

> Investments

‘The Friends’ supports St. Paul Library’s proposed building plan. Here’s why

By Beth Burns

In St. Paul, we have the opportunity for bold investment in our future through our public libraries. With continued challenges and uncertainty, we need trusted resources, people, and spaces to support, connect and help us move forward.

According to a recent study from the Saint Paul City Council Audit Committee, Saint Paul Public Library is the most trusted, beloved public institution in our city. When we invest in our Library, we invest in possibilities. We invest in each other.

Saint Paul Public Library has proposed a vision and direction for its facilities that is dynamic, responsive and accessible to today’s library users and to our whole community. Transformative investments in the Hayden Heights, Riverview, and Hamline Midway libraries will say, “We see you. We welcome you” to residents of all abilities, all ages, all socio-economic and education backgrounds, all races and ethnicities, all identities, all interests, and all circumstances. Additional systemwide investments will address the need for technology-rich spaces as well as spaces for children and their adults to play and learn together.

Saint Paul Public Library has led remarkable community engagement processes across our city and has engaged hundreds of residents in imagining libraries that will serve us all for decades to come. The Friends commends their process. And, we unequivocally sup-

port Saint Paul Public Library’s proposed vision for systemwide investments that honor our history and will make all our libraries more welcoming, more accessible, and more prepared to meet whatever challenge comes next.

We believe in the Library. The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library has a long and successful history of advocacy and investment grounded in the basic principle that Libraries Are Essential. We believe that public libraries are essential to healthy neighborhoods, to thriving families, to aspiring individuals, and to our sense of identity and pride as residents of St. Paul.

If you, like me, are someone whose vision of a public library is grounded in memories of childhood trips to check out books or attend storytimes, I invite – I implore – you to visit a Saint Paul library branch. You’ll find people reading. You’ll also find children singing, teens gaming, students sewing, musicians recording, neighbors laughing, adults learning, and always ... library staff helping.

Today’s library offers books – and so much more, all in response to community needs. Even during the height of the pandemic, our Library has con-

sistently shown up for us. In 2021:

- Library staff, in partnership with Ramsey County Workforce Solutions, mobilized 2,700 career help sessions for displaced and unemployed workers.

- Saint Paul Public Library gave away more than 18,000 books to children and families and served 3,500 participants in summer outdoor storytimes.

- Community specialists working with the Somali, Latinx, Karen, Hmong, and African American communities interacted with 14,000 residents in five languages.

- The library hosted 48,000 Wi-Fi sessions to serve individuals of all ages who have limited or no digital access.

- The library gave away 792 Tech-Paks (which include a computer, internet hotspot, and digital training) to Saint Paul households.

Ebooks and digital downloads of materials comprised an increasingly important part of the 2.2 million items that were circulated.

And now, with library hours and staff restored to pre-pandemic levels, our Homework Centers and Reading Together programs are filled with students catching up on reading skills and academic performance

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after two years of deeply disrupted educational experiences. Children and families are gathering for in-person storytimes. Neighbors and coworkers are coming together for community meetings, workshops, classes, book clubs, trainings, and more. Citywide celebrations like Juneteenth and Northern Spark have events and homes in our libraries. And, in just a few weeks, Summer Spark, the library’s citywide summer reading program, kicks off with another year of book giveaways, artist-led encounters, and more.

Even in the most “normal” of times, investing in the public library makes sense. These are not normal times. In the last three years, the economic, educational, employment, health, public safety, digital access, and social disparities in our community have been laid bare. For every example of inequality and inequity that has been exposed in our city since the start of the pandemic, the library has been expected to come up with a response and solution. And, more often than not, it has – to all our benefit.

The Saint Paul Public Library system requires investment equivalent to what it’s being asked to do in, for, and with our community today. And

investing in transformative spaces that will serve us all is the first step. Why now? Because we cannot afford to wait. We deserve spaces that welcome all of us with services, resources, technology, and information that serve us far beyond building walls.

The Friends’ vision is for a dynamic library at the heart of every community. Our organization has a 75-year history as the Library’s (and therefore the City’s) philanthropic partner. We know there is a role for The Friends in realizing the Library’s transformative vision; we are wrapping up our own capital campaign feasibility and community engagement process to understand how The Friends can financially contribute to this effort. And, in keeping with our decades-long public-private partnership, we will also continue to advocate to local and statewide leaders for more public investment.

When we build and update buildings, we do so much more than pay for bricks and mortar. We invest in people and in neighborhoods. We invest in all our futures.

Beth Burns is president of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.