

OFF THE CUF

BRANCHING OUT

While Overshadowed By Other Initiatives, the Recent Decision to Restore Six Day A Week Library Service is a Huge Victory for New York and Will Help Boost the Competitiveness of the City's Workforce

LAST MONTH, MAYOR MICHAEL BLOOMBERG WON A SIGNIFICANT VICTORY

when state legislative leaders agreed to advance his high-profile congestion pricing proposal. But the mayor's innovative traffic plan isn't the only policy initiative agreed to this summer that should produce meaningful long-term benefits for New York City. This past June, the mayor and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn struck a deal on a less-heralded initiative—to restore six day a week service to the city's public libraries—that should be recognized as a landmark achievement for boosting the competitiveness of the city's future workforce and improving the quality of life for untold numbers of seniors, parents, children and immigrants.

While most everyone supports libraries, few recognize just how significant they are in the context of workforce and community development. Yet, New York's three public library systems—Brooklyn Public Library, Queens Public Library and New York Public Library, which serves Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island—are much more than just places to borrow books. They foster reading skills in kids, assist adults in addressing skills gaps, help immigrants assimilate and bolster technology access for thousands of seniors and low-income individuals who don't have computers or the Internet at home. Libraries complement the public schools in improving student achievement by offering after school tutoring and other learning initiatives. And through initiatives ranging from GED prep courses and entrepreneurship workshops to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, they help equip adults with the tools they need to compete in today's knowledge economy.

All of these functions are invaluable at a time when New York desperately needs to invest in its human capital. Currently, 57 percent of all elementary and middle school students read below state and city standards; more than 1.5 million adults in the five boroughs have limited literacy skills; a quarter of all adults across the city have inadequate English skills; roughly 170,000 New York City teens are neither in school nor working; and the unemployment rate among teenagers is approximately double the national rate.

But until this year's budget agreement, which added \$42.7 million in new baselined funding to support the three library systems, too few of the city's library branches had been open when New Yorkers who need them the most could use them. Most library branches in every borough were open less than 40 hours each week. Scores of branches weren't open at all over weekends, and the vast majority of them shut their doors by 6 pm on most nights. Shockingly, New York's public libraries were open an average of 39 hours per week, the lowest number of the 20 largest cities in the U.S. For instance, libraries are open an average of 59 hours a week in Chicago, 53 hours in Los Angeles and 66 hours in Phoenix. Even in cash-strapped Detroit, libraries are open 40 hours a week.

Libraries across the five boroughs were open six days a week for most of the 1990s and in the early part of this decade. That changed shortly after 9/11, though, when the severe budget shortfall Mayor Bloomberg inherited led him to make significant cuts to a litany of city services, including libraries. In the face of sharply reduced funding, the city's three library systems scaled back most branches to five days a week.

New York's libraries then operated with a bare-bones schedule that wasn't conducive for many working New Yorkers. For instance:

- In the entire city, only two library branches—the Mid-Manhattan and Brooklyn Central Libraries—were open before 10am.
- Only 27 of the 63 Queens branches were open on the weekend. (21 branches were open on Saturdays and 6 on Sundays; 4 were open both weekend days), and 32 of the 63 branches were open 35 hours or less.
- Every Brooklyn branch except the Central Library stayed open past 6pm just one night a week.
- 54 of the 56 Brooklyn branches didn't open their doors until 1pm at least three days a week, and Saturday hours at all of them were only from 11 to 3.
- 20 of the 35 branches in the Bronx were open just five days a week.
- Half of the 12 Staten Island branches were open just five days a week.

How do New York's Libraries Stack Up?

As this chart shows, before the budget agreement this June to restore library service to six days per week, New York City's library branches were open fewer hours per week, on average, than any other library system among the 20 largest cities in the U.S. The additional funding will bring the city's average up to 45 hours per week, a dramatic improvement, but still below the national average of 47 hours per week and well behind many other large cities.

| Library System | Average Hours Open Per Week |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Phoenix | 66 |
| Baltimore | 66 |
| Charlotte | 65.2 |
| Columbus | 63.7 |
| San Antonio | 60.5 |
| Chicago | 59.7 |
| Austin | 58.9 |
| Indianapolis | 57.1 |
| Jacksonville | 53.7 |
| Los Angeles | 53 |
| Houston | 50.6 |
| San Jose | 49.5 |
| Dallas | 49.3 |
| Memphis | 48.7 |
| Fort Worth | 47 |
| San Diego | 43.1 |
| San Francisco | 42 |
| Philadelphia | 41.8 |
| Detroit | 40 |
| Staten Island | 39.7 |
| Manhattan | 39.6 |
| Bronx | 39.3 |
| Queens | 38.7 |
| Brooklyn | 38 |

Source: Calculations made by Center for an Urban Future in June 2007 based on the published schedules of each library system. Averages include main branches and research libraries.

