

“Let there be no mistake. Public library service is a critical service that must be preserved. People need us, and we must continue to be there for them. We will fight every day to save the Queens Library this year, so that when this economy turns around we will be well positioned to expand library service to where it truly needs to be—open seven days a week,” CEO Thomas W. Galante said at a recent New York City Council budget hearing. For its daily delivery on that commitment, in both good and bad times, the Queens Library is the 2009 Gale/LJ Library of the Year.

Despite a current (FY08) budget cut of \$5 million and the threat of reductions of nearly \$20 million more in the next budget, the Queens Library has maintained massive and excellent programs of service and incredibly high levels of use by a public that lines up at every one of its 62 sites, every day, and occupies every space until it closes. The service includes some 23,000 free educational, cultural, and entertainment programs each year and a circulation approaching 20 million items. The Queens Library



TREATING CONSTITUENTS ROYALLY (Clockwise from far l.): The branches of Queens Library are richly appointed with materials and enthusiasm. Jackson

THE POLITICS OF EXCELLENCE

Queens Library, NY
By John N. Berry III

serves a population of 2.27 million, 55 percent of whom speak a language at home other than English—it is just one of the 160 different languages spoken in that diverse borough. No one in Queens lives more than a mile from a library branch.

Managing under fire

The administration and staff of the Queens Library do all this while discussing and developing scenarios and plans for FY09 budget reductions everyone hopes will be less than the \$20 million threatened.

Queens's FY08 budget of \$127.5 million affords the library \$56 per capita. That budget pays for a full-time staff of 1150 and an additional 550 on hourly rates. Nearly 25 percent of them are “librarians” who hold the MLS. Many earned that degree while working at Queens, with tuition help from the library.

“It takes a lot of effort and time to scenario plan in the face of a huge budget cut. We do it in broad strokes up front,” says Galante. “We scheduled a week in June, as soon as we knew

the number, to meet with our senior people to figure out what to do. In the meantime, we’re planning different service models and service schedules.”

Despite huge cuts proposed by the New York City mayor’s office, the city’s three libraries have strong support from the speaker of the council, Christine Quinn. “We’ve met with [Quinn’s] senior staff and city council finance. We know they are going to do all they can to help us out,” says Galante. “It is fair to say we’ll get some funds restored, the only question is how much.”

The economy and the library

Planning for future cuts is complicated by the FY08 reduction. For one, the library has had a hiring freeze since October, and with the economic downturn, Queens has had very little staff turnover. Usually, about 12 full-time staff leave each month to go back to school or to relocate. Recently, there were no departures for several months, and only two or three people left in others. Galante sees the departure of five people in May as a sign of economic recovery, but the low turnover gives him few vacancies to use to lower personnel costs.



Moreover, says Galante, “We view our programs as basic services, not as temporary grant programs. So when budget cuts come, we don’t just cut our programs.”

Nonetheless, the FY08 cutbacks saw an art gallery at the central library closed to repurpose the space for patrons. The teen Internet Mentors program, through which mentors get paid \$8 an hour to share skills with other patrons after school, was scaled back. The library’s bookmobile, used for community outreach, was taken off the road.

“There has been pain this year, but at least we have maintained six-day service in every library and seven-day service in four, including the central library. We’ve kept our doors open as much as they have been for many years,” says Galante.

The worst-case scenario, \$20 million gone, would mean half of the libraries would be open only two or three days a week. Galante’s top priorities are to avoid layoffs and to keep library hours at their current level. “We’ll need a large restoration to keep six-day service,” he says. “We have to be open Monday through Friday when the kids get out of school. Thousands come every day. They need the library,” Galante says.

“You don’t want to close on the weekend. Classes are very popular then because it is a day off. A cut in hours limits public access to everything—the materials, the librarians, the computers, the programs, and the facility,” says Maureen O’Connor, COO at Queens.

Politics and budgets

“Most elected officials support the library, but they need all the help they can get from us and from citizens. The focus is to raise awareness of the value of public libraries. We show all we do and all the people we help. We rely on our government officials to help support us, so we don’t take any jobs, no shots at

Heights features a vast array of international materials, while Jamaica’s Central Library has something for everyone. The Flushing branch, renovated in 1998, is considered the system’s flagship. The Cyber Center in Jackson Heights sees constant use and a line of customers at opening to reserve computers. Jamaica’s Adult Literacy Center (ALC) offers a youth literacy class, here with teacher Anastasia Libovich (center) and case manager Desiree Kerr (right, standing) helping disenfranchised youth find their place in the world. COO Maureen O’Connor and CEO Tom Galante congratulate students in one of ALC’s English classes. Graduates who go on to become U.S. citizens (and often library advocates) receive recognition on a bulletin board.

people. That wouldn’t be smart,” asserts Galante. “We do a lot of advocacy work. We do it smart, build relationships. Many elected officials tell us to rally, rally, rally, because it helps them support libraries when it comes to the budget negotiation.”

