Fiscal 2010 Capital Planning Commission Testimony
By Norma Blake, New Jersey State Librarian

Chairperson and Members of the Capital Planning Commission, as State Librarian, I thank you for your past support of the New Jersey State Library and its Library for the Blind and Handicapped. Your support of Audiovision's transition to digital equipment in FY2008 at the Library for the Blind and Handicapped (LBH) will mean a dramatic improvement in access to information for New Jersey residents who are blind or who have a print disability. We will be well prepared for the conversion to digital broadcasting in February 2009 thanks to your support.

This year I am here to continue to address the serious building problems with LBH and the West State Street Library Information Center. LBH serves as the State's public library for New Jersey residents of all ages who are visually impaired, have a physical handicap or a learning disability, or who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. The New Jersey Commission for the Blind estimates that there are almost 300,000 blind and visually impaired residents of the state. New Jersey also has 720,000 Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Deaf/blind individuals. Approximately 900,000 New Jersey residents have learning disabilities. LBH provides these residents with special equipment and materials in many formats such as books on tape (soon to become digital talking books in 2009), large print materials, Braille and audio-described videos, Audiovision, our radio reading service for the blind, and NEWSLINE, which gives customers audio access to over 250 newspapers and magazines, some in Spanish.

Services onsite for children and adults are also an extremely important component of the Library's programs. LBH offers a popular monthly American Sign Language Children's Story Hour program for over 600 students a year and a Summer Reading Club for Deaf and visually impaired children, children with learning disabilities, and teenagers with multiple disabilities. Programs for adults held at the Library included training in the new adaptive technology lab, meetings on topics of interest such as accessible voting and transportation, book clubs, a two-week WorksSkills program which provided on-site job training for high school students, and the very popular Fall Festival which draws over 300 residents from all across New Jersey.

As the only public library for the visually impaired and disabled, the Library for the Blind and Handicapped should be the model of inclusiveness and accessibility. However, LBH has major ADA accessibility issues. The LBH facility was constructed in 1982 which pre-dates the American Disabilities Act of 1990. While the facility was designed to serve persons with physical disabilities, the facility today does not meet regulations promulgated in 1994 under this Act. For example, the facility has 19 heavy manual interior doors which need to be replaced with electronic doors to provide easy access for our customers. The closing mechanisms on these heavy doors do not meet the ADA guidelines that govern the amount of foot-pounds required to open, or keep open the doors once they are in motion. The placement of the doors also provides obstacles to
customers using wheelchairs who have to move in the arc of the doors before they can reach the handles. Two of the doors also require raising and ramps at an additional cost.

Our request for LBH includes the safety of the courtyard which has had no repairs for 25 years. The courtyard, which is surrounded by glass and is visible throughout the LBH facility, is used to advance the arts for persons with disabilities in partnership with Grounds for Sculpture and many organizations that serve the visually impaired. Presently this area is not safe for use either by the public or staff due to the severe deterioration and displacement of the hardscape. There are dangerous tripping hazards for our frail and blind customers who visit the courtyard, as well as for non-disabled customers and staff. This outside area was designed for their use and pleasure. However now, due to tree roots and water damage, nearly all the bricks and pavement are displaced by over one inch in the courtyard.

Besides two sculptures loaned by the Seward Johnson Foundation, this area also houses a public art statue with Braille lettering that is now almost completely worn off. It is a tactile work intended to be touched and the Braille to be read. The State Library is requesting funds for a study on how to fix the deteriorated foundation and statue. In addition, funds are requested for a feasibility study by a landscape designer to assess the placement of the sculptures and statue, since navigating the courtyard is a challenge for our customers who are blind and/or use wheelchairs who wish to visit and enjoy this area.

As part of the LBH request, the State Library is also requesting funds to replace 40 public use chairs that are not accessible to physically disabled clients and funds for an adjustable reference table for use at the State Library in order to better serve our clients who utilize wheelchairs. Our present tables do not have height adjustments and thus our customers must place books and materials in their laps or depend on others in order to use them.

