

To keep you informed about the Central Library, attached is an article by John Szabo, Director of Libraries of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System that appeared in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on Wednesday, June 25, 2008.

A neighbor with smarts

Master plan: New library for Atlanta would reflect a commitment to education, literacy --- and to downtown.

By John F. Szabo
For the Journal-Constitution
Published on: 06/25/08

Libraries make good neighbors. Good libraries make cities stronger. Great libraries boost economic development, serve as a stop for tourists and residents alike and become their community's center. The library's mission is open and equal access to all, which signifies opportunity for all — every age, income level, ethnicity or physical ability — offering programs that educate, entertain, enlighten and engage. Lifelong learning is the hallmark of libraries throughout history, even before the catch-phrase was popular.

The bold and exciting idea to build a new central library in downtown Atlanta, offered up by Fulton County Commissioner Robb Pitts as an addition to the library's facility master plan, is forward-thinking and reflects a commitment to education, literacy and the value of public libraries as critical cultural institutions. Thanks not only to Pitts for surfacing the idea but to our library's board of trustees and the Fulton County Board of Commissioners for their support of this idea.

A signature central library would follow in the wise path of other great U.S. cities that have built new central libraries in recent years, including Seattle, Nashville and Minneapolis. A strong central library enhances the entire community, and in downtown Atlanta, with world-class neighbors such as the Georgia Aquarium, World of Coke and CNN Center, a signature library would add to the cultural landscape of our city in a way that nothing else can.

The Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System began in 1902 as the Carnegie Library of Atlanta, one of the first public libraries in the United States. We are proud to carry on the tradition of Andrew Carnegie.

Last year, the library began a strategic fact-finding mission in order to determine the best course of action for a long-overdue facility master plan. The library system held a series of 37 public meetings, in communities from Chattahoochee Hill Country to Alpharetta. We heard from hundreds of citizens, each with a personal story of how our libraries have supported or in fact changed their lives. We listened to their recommendations for how we can become better. The final plan calls for eight new libraries, two expansions and 24 renovations, and, if approved by the commissioners next month, the plan will be placed on the

November ballot as a bond referendum. In a time when the commission has to carefully examine the balance of our tax dollars with the services provided to residents, I believe there is no better time to invest in public libraries.

Ten years ago, pundits predicted that the Internet boom and bookstore mega-chains would lead to the demise of the nation's 16,000 public libraries. In fact the opposite has proven true — current data show that U.S. library visits have increased each year, and the demand for new and improved spaces is at a record high. Almost 550 public library construction or renovation projects were completed from 2004 through 2006 — growth unmatched since Carnegie led an effort to build 1,600 new libraries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fulton County cannot afford to fall behind.

The Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System serves nearly 1 million people in Fulton County and Atlanta in DeKalb — with 34 libraries. It does this at a satisfaction rating of 97 percent. We offer innovative programs, services and technology to meet our community's needs. Today's libraries continue to offer books, magazines and newspapers, but we are also the place to take classes, download e-audiobooks, research your genealogy, get homework help, join the summer reading program, see art exhibitions, check out videos, CDs and DVDs, earn your GED, hear authors speak, research online databases, and see musical performances. This extensive list of programming, services and events attracts young and old alike.

Our library system averages a circulation of 3.2 million materials per year. Last year, citizens made more than 3 million visits to the 34 libraries — with close to 600,000 to the Central Library alone. More than 7,000 enrichment programs were attended by more than 250,000 patrons. Our Web site had more than 5 million hits, about 13,700 per day. Patrons were provided with 1.8 million individual sessions on 650 computers to search the Internet, look for jobs, create resumes, use e-mail, research health issues and more.

Think of the Central Library as a hub, the branch libraries its spokes, working as one to serve communities, build minds, help students, grow businesses and expand futures. For good reason, a new urban library would be the cornerstone to a vital downtown for years to come. Our city deserves it now more than ever. It's the neighbor we all want to have.

> John F. Szabo is director of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.