

Carnegie Library System: Comparative Operating Statistics

After receiving little attention in the way of research since the 1990s, the state of the Carnegie Libraries—a public trust of 19 libraries with a collection of over 5.2 million items based in the City of Pittsburgh—has been a much covered topic since 2008.

Consider the following: a 2008 study by Carnegie Mellon University; a 2009 study by RAND; a 2010 outside audit performed for the Regional Asset District board; and a 2011 Public-Private Task Force report. State funding issues, the threatened closure of four branches, and a debate over how much additional financial support the City should be providing the library system will spur on such a volume of inquiry.

Based on recommendation five of the Task Force report, voters in the City of Pittsburgh will get a chance this fall to vote on whether to approve a property tax rate increase of a quarter of a mill (from 10.8 to 11.05 mills) to provide a dedicated funding stream for the Carnegie Library system. Those on both the pro and con side will have the opportunity to make their case to the voting public as to why the tax increase is warranted or not.

What do recent studies tell us about the system's operations that might be relevant to the voters in making their decision? The studies have mapped locations and examined alternative arrangements, determined how viable the library system's cost-saving plans were, and explored the likelihood of new revenues. Much attention in each study was given to benchmarking the Carnegie system against other big city systems to assess performance and cost-effectiveness. For instance:

- ***The Carnegie system was in the middle to bottom of the pack on a per resident cost basis:*** The RAND study found that in 2005 the operating expenditure per capita for the Carnegie system was \$57.74 nearly identical to the group average of \$57.55 for Pittsburgh and thirteen other cities. It was much lower than Cleveland (\$127.16) but higher than Louisville (\$23.79). The audit conducted for the RAD board used a larger sample of twenty three systems and when those systems' costs on salaries/benefits as a percentage of total operating expenditures was determined, the Carnegie stood at 55 percent. The average for the group was 62 percent and the system serving Birmingham came in at the highest with 82 percent.

- ***The Carnegie system was on the low end of usage and population per facility:*** The CMU study produced a measure of population per facility and found that, when based on the City of Pittsburgh’s population, the Carnegie system served fewer than 20,000 people per facility. Only Boston, Cincinnati, and Cleveland likewise served fewer than 20,000 per facility. Conversely, systems in Baltimore, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Louisville served more than 40,000 per facility according to the data. The RAND study produced a library visit per capita measurement and found that the Carnegie system had a metric of 4.24. The average for their peer group was 7.41 indicating Pittsburghers do not visit the library as frequently as residents of other cities in the report.
- ***The Carnegie system was above average on the proportion of staff comprised of librarians:*** The RAD audit produced counts for full-time equivalent staff identified as librarians and other staff. These numbers were used to obtain a percentage of staff that are librarians. The average was 26 percent for the sample. The Carnegie system’s percentage was 30 with five other city systems above it, none going higher than 34 percent.

One area that most of the research touched upon—but was not used for purposes of benchmarking costs—was that of the 44 libraries that comprise the Allegheny County Library Association (ACLA). The RAD sales tax funds both the Carnegie system as well as the ACLA libraries and both receive aid from the Commonwealth.

Based on 2010 library attendance (2.2 million) and 2010 operating expenditures (\$23.9 million) the Carnegie system had a per attendee cost of \$10.81; this was more than double that of the aggregate ACLA per attendee cost of \$4.21 (aggregate operating expenditures of \$21.7 million and 5.1 million attendees in 2010). Individual libraries of the ACLA system in Braddock, Bridgeville, and Carnegie (Borough) exceeded the per attendee cost of the Carnegie system; libraries serving Monroeville, McKeesport, and Robinson approached the per attendee cost.

Additionally, whereas RAD and state funding covered 90 percent of the Carnegie system’s expenses, state and RAD funds accounted for only 35 percent of aggregate ACLA library expenses. No individual ACLA member library had the level of support for the Carnegie system, though libraries serving McKees Rocks, Swissvale, Bellevue, and North Versailles were above 60 percent in combined RAD and state funding for covered operating expenses.

The Task Force report made a point of noting that “many other libraries in Allegheny County continued to receive both RAD funding and a contribution from their municipalities after RAD was created [in 1994], understanding that ongoing local support for the libraries would be critical”. Data from the ACLA on local government income (not counting RAD) shows that four municipalities (Brentwood, Castle Shannon, Robinson, and Wilkinsburg) have dedicated millage for their libraries. Municipal contributions in 2010 ranged from a high of \$1.4 million for Northland Library (Bradford Woods, Franklin Park, Marshall, McCandless, and Ross) to \$2,000 for McKees Rocks.

The Carnegie system reported \$602,000 from the City of Pittsburgh in 2010; the proposed millage increase is projected to raise \$3.25 million annually.

With the wealth of information in recent years compiled on the Carnegie system, voters have plenty of data to ponder in order to decide how they will vote on the referendum. The most likely opposition will come from non-resident property owners, especially owners of commercial properties that already pay a large majority of City property taxes.

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