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A bibliophile's view of Indianapolis

A public library preserves the record of humanity's intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements, as well as its failures. Those records and the people who facilitate the community's access to them support democracy, encourage economic development, sustain lifelong learning, and foster an information- and technology-literate community.



**BRIAN
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Commentary

A community's investment in its public library system symbolizes the importance of the civic role of public libraries in ensuring an informed society. In our community, the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library Foundation raised more than \$45 million from individuals, foundations and corporations for the Central Library expansion, demonstrating the broad and meaningful community support our library system enjoys.

In 2006, more than 5 million visits to the library system occurred and nearly 14 million materials were loaned. This reflects record demand of the library's physical infrastructure and the quest for knowledge by members of our community.

To help meet that demand, the expansion and modernization of the Central Library will allow Indianapolis citizens ready access to more than 700,000

books and materials in the library's repository. The quadrupling of the number of patron computers, quintupling of the number of parking spaces, and doubling of the auditorium capacity will ensure that humanity's accomplishments can be enjoyed by an even larger portion of the community.

Unfortunately, a large part of society is always excluded from the economic prosperity of the majority. For them, a library is a necessity. For example, a recent study noted that, in 2005, an estimated 58 percent of Indiana households had a computer and 51 percent enjoyed Internet access in the home. That means that roughly 42 percent of Indiana's population does not have a computer and an even greater percentage lacks Internet access.

Today, most employers, government and social services agencies require online applications and e-mail addresses. Many of those government and social services are for the benefit of the least able in our society, including welfare, unemployment, immigration and public housing benefits. Without access to a computer and the Internet, it becomes less likely that those individuals will be able to improve their skills, educational level and overall economic situation.

In 2006, IMCPL users logged 771,000 hours of computer time during 1.5 million sessions. Assuredly, one of those sessions helped someone who did

not have a computer find and apply for a job. Recognizing the power of technology in a library setting, the planners of the newly transformed Central Library made sure to provide more than 300 computers for patron use, an increase from 72.

Statewide, almost two-thirds of the population uses the library, but libraries are paid for with less than 2 percent of all public tax dollars. Indiana's 238 library systems make up the nation's fourth-largest library network. However, that does not mean every Hoosier has convenient access to a library. In 2006, portions of Boone, Hendricks and Hamilton counties were not served by a library. And 32 of Indiana's 92 counties have townships not served by a library.

Libraries help citizens bridge the information divide and protect our right to know, which is fundamental to the success of a free society. Libraries connect people with ideas, information and one another.

Not only is the new Central Library the *omphalos* of the War Memorial Plaza, it and the people who work within it are also vital to the education of our citizens. Go visit the Central Library when it opens next month. You can learn something new and be proud of your community. •

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