

How to Tell a World-Class City?

Written by John J. Quick, Special To The BT

CHECK OUT THE VITRANCY OF ITS LIBRARY SYSTEM



Photo courtesy of Miami-Dade Public Library System

The 20th Century was a renaissance for libraries in the Western world when the United States, France, and Britain opened libraries in most major cities during the Cold War. Libraries played an important role in the advancement and sharing of ideas and information on current economic, political, and cultural affairs during the ideological battle between East and West.

Today libraries continue to serve as beacons of democracy because they

offer free and equal access to information for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, ability, or economic status. Libraries represent an individual's right to acquire knowledge, explore, and achieve.

In 2007 the Miami-Dade Public Library System was awarded the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, the nation's highest honor conferred on museums and libraries for service to the community.

A year later new branches opened and older branches were upgraded in accordance with the 13-year capital plan approved by the Board of County Commissioners in 2002. Materials and equipment circulation reached an all-time high of 9,224,050 in 2009, and library visits reached 23,026,231. Then the cutting began.

Since 2010, library revenues -- determined by property tax rates set by the Miami-Dade County Commission -- have been slashed by 55 percent. Yet countywide property taxes were reduced only 2.78 percent.

The result, not surprisingly, has been devastating. The free Science, Math, and Reading Tutoring Program (SMART), which provided 29,000 hours of academic support each year, was eliminated.

Two of four library bookmobiles have been taken off the road, and regular neighborhood stops have dwindled from 48 to 28.

Staff reductions have made the recruitment and training of volunteers for the adult literacy program unmanageable, rendering the program essentially unavailable to the 250,000 adults who need it.

In addition, staff reductions and less funding for new books have markedly reduced the JumpStart program, which provides story time starter kits and training to child care centers. The Reading Ready program, which teaches parents six essential child literacy skills, has stopped operating in all branches.

Operating hours have been reduced. Professional librarians have been laid off by the hundreds, and the book-buying budget is dry. If you are looking for your child's school summer reading book, chances are you will not find it at the library.

Avoiding these service cuts and enhancing the services provided can all be done by restoring to the library's \$64 million budget. A sampling of what \$64 million could buy includes: innovative "makerspaces"; virtual information complexes; workforce expansion centers; path-to-citizenship outreach programs; early reader apps for tablets and mobile devices; the return of tutoring and other educational programs for children; teen centers at all regional libraries; renovations of children's rooms; more advanced technology classes for children and seniors; new books and e-resources; more senior center services through mobile library and outreach services; upgraded and increased technology options at public work stations in every branch; increased cultural and recreational programming at all branches; restored operating hours; and the preservation of a quality staff skilled in research, technology, educational curriculum, and programming operations.

Most recently, county Commissioner Esteban Bovo suggested that some library branches be relocated to parks as a cost-cutting solution. The truth is, we need not go as far as the commissioner's district of Hialeah to find wonderful synergies between parks and libraries. The Virrick Park and Shenandoah Park branches are perfect examples. While this is perhaps a visionary, long-term idea we should embrace philosophically, we should not overlook the cost of retrofitting dilapidated park buildings for library branches. A real cost-benefit analysis is in order.

The bottom line is that right now, we should be focusing our efforts on adequately funding our libraries to restore programs; restore the book-buying budget; rehire qualified staff; upgrade technology; engage in community outreach; and implement innovative ideas for a 21st-century library -- before spending money on bricks and mortar to retrofit decaying park structures that will only serve as museums for old books.

You cannot have a world-class city with a decaying library system. Libraries are inextricably linked to education and quality-of-life factors that are central to the future economic growth of Miami-Dade County. Libraries are an engine of our prosperity because a healthy economy depends on a workforce that is literate and informed.

Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library and the Coalition to Save Our Library encourage all residents of this community to call or write their county commissioners to tell them Miami-Dade libraries must be adequately funded.

The library budget will be set at a County Commission meeting on July 15. There is no time like the present to make your voice heard.

"Whatever the cost of our libraries," said Walter Cronkite, "the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation."

As our county and nation struggle to prosper in an increasingly complicated world, his wisdom is more valid today than ever.

John J. Quick is president of Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library