and non-users alike say libraries use public monies well.

Do you believe that libraries use their money well, or do they spend it on the wrong things?



Leaders See Libraries as Poised to Solve Problems, But Vulnerable

- Leaders recognize the potential of libraries to do far more in their communities than just provide access to information. Many point to very specific examples of where libraries had made themselves indispensable to communities facing major challenges, such as adult literacy and helping acculturate new immigrants.
- At the same time, many leaders pointed out that libraries tend to fall to the bottom of the list when local decision makers are deciding their budgets.

Most People Reject Cutting Library Services and Are Receptive to Boosting Funding — if Libraries Make the Case

- Faced with the prospect of local libraries in trouble, even non-users say they would raise taxes rather than cut back services or charge fees. Asked “If local libraries need additional funds to continue operation,” increasing taxes to cover the necessary costs was the most popular answer (59% of library users, 47% of non-users) – ahead of “the library charging the people who use it” (26% library users, 35% non-users) or “the library reducing the service that it offers” (17% library users, 23% non-users). But since most Americans aren’t aware of the funding challenge, libraries need to nurture this potential support and help translate it into action, the study suggests.
- Because most Americans believe libraries use tax resources wisely, libraries do not have to fight the “cut the waste first” attitudes the public brings to so many issues of public funding.
- There are several areas where the public sees opportunities for libraries to fill key gaps in their communities. Providing safe places for teens along with engaging activities, offering places where adults can improve their reading skills, and serving as the “go to” place in the community that assures access to government information, such as health program forms and tax information are seen as places where community needs and library strengths overlap.