The Library for the Blind and Handicapped serves as the State’s public library for New Jersey residents of all ages who are visually impaired, have a physical or learning disability, or who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. The $763,000 requested will make the LBH a model of inclusiveness and accessibility for our residents and address health and safety concerns for our staff as well.

The State Library is also requesting funds to address the poor condition of the State Library building at 185 West State Street. As you know, the State Library is the research library for all branches of government. New Jersey residents also use the materials and services of the State Library. Our law collection is the largest public-access law library in the state. Many residents also use our special collections such as our New Jersey materials, genealogy, funding and foundations, state and federal documents and our business resources. State employees and residents use our services both in person and electronically – for example, our Cyberdesk Information Service had over 300,000 unique visitors in the past fiscal year.

The State Library also provides information services to New Jersey’s 451 public libraries, providing databases, internet access and technology infrastructure. The State Library has
also implemented the New Jersey Knowledge Initiative (NJKI) which provides access to high-end proprietary databases. Businesses, researchers, students and educators all use the databases to find the cutting-edge information they need. To date, more than 15 million articles and documents were used by hundreds of thousands New Jerseyans. The State Library’s other products also generate wide use by the public. Thousands of questions are answered annually 24/7 by librarians on our online reference service, QandA NJ. JerseyClicks, our Web portal, is also widely accessed by the public and by librarians statewide.

The State Library’s mission statement is “Connecting people with information through libraries.” Our 5-year Strategic Plan affirms our role as a leader for all New Jersey libraries. However, our current Library severely hampers our ability to lead and serve. We need to address major concerns with our facility.

The State Library facility currently has a major problem with a faulty electrical movable shelving system. While the shelves are virtually indestructible, the electrical wiring and rails for this system, which are over 25 years old, must be replaced. Currently, the faulty wiring causes the movable shelves to be immobile and they must be moved by hand by a staff member with enough strength and flexibility to do so. This poses risk of bodily harm to our staff. The library can no longer order replacement parts, and the electrical connections and the rails on which the shelves move need to be replaced entirely. Since browsing and retrieving materials from the shelves is an essential operation of a library, we ask that this request be supported. It should be noted that the State Library has not received an appropriation for capital improvements for shelves housed that the State Street facility in over 25 years. The State Library therefore requests $458,000 to dismantle the current shelving; refit and install 100 ranges of compact shelving, and move, store and reshelving approximately 275,000 books.

I will now discuss our State Library building itself.

Because of the age and inadequacy of our facility, a feasibility study for a new State Library building is again requested. This study was approved by the Commission and was included in the Governor’s FY 2002 budget. However, due to budgetary constraints the study was eliminated from the FY 2002 Appropriations Act. The need for this $522,000 study remains.

The State Library struggles daily to offer 21st century services in a building built in the early 1960’s. The current state of the building makes a major renovation of this building or construction of a new one a paramount need. Attempting to operate a modern, technology-based library in an outdated facility becomes more difficult each year. Our building was designed before the introduction of computers. Its poor design, thick reinforced concrete walls and floors defy all attempts to adapt for the technology demanded by modern library use. The building’s 102,000 square feet are so poorly designed that it is insufficient to house the Library’s collection of 2 million materials. Collections and work units are split on multiple floors. Many items are tightly packed into the compact shelving system in the basement. Besides the need for adequate space
for library collections, new computer and training space is needed along with new meeting rooms, exhibit areas, reception and public service space, preservation and digitization space, and staff offices equipped with the technology needed to serve our State government customers and our residents.

The first step needed to help us plan for a modern State library is the feasibility study to define space needs, adjacencies and new areas of operation. A state-of-the-art Library will better serve the three branches of government, our libraries, and the residents of New Jersey.

Thank you for your consideration of our capital budget request. I will be happy to provide you with any additional information you may require.
The Courtyard at the Library for the Blind & Handicapped
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Many of the Braille letters have orn or missing dots.
Lack of space causes overcrowded racks. Parts are no longer available for the obsolete movable racks, which often break down and are difficult to move by hand.
Connections and wiring schematics at the State Library, designed before personal computers, are obsolete and hinder necessary technological upgrades.