"[Libraries] have got to be open at times when people need it and want to use it. The time children have is after school and on weekends. The times parents have are after work and on weekends," says Gail Nayowith, executive director of Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, a child advocacy organization.

While government agencies and nonprofit organizations provide some of the same services as libraries, no other institution serves such a diverse mix of New Yorkers—from first graders to seniors, new immigrants to long-time residents and would-be entrepreneurs to first-time job applicants. With branches in neighborhoods throughout the five boroughs, libraries are easily accessible for almost all New Yorkers. They are also probably the one public institution that is trusted by immigrants, a fact that can't be overlooked at a time when immigrants and their children comprise roughly 60 percent of the city's population.

"People really do trust [the library] as a place to go for information," says Brian Gurski, director of the Small Business Development Center at LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City. Gurski occasionally teaches workshops for entrepreneurs at various library branches in Queens, a borough where the bulk of those starting businesses are immigrants. "Libraries are one of those ideal locations to reach deep within communities because that's often where new immigrants feel safe and comfortable."

Before the recent agreement, however, the city's libraries couldn't meet the demands of many immigrants and other working New Yorkers. Indeed, librarians and community leaders interviewed by the Center said that the reduction in library hours that occurred in 2002 impacted their ability to serve communities.

Michael Semple, who manages the Adult Literacy Center at the Rochdale branch in Eastern Queens, said that his branch used to offer a pre-GED class on Saturdays that was taken by about 40 adults. But the budget cuts forced the Rochdale branch to shut its doors on Saturdays and discontinue the class. The Laurelton library branch remained open on Saturdays and offered the class, but in a May 2007 interview, Semple said that it wasn't as convenient for many neighborhood residents, and as a result, it attracted just 18 to 20 students. "When it was here, people had more accessibility from their homes. Now they don't have that," Semple said. "A lot of our students are working two and three jobs. They can't go to the library during the week. The only thing available to them is a Saturday program." (Thanks to the additional funding in the city budget, the Rochdale branch expects to re-introduce its pre-GED class on Saturdays later this year.)

In several neighborhoods across the city, the funding cutbacks that occurred in 2002 prompted libraries to elim-

inate morning hours two or three days during the week. Library officials say that made it more difficult to serve older adults, who often feel more comfortable using the library in the morning, a time when it is light out (and thus, safer) and quieter (before masses of kids start arriving).

Tom Kamber, executive director of Older Adults Technology Services, a nonprofit that supports older adults in using technology to improve their lives, says he can all but guarantee that many more seniors will take advantage of the computers and Internet access as more branches start opening their doors in the mornings again. Kamber says that older people across the five boroughs depend on computers at libraries to go online for everything from communicating with relatives to re-searching prescription drug plans.

"Libraries are a lifeline for a lot of seniors," says Kamber. "It would be a shock if 20 percent of seniors had access to the Internet at home. So what they end up doing is going to the local technology resource. In 75 percent of the cases, it's the library."

Fortunately, the additional funds provided in this year's budget agreement have allowed libraries across the city to begin extending their hours. In early July, the Brooklyn Public Library started opening its doors earlier in the morning; most branches now open at 9am three days a week. Additionally, as of mid-July, all of the New York Public Library's 87 branches and four research libraries are open at least six days a week. The Queens Public Library has also begun to open several more branches on the weekends; in the coming weeks, it expects to add Saturday hours at all 63 branches and Sunday hours at some.

Speaker Quinn, who made six day a week library service one of her top budget priorities, and her colleagues in the City Council deserve much of the credit for the libraries' windfall. Though libraries might not seem to have as dramatic an impact on the city as congestion pricing or higher-profile issues, this overlooked aspect of the budget agreement will quietly improve the quality of life for countless New Yorkers.

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