INDEPENDENT PROPOSAL / DECISION BRIEF

A practical plan for Portland's libraries

Protect what people depend on. Test what could make it better. Do not turn a vision into an unfunded promise.

Portland Civic Lab · Revised October 27, 2026 · Proposed, not adopted

> **The decision in one sentence:** ask commissioners for a bounded, costed readiness process that works through MCL's official planning - not blanket authority to implement a 2040 vision.

What could be approved first

1. Affirm reading, collections, intellectual freedom, privacy, skilled assistance and equitable access as the protected core.
2. Ask the Director to test proposed improvements through the library's existing strategic-planning and advisory process.
3. Require a workplan within 30 days, a public 90-day checkpoint and a readiness report within 12 months of Board direction.
4. Reserve pilots, new spending, recurring services, capital commitments, tax proposals and major procurements for their applicable approval processes.

MCL: service priorities ↗ Library Advisory Board: July 2026 agenda ↗

What is not ready

No public research packet can substitute for an official fiscal note, staff capacity, legal review, a labor process, a representative resident baseline or executed partner commitments.

Our readiness assessment: suitable for discussion and a scoped planning request; not ready for systemwide implementation authorization. A numerical "10/10" would imply precision and consensus the evidence does not establish.

Possible commissioner reactions below are our analysis of public constraints and questions - not quotations, endorsements or predicted votes.

What commissioners would reasonably ask

The objections are not obstacles to hide. They are the design requirements.

MONEY

What does this cost - and what gives?

A ten-year fiscal note showing staff, substitutes, collections, contracts, security, utilities, technology, internal service charges, maintenance and replacement. Show base, downside and expansion cases.

Approval condition: No recurring commitment without recurring funding and a public opportunity-cost statement.

MISSION

Is this still a library?

A protected core: collections, browsing, quiet, intellectual freedom, privacy, accessible facilities and staffed help. State what changes at each branch.

Approval condition: No pilot quietly displaces core hours, collections, public space or staff coverage.

WORKFORCE

Who does the work, and were they heard?

Frontline design participation, workload and safety analysis, classification review, training, coverage and a documented labor-relations determination.

Approval condition: Complete required notice, consultation or bargaining before changing roles or working conditions.

AUTHORITY

Which Board, agency or partner owns this?

County counsel identifies District versus County authority, budget and procurement requirements, and partner agreements. Library management owns delivery.

Approval condition: No service dependent on another profession without funded, supervised and accountable specialists.

EQUITY

What improves outside the flagship?

A branch service floor, access analysis and representative resident research including nonusers and people facing language or disability barriers.

Approval condition: No countywide success claim that hides persistently underserved branches or groups.

EVIDENCE

How will we know when to stop?

Publish baseline, cost ceiling, intended beneficiaries, outcome threshold, privacy safeguards, equity test and fixed end date before launch.

Approval condition: Stop for unsafe delivery, privacy breach, inadequate staffing, lost partner, overspend or harm to the core.

The May 2026 work-session follow-up contains concrete examples: Commissioner Meghan Moyer asked about building lifecycles; Commissioner Julia Brim-Edwards asked for branch use trends, security progress and management span of control. These questions support a cost, workforce and neighborhood-level test - not an inference about how either would vote today. Budget work-session questions and follow-up ↗

The fiscal boundary

The FY2027 adopted operating budget is $128,522,251, with 544.80 full-time-equivalent positions. About $2.056 million in reductions includes $350,000 for e-books. A proposal must start with those tradeoffs, not assume unused capacity.

The May forecast reports an approximately $2.0 million recurring FY2027 gap before balancing, with shortfalls through FY2031. Its figures use a different scope from the adopted operating budget. Do not subtract one from the other as if they were identical statements.

FY2027 adopted Library operating budget ↗ FY2027 Library District presentation ↗

The permanent rate is $1.22 per $1,000 of assessed value in FY2027, against a $1.24 limit. The forecast already assumes the limit from FY2028.

Oregon does not let a district or its voters simply increase a permanent rate limit. A local-option levy is a different, time-limited tool, with compression risk. County counsel and finance staff must evaluate any actual proposal. No new tax is recommended in this readiness phase.

Oregon DOR: property-tax rules ↗

Assume no new money until identified. The $19.1 million operating reserve, $94.8 million separate capital fund and $4.3 million of one-time special projects are not interchangeable or automatically available. Identify eligible uses, commitments, reserve policy and opportunity costs before requesting a dollar.

