

# Pathways to Sustainability for Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

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**U.S.** public libraries fulfill a unique and important role in their communities by providing free access to information and Internet services. At the same time, they face the ongoing challenge of doing more with less, as most libraries' budgets have failed to keep pace with inflation over the past several years. Consistent with this trend, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP) faces decreasing operating revenues, which limit its ability to adapt and respond to its users. Its revenues in 2007 remained nearly identical to those in 2000; when adjusted for inflation, revenues fell 20 percent over the period. Moving forward, CLP faces financial uncertainty because of potential cuts by its primary source of funding, the Allegheny Regional Asset District. CLP asked RAND to identify critical factors that affect the library's financial soundness and to develop a framework to assess how these factors can be managed to provide a more stable and sound financial base. After reviewing the literature and interviewing library directors and individuals at nonprofit and nongovernmental agencies who manage or fund libraries, the RAND researchers provided a set of nine opportunities for CLP and a task force to consider. These opportunities may improve CLP's ability to secure the funding needed to meet its mission in the future.

## Overview of CLP

Although the capital for CLP's construction at its founding came from Andrew Carnegie, CLP was established as a public trust and is supported entirely by public dollars. About 60 percent of CLP's operating funds come from local sales tax revenues, and the rest from state revenues, fees, donations, and other sources. CLP operates a main library and 18 branches that serve Pittsburgh's population of nearly 335,000. Operating on a budget of \$26.8 million in 2007, the library

## Abstract

Like many U.S. public libraries, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh faces financial uncertainty. CLP asked RAND to identify critical factors that affect the library's financial stability and to develop a framework to assess how these factors can be managed to provide a more stable financial base. RAND researchers reviewed the literature and interviewed library directors and policymakers. They identified nine opportunities that may improve CLP's ability to secure the funding needed to meet its mission in the future.

has connected with a large number of users, as indicated by its circulation of 3.4 million and nearly 2.8 million visits that year. To serve the Pittsburgh population, the library offers specialized services, including a business center; children's and teens' centers; music, film, and audio collections; a job and career center; a music center; PC centers; and reference services.

## Opportunities to Promote Stable Funding

Library leaders and policymakers from similar libraries told RAND researchers that their greatest challenge was to secure adequate funding to serve their communities and meet their missions. When funding is limited, they have three basic options, which can be conducted separately or in combination to bring them into balance with operating demands:

- Seek additional funds.
- Reduce expenses, including removing services.
- Implement more-efficient modes of operation.

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The researchers identified three areas that affect CLP’s sustainability: demand for and consumption of services; the effectiveness of library advocates in generating community support; and organization decisions, such as governance and structure. Each of these areas can be involved in increasing library funds, reducing expenses, and implementing greater efficiency. Using this framework, the researchers identified nine opportunities that could promote sustainable funding for CLP:

1. Evaluate and use methods for identifying service demand and for increasing innovative activities to engage users.
2. Conduct a rigorous right-sizing assessment for the number and size of services and programs and implement findings.
3. Evaluate ways to leverage existing and new resources—including technology, volunteers, and strategic partners—to meet stakeholder needs and implement findings.
4. Identify, develop, and use performance measures that provide indicators of progress, demonstrate CLP’s value, and uncover areas of unmet need.
5. Assess how to involve library staff in institutional changes. Evaluate the costs and benefits of training librarians and staff in outreach and of a dedicated outreach department. Implement new approaches.
6. Evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of formalizing “Library Friends” of CLP. Develop measures of board engagement and participation, and assess the effectiveness of board members as advocates for and as partners with CLP. Develop new governing options to increase financial sustainability.

7. Evaluate the costs, benefits, and long-term financial stability of new organizational models, such as a public library district, including an assessment of the costs of a media campaign to garner public support.
8. Conduct a right-sizing assessment for the number and size of facilities, staffing, and holdings and implement the new strategy.
9. Evaluate the service and resource efficiencies and tradeoffs from a countywide merger of libraries and implement the best option.

Each of these opportunities is related to the library’s ability to garner and sustain resources. However, no single opportunity is sufficient to accomplish this goal.

### **Next Steps for CLP**

This study provides a roadmap for where the library might go in its quest for stable funding. An appropriate next step for CLP would be to have a task force review the opportunities and establish priorities among them. With the uncertainty of continued funding through the Regional Asset District, the library urgently needs to find a path to stable funding. The RAND researchers, therefore, recommend that the commission seriously consider opportunities seven and nine, including an assessment of the current funding model. With its mission of fostering literacy, learning, and access to knowledge, CLP remains a critical resource to the City of Pittsburgh. Establishing sources of stable funding will ensure that it can continue to carry out its mission well into the future. ■

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This research brief describes work done for RAND Education and documented in *Assessing the Future of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh: Pathways to Sustainability*, by Sally Sleeper and Rena Rudavsky, TR-638-CLP (available at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical\\_reports/TR638/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR638/)), 2008, 84 pp. This research brief was written by Jennifer Li. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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