

Public Comment Remarks to Oakland City Council
May 12, 2011

My name is Nina Lindsay. I'm a born & raised Oaklander, graduate of Tech, homeowner, and employee of the Oakland Public Library where I've worked for over 15 years, most recently coordinating the work of the children's librarians throughout the system.

Children's library services as we know them will cease to exist under the Mayor's proposed budget Scenario A. I want to make sure you understand what these services accomplish.

You know the effect that Oakland's high school dropout rate has on unemployment, crime, and poverty. [A recent study by the Annie E Casey Foundation](#) shows that "Students who don't read at grade level by third grade are four times more likely" to be high school dropouts than proficient readers. "Kids who are poor readers and live in poverty" are six times more likely to drop out.

Numerous studies link [access to print materials](#) with reading ability, especially for children in poverty, and [especially when the child gets to pick their own reading material](#). So far this fiscal year, Oaklanders have checked out nearly 325,000 children's items from the library, accounting for 40% of the library circulation. Our annual Summer Reading Game rewards children for reading books of their choice. The reward? A book of their choice to keep. Last year more than 8000 kids participated, and we served as a model site for the California Library Association's pilot to prevent summer reading loss.

The major social problems our city faces are all predicated on kids' success in school. [The National Center for Education Statistics](#) shows that reading success is positively influenced by access to public libraries, not only through materials, but also through programs. Recent research shows that [literacy behaviors](#) learned in the first 3 years of life are the crucial building blocks to later reading success. All of these behaviors are modeled in our libraries' storytimes. We currently offer 26 regular weekly drop-in storytimes throughout the city, in addition to those scheduled on request by teachers. My office also coordinates a corps of volunteers who provide weekly storytimes in dozens of Head Starts and CDCs.

If we can get them at age zero, we can keep them for life. This doesn't happen by magic. It happens because the city's voters made overwhelmingly clear in passing Measure Q that they wanted a full time children's librarian at every library. These librarians are constantly connecting young people, caregivers and community organizations with library resources. They have done hula-hooping storytime at school assemblies, held overnight camping trips in the library, and been dunked in the Dunk-the-Librarian tank, all to get kids to use the library. And it works. New children's librarians hired last summer have doubled the circulation of children's materials at their branches. Hundreds of school kids screaming at the 81st Avenue Library hadn't just seen Justin Bieber: they were watching the children's librarian open the [first box of books](#) being delivered to their library.

The Mayor's Scenario A leaves 4 library locations open, but without coordinated children's services, without the grant support necessary to leverage the tens of thousands of dollars that fund our programs, and without the assurance of a trained children's librarian at each location. The Mayor may intend to reopen branches 1 by 1 as increased revenue allows, but this critical infrastructure will be gone. Because of seniority and call back rights, there is no guarantee of a trained children's librarian at each branch until we are again fully funded. No story time, no Summer Reading Game. Teacher and daycare providers will be left in the lurch.

The library is the one public place in our city where an individual child's needs are as important as any other individual's, regardless of age. A toddler's need to open and close a book is vital. A nine year old's need for a private corner with a pile of comics is vital. A young person's need for access to information without question or judgment is vital.

Any major cuts to libraries--even if only for 1 year--will jeopardize our entire community for a generation, because it will take many years to bring back these services once they are cut--critical years that cannot be replaced for our youngest. Kids need to read to graduate. If they don't, we all pay.

I've given you only one picture of how Oakland libraries support the most basic needs of our community. You have heard and will hear from seniors, job seekers, immigrants, teens, adults learning to read.... As a lifetime Oakland resident, I reject the implication in the Mayor's proposal that adequately staffed and distributed public library services are any less essential to our city's health and safety than Police. As a homeowner, I will vote for a parcel tax to support adequately funded city services, and I will help campaign for it--let's put this to the voters. As an employee, I will vote for whatever concessions my union negotiates on my behalf, with the assurance of concessions from Police. You do not have to sacrifice our libraries to balance this budget.