“Libraries were given one of the highest satisfaction rates as one of the most important city services when the mayor did a citizen survey about six months ago,” Galante says with pride. He believes protests like one at city hall on May 28 help libraries get more support and help elected officials support them.

“If you can show elected officials something, most of them will get on board. For example, we have two new neighborhood libraries, [the Court Square branch] we redesigned with help from LJ. So we said to local officials, ‘Wouldn’t you like to have one of those in your district?’ That’s how we got 25 libraries redone. Five are opening soon,” says Galante.

The CEO and his team build relationships with all 45 elected officials who represent Queens. That includes 15 city council members, some 18 state assembly members, senators, and others. State aid is not much in New York, and it is in decline. Queens Library gets about six percent of its budget, or \$6.5 million, in operating aid from the state.

State grants provide more, like two capital grants of \$6 million each in the last two years for renovations. In the last five

years, Queens Library has attracted \$180 million through government sources.

Bang for the bucks

Part of proving the value of the library to citizens and officials and giving it a higher profile is making it more attractive and efficient. Galante's goal to renovate and expand every library continues apace.

"We have three new libraries in design right now, about to go into construction. We've completely gutted about 25 libraries and reconfigured the space to meet current service needs," says Galante. "We're creating separate teen areas, ripping out circulation desks, and putting in self-service stations."

Self-check machines at some facilities have eliminated long lines to check out materials at all the old circulation desks. People used to wait ten to 25 minutes for clerks to scan barcodes. The machines double the capacity, and there is always someone on hand to help users. Galante says that model has allowed staff to get out on the floor even though the facilities maintain information and service desks staffed by librarians.

The creativity in Queens extends to its integrated library system (ILS), which is being custom designed. "We're working with [Queens's current vendor] VTLS to build our own ILS using its system as a core," states Galante. "We want to have real quality customer service, and the only way to have that in an online service arena is to be sure it is not driven by the vendors but by our own focus and our most forward thinking." VTLS plans to take the system to market.

Galante's management style is a unique mix of future vision, current operations and staff, and political savvy to deal with the complexities of city finance in hard times. "The reason we do a good job is our people. The senior management team we have built does wonderful work," says Galante. Every department head has moved up in the past few years.

Long term, Galante aims "to continue all our services and programs, keeping them current and providing great online service." He expects every facility will be renovated and modernized in a decade.

Services & programs

The Queens Library staff are very proud of their programs that "attract users who hover on the edge." They mean people new to the United States, who don't speak English, and those who "grew up



poor and hopeless," as Joanne King, associate director for communications, wrote in the award application. The library caters to those who are "not anchored in any of the traditional institutions and are neither in school nor employed." They concentrate on programs that get jobs, support academic success, and help people lead healthy lives. There are also programs to promote entrepreneurship, aid folks in staying on the "right side of the law," and provide access to health and human services in a variety of languages.

Very few, if any, other libraries provide programming as varied or massive as that offered at Queens. While many programs were begun with grants, Queens quickly evaluates new programs and if they work, immediately incorporates them into its vast array of core library services and its regular operating budget.

The New Americans Program, started in 1977, aims to encourage the use of the library by new immigrants, who are often leery of government institutions. The program, which has a resident demographer, identifies each new group arriving in Queens and builds services, including collections in the language of each group, to help them trust and be comfortable with the library and other "official" institutions.

Empowering teens

King calls the library's Teen Empowerment Initiative "the most audacious move on the organizational status quo ever attempted by the library." As in libraries everywhere, at Queens thousands of "restless teens" arrive every day

after school. Some bring homework, but most just come to hang out. They can be noisy, disruptive, and often take over large areas of a library, making it uncomfortable or threatening to other users.

"The first thing a lot of libraries do is add more security people. Our strategy is to hire youth counselors to work with the kids," says Galante. He is obviously proud to have Lambert Shell, a former college basketball player who did a few years as a pro and went back to school to get his library degree, at the new Youth Enrichment Unit at Queens.

"Look, teenagers want a place to socialize, and we welcome them. Then we do programs to introduce them to the library. We get kids from all classes, from communities with high rates of foster care placements and others with families who own homes. They all need this kind of focused service," says Shell. The programs work, Shell argues, because the kids themselves are involved in them and because the administration supports the programs at the highest levels.

So far so good: in FY08, the library held 4000 programs attended by 58,700 teens. There were no incidents in community libraries that once had daily visits by police.