A twelve-month process - with stop points

When	Public deliverable	Gate
Days 1-30	Executive owner, workplan, staff time, cost ceiling, funding, legal instrument and official-plan crosswalk.	No work beyond ordinary authorized planning without certified capacity and appropriation.
Days 31-60	Resident sampling, closure-adjusted baseline, labor/legal issues, provisional service floor and pilot candidates.	Remove concepts without an owner, privacy path or plausible resources.
Day 90	Public checkpoint: spending, staff input, core-service effects, risks, next-year costs and any pilot request.	The Board can narrow, stop or redirect; a checkpoint does not authorize pilots.
Months 4-12	Approved limited tests, ten-year cost model, baseline and findings. Report what failed as well as what worked.	Each fiscal year needs a valid appropriation. No automatic renewal.

Dates begin only after future Board direction. The earlier draft's September 2026 start was not an approved launch. This proposed direction should expire after 12 months unless lawfully extended; work crossing June 30 needs the next fiscal year's appropriation.

Six deliverables. Named responsibility.

Deliverable	Proposed owner	Proof required
Operating & lifecycle model	Library Director, Finance, County Budget, Assets and IT	Ten-year costs, revenue scenarios, planned maintenance and explicitly unfunded needs.
Resident & branch baseline	Library evaluation team; qualified research partner	Sample design including nonusers, language access, closure-adjusted trends and uncertainty.
Workforce & safety plan	Library leadership, frontline staff, Labor Relations and union	Roles, training, coverage, incident definitions, post-incident support and record of what worker input changed.
Core service standard	Public Services and collections teams, with resident input	Hours, materials, skilled help, quiet use, accessibility, youth access and language support; transparent exceptions.
Partner agreements	Director, County counsel and responsible partners	Scope, funding, staffing, supervision, liability, data, evaluation, continuity and termination.

Deliverable	Proposed owner	Proof required
Pilot evidence & decision	Named pilot owners; evaluator; Board	No more than three pilots; cost per result, service effects and a recommendation to stop, revise or continue.

Keep the first tests small

Consider no more than three pilots, at most one in each portfolio. Select locations by need, workforce capacity, building readiness and geographic equity - not publicity value.

1. **Core access:** discovery, holds, browsing, delivery or multilingual collections.
2. **Reach and learning:** family reading, school partnerships, language access or digital navigation.
3. **Branch capability:** mentored creation, specialist navigation or emergency readiness, with a funded partner where needed.

Before launch, publish the problem, population, baseline, outcome threshold, equity test, cost ceiling, appropriation, accountable staff, partner agreement, privacy and accessibility review, labor determination, fixed end date and stop rule. “Pilot” is not a waiver of those requirements.

What would stop a pilot?

Loss of funding or staffing; a cost-ceiling breach; a serious safety or privacy failure; failure to complete required labor or legal processes; a partner withdrawing; or harm to protected core service. The Director must stop unsafe or unauthorized work. The Board retains its budget and oversight powers.

County: AFSCME Local 88 agreement ↗ MCL: privacy & confidentiality ↗

What does the Board get at the end?

Three choices with comparable costs and service consequences:

1. **Maintain and improve:** fix reliability and safety, protect core service and stay within forecast resources.
2. **Targeted expansion:** continue proven improvements where need is greatest, with explicit tradeoffs or new recurring funding.
3. **A systemwide standard:** extend a funded service floor and selected capabilities across the county, backed by realistic revenue, labor and lifecycle plans.

No option should assume that “efficiency” alone closes a structural gap and pays for a major expansion. Grants can fund learning or startup, but time-limited gifts do not automatically sustain permanent jobs.

Boundaries that protect the mission

The library is not an unfunded shelter, clinic, police station, substitute school system or commercial coworking club. It can be a trusted place to find information, get a referral, learn, make and belong. Specialists should remain responsible for specialist work.

A privacy-protecting digital service does not require a new universal-account platform. Improve existing discovery and accessibility first. Teach media and AI literacy without requiring patrons to surrender reading histories or use a particular vendor.

A resilience role requires tested power, filtration, communications, supplies, staffing and authority. This guide does not certify any branch as a full resilience hub, nor does it claim the verified count is zero.

Suggested Board direction

Policy starting point for staff and County counsel - not a final resolution or legal opinion.

> Affirm the protected library core and direct the Director to return with a costed readiness workplan within 30 days; a public checkpoint within 90 days; and findings and options within 12 months, aligned with official library planning.
>
> Require identified staff capacity, legal authority and adopted appropriation. Reserve material commitments for applicable public budget, procurement, legal, labor and intergovernmental processes. Do not authorize a pilot, tax, capital project, permanent service, core-service reduction or major technology purchase through this direction alone.

Commissioners serve in both County and Library District capacities, with operations delivered through an intergovernmental agreement. County counsel must specify the correct capacity and instrument for each action. Partners, employees and residents do not lose their own decision rights because a vision is endorsed. FY2027 Library District presentation ↗

One-year success is a better decision

Success is not a ribbon cutting or a new slogan. It is knowing which improvements residents need, which staff can deliver safely, which partners will support, which the budget can sustain - and which should not proceed.

That is the bridge between an ambitious future and a plan worth approving.