

Arizona Daily Star

Arizona opinion: Investment in library infrastructure is critical and overdue

Jason Macoviak and John Walsh Special to the Arizona Daily Star

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The following is the opinion and analysis of the writer:

Our public and tribal libraries are beloved, averaging more in-person visitors a week than Disney World's Magic Kingdom pre-pandemic (444,582). What makes Arizona so unique underscores the vital need for these institutions but also underscores their fragile futures.

Spectacular landscapes can mean limited connectivity. Libraries help bridge the digital divide. Our desert climate requires updated HVAC systems for health, safety and comfort indoors, but many of our facilities have inadequate electrical systems. Statewide, we prioritize equity and inclusion, yet we have libraries that can't be accessed by people with physical disabilities.

By co-sponsoring the Build America's Libraries Act, Representatives Ruben Gallego, Raúl Grijalva, and Tom O'Halleran are making up for lost time. Congress last funded library facilities in 1997. This legislation addresses facility infrastructure, accessibility barriers, broadband capacity, natural disasters and pandemics. It also prioritizes sustainable and resilient design so libraries can withstand extreme heat, severe storms and extended power outages.

With Congress proceeding on a \$3.5 trillion budget bill, we must include the Build America's Libraries Act, which would dedicate \$5 billion to libraries nationwide and an estimated \$99 million for Arizona. We thank you, Congressmen, and urge your colleagues to stand with you.

How would our libraries benefit? The Winslow Public Library is one of 13 in the Navajo County Library District. Many people who live on the Navajo reservation make the long drive there for broadband. The building could use more computers and expanded outdoor WiFi, which is in constant use for homework, job applications and small businesses.

Space is a challenge at the Winslow Public Library, too. All STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) activities and adult programs, and most Summer Reading events, must be held off-site because attendance is high. There are few electrical outlets and none that can accommodate three-prongs in this former church that the library acquired in 1969. Bathrooms are not accessible for people with physical disabilities. The town needs a new building but lacks funding.

The Copper Queen Library in Bisbee is 114 years old. Visitors enjoy its history and architecture, but damage from ongoing roof issues forced the library to pull hundreds of books from the shelves. A leak in the Teen Room collapsed the ceiling. The outdated HVAC system cannot adequately cool the building in summer and

heat it in winter. The veranda railings don't meet building code heights, and they're not accessible to people in wheelchairs.

Bisbee's town budget can rarely fund infrastructure repairs, and though the State Historic Preservation Office issued a grant for a building assessment, there is no money for repairs or renovation.

Public and tribal libraries are hubs of education, digital access and career readiness. Imagine what more they could do, for years to come, if this legislation is passed.

Author bios: Jason Macoviak is the manager of Bisbee's The Copper Queen Library which was awarded the Best Small Library in America by the Library Journal in 2019, and is the oldest, continuously operated public library in the State of Arizona. John Walsh is the current president of the Arizona Library Association and recently retired after serving 20 years in academic librarianship.