The recession, however, has brought new challenges. "After-school programs that were funded are now closing," says Shell. "It will get worse after a new budget year begins. We already see more kids coming."

Model programming

The library's BOOST (Best Out of School Time) program, with funding from the Wallace Foundation, combines a safe haven with homework help and after-school enrichment emphasizing math, science, and literacy. Unattended children are targeted at all 62 Queens libraries, and 27 sites have activity assistants trained to move kids from fun to supplemental learning. BOOST currently serves 2200 kids every weeknight during the school year.

Queens began its Family Literacy Programs in 2003 with a grant from the New York State Education Department. That was when Susan Dalmas became adult literacy manager. The program, with some 163 parents and 200 children now enrolled at five sites, promotes literacy and lifelong learning, and it tries to give parents the tools they need to advocate for education services for their kids and economic viability for themselves.

The adult programs reach 5000 people a year and are growing. The adult learner program provides basic instruction to adults whose English proficiency is below the fifth-grade level. In addition to 500 formal registrants, others use the seven centers to improve literacy through self-study with computer programs and special collections.

The health literacy program offers basic literacy in health science or medical languages or jargon and refers those in

need to health-care agencies and even assigns staff to take them there and help them deal with the agency.

The ESOL schedule at Queens serves nearly 3000 students every year in 100 classes at 24 locations. Some sections are earmarked for seniors, others for those who are illiterate in their native language as well as in English.

To introduce the library's business resources to those who manage and work in the 46,000 firms in Queens, the library runs its StartUp Business Plan Competition. In cooperation with the Queens Economic Development Corporation and sponsored by the Citi Foundation, the library awards prizes totaling \$29,000 for the best business proposals. Applicants attend classes in planning, marketing, financial statements, and library resources for four months, then submit their plan.

In a library with more than 23,000 programs, these are just the tip of the iceberg. The library maintains the energy and drive for those and still runs a library system that is exemplary in the areas of popular collection development, reference, and adult and children's service and lends more materials than any other library in the United States.

Morale in hard times

"I'm always an optimist. It is part of the job to be a little bit of a cheerleader," says Galante when asked how he maintains staff morale in tough times. A human resources director hired three years ago has built good relationships with the union.

"We do a lot of work on communication, to make sure staff are in the loop." The CEO meets biannually with all the employees in groups of 150. It takes two

IT TAKES A VILLAGE
(Clockwise from far l.): Or at least the Queens Village branch, where young adult librarian Euni Chang (l.) has introduced gaming classes for kids, which lead to tournaments (and might even include jousting). Queens Library's Youth Enrichment Services coordinator Lambert Shell left a professional sports career to get a library degree and help establish focused service for Queens's teens. Queens Village branch manager Madlyn S. Schneider extends Mail-a-Book service throughout the kingdom

LIBRARY OF THE YEAR 2009 SPECIAL MENTION

Several of this year's submissions feature the service philosophy and dedication to community that signify a Library of the Year:

Columbus Metropolitan Library, OH
Patrick Losinski, Executive Director

Hoover Public Library, AL
Linda Andrews, Director

River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester, NY
Susan Gibbons, Vice Provost and Dean

LIBRARY OF THE YEAR 2009 JUDGES

LJ thanks the following library professionals who volunteered their valuable time to help select the 2009 Library of the Year:

Tina Creguer, Vice President, Marketing Communications, Gale | Cengage Learning

Erika Linke, Associate Dean, Carnegie Mellon University Libraries, Pittsburgh; President of the Association of College and Research Libraries

Lucie P. Osborn, County Librarian, Laramie County Library System, Cheyenne, WY, Gale/LJ Library of the Year 2008

Nancy E. Rosenwald, Director, Union County Carnegie Library, Union, SC; LJ Best Small Library in America 2009

Loriene Roy, Professor, University of Texas, Austin; Immediate Past-President, American Library Association

The panel also includes LJ's John N. Berry III, Francine Fialkoff, Bette-Lee Fox, Josh Hadro, Brian Kenney, & Norman Oder

weeks, and he is quick to say it is "not at all a speech." He delivers about 20 minutes of "where we've been and another 20 of where we're going." Then for 90 minutes, he answers questions.

"You can't leave until you ask some questions," Galante tells each group. By the time they finish there are usually still a dozen hands waving in the air.

The next round of meetings might be a bit tougher. "The kind of budget cuts we're talking about are not just 'tighten your belts a little.' We've already done that and more," says O'Connor. Keeping morale up isn't always easy.

It is not just managing under the gun that won Queens the Library of the Year Award. It is the ability of the managers and staff to provide an incredibly diverse set of services and continue the constant modernization of the 62 libraries. Their sustained commitment to library service that truly improves the lives of everyone in the borough is what makes the Queens Library so strong. ■