

**TESTIMONY OF OTTO E. LEWIS**  
**MONTGOMERY COUNTY LIBRARY BOARD**  
**April 16, 2009**  
**Members of the County Council**

Good evening Council President Andrews and Council members. My name is Otto Lewis; I live in Colesville, Maryland. I am a member of the Library Board and I am honored to serve as the Chairman of its Legislative and Public Affairs Committee and it is my pleasure to speak to you tonight.

I know you have heard this before: Americans **are using libraries now more than ever**. During this time of economic downturn, library services are in great demand. Unfortunately, just when the need for libraries increases, their budgets - are often the first to be cut. **(Don't cut Montgomery County Public Libraries (MCPL) budget any further)**. Just when the challenges to the workforce are greatest, services and hours are cut (making job searching and training information less available. **(Don't cut the library hours.)** Libraries across the country are helping Americans get back to work by assisting people with job searches and providing financial information. According to one study, a family of four saves as much as \$2,500 a year by borrowing 10 items from the library per month instead of buying them. Bookstores are closing.

Don't get me wrong, we are proud of our library system and the services it provides. In FY 08, MCPL had 9 million visits. 88% of the visitors visited the library at least once per month. We have 472 public access computers, over 3M print materials, 187, 790 audio recordings, 169, 671 videos/DVDs, 4,407 periodicals, WiFi at 20 branches. Phone calls and instant message questions to Ask-a-Librarian reference service also have grown by 4%. However, at this point, we have smaller staff and fewer programs to offer. Based on a recent customer satisfaction survey, our libraries were rated well in terms of overall satisfaction at 96%.

This is just part of the story. With the increase in visits, the tension is beginning to show; for instance, there are long lines waiting to use the computers. At one time, many of us thought libraries would become obsolete in the Internet Age. **Not so. They have modernized, digitized, virtualized. Many people are canceling home service on the Internet to save money. At some libraries, the wait time can stretch over an hour.**

Libraries have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. My mother is a retired college librarian. Books are important to me. I have friends who have told me they wouldn't be where they are today if it wasn't for the public library. **There is no such thing as a good education without good libraries.** As it was when I was a youngster, our young people today find libraries to be a

"sanctuary of learning- a **safe place** to meet after school. As a matter of fact, the increase in teen book checkouts for MCPL is 33%.

Based on a recent Harris Poll for the American Library Association of youth ages 8 to 18, when asked the questions, when you visit the local library web site, what do you go there for?

75% say to borrow books or other materials for school assignments

60% say to borrow books for personal use

46% say to use the library web for information and research

38% say to study

38% say to read

26% say to use the library's computers for fun

21% say to hang out with friends

17% say for special programs

As you can see, our young folks know the value of libraries in their community. It's the only institution in American society offering such accessible learning opportunities for all ages.

As a long time advocate for libraries, I do what I can to support the Montgomery County libraries needs. However it is the County's role to fund basic library services. **Closing the doors or reducing the hours of operation will deny access by residents to resources as well as the expertise of an outstanding staff. Please keep the libraries open. Keep staff in tact.** Your efforts will go a long way in keeping the level of our customer service high. I know this year you are facing many painful choices, so I sincerely appreciate your efforts in keeping all branches open and maintaining our current hours.

I met with each of you last year and I am looking forward to our meetings again this year. As you recall, we were rated very low by the Henning rating system. I am please to say. We are now in the top twenty of the Hennen rating and a four star (4 out of 5) in the Library Journal rating. I am looking forward to our upcoming meetings, again, this year. The theme will be "The Impact of the Economic Downturn on our Libraries."

I thank you very much for your consideration of my comments.