

CIVIC STRATEGY REPORT

Portland Public Knowledge Commons

A deep dive into the past, present, and possible future
of Multnomah County Library

1864–2026 history • 2011–2026 transformation • 2040 horizon

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How can Portland turn a rebuilt library network into the world's most effective public infrastructure for human agency and democratic belonging?

Prepared August 2026 | Multnomah County, Oregon

Reader's map

This report separates the historical record, the current diagnosis, and the proposed future. The future model and numeric targets are recommendations—not claims about current performance.

Executive answer	The thesis, the recent transformation, and the strategic choice.
1 • Public purpose	Six recurring purposes and the tension inside public librarianship.
2 • Portland history	From subscription privilege to a countywide public network.
3 • Last fifteen years	Permanent funding, hybrid use, crisis, and reconstruction.
4 • The gap	Where Portland is strong and what separates it from world leadership.
5 • Global lessons	Practice benchmarks from Helsinki, Aarhus, Singapore, Toronto, Vancouver, Christchurch, Chicago, and San Francisco.
6 • Future model	The Portland Public Knowledge Commons: three layers and five protected purposes.
7 • World-leading standard	A 2040 scorecard with equity floors and anti-gaming rules.
8 • Roadmap	A staged path from stabilization to independently verified outcomes.

SCOPE

"Portland libraries" means Multnomah County Library: a countywide system serving Portland, Fairview, Gresham, Troutdale, and unincorporated communities. The Library District is a separate taxing district, while the County Board governs it and MCL operates as a county department.

Executive answer

BOTTOM

LINE

Portland has much of the hardware of a world-leading system. The gap is the operating model: universal resident reach, branch-by-branch equity, staff safety, specialist partnerships, and credible evidence of learning and civic outcomes.

Libraries have never had only one purpose. They began as organized access to scarce books and information, but the durable public-library idea is larger: a place where anyone can enter without buying anything, encounter knowledge beyond what the market would select for them, learn throughout life, meet people unlike themselves, and exercise the practical freedoms of citizenship. Portland's history shows the purpose widening in layers: subscription reading room; free public library; countywide educational network; neighborhood civic space; multilingual and culturally specific service; digital gateway; and, increasingly, social and climate infrastructure.

That history is both democratic and disciplinary. Portland's library removed dues, extended service through schools, deposit stations, branches, delivery, and the web, and became a highly used public institution. Yet earlier librarians also decided which books and conduct counted as respectable; Black communities lost institutions and were displaced by public decisions; Native people were historically excluded; and "free access" never automatically removed barriers of language, disability, safety, geography, or trust. The lesson is not that libraries failed. It is that publicness must be continuously made—not merely declared.

The last fifteen years brought three structural changes. First, voters created a permanent Library District in 2012, ending decades of temporary-levy politics. Second, digital borrowing became a coequal system: from FY2019 to FY2025, digital circulation more than doubled and reached 42% of circulation, while physical use and visits were depressed by the pandemic and rolling construction closures. Third, a \$387 million 2020 bond—about \$458–459 million with premiums, interest, and other resources—rebuilt the physical network, culminating in the 95,000-square-foot East County Library in May 2026 and the final major project in August.

The result is a paradox. MCL is a high-output system: 19 locations, 18.1 million checkouts and renewals, almost nine million combined digital and in-person visits, and the second-highest circulation among U.S. systems serving fewer than one million people in the latest federal comparison. Yet it is not demonstrably "number one in the world." No credible global league table exists, circulation is too narrow a definition of excellence, and current evidence exposes major gaps: only 38% of households had an active cardholder in the FY2026 budget measure; satisfaction and "find what I need" declined in a

self-selected patron survey; in-person use remains below pre-pandemic levels; public-facing staff reported severe safety and trust problems; school outreach programs ended; and the larger estate is arriving just as operating revenue faces inflation and property-tax constraints.

The strategic choice is therefore clear. Portland should build the **Portland Public Knowledge Commons**: a universal hybrid network with three mutually reinforcing layers.

1. **A universal digital library** that functions as a resident's trusted learning, media, research, and civic-information account—simple, multilingual, privacy-protecting, and available at all hours.
2. **Nineteen neighborhood commons** that guarantee a strong baseline of reading, learning, technology, meeting, creation, and resilience capability in every service area.
3. **Specialized flagships and mobile nodes**—Central, East County, the Operations Center and mobile services—that provide deep collections, advanced creation facilities, cultural memory, large-scale civic convening, and outreach beyond buildings.

Its five protected purposes should be: **read freely; learn and navigate; make and work; belong and govern; prepare and recover**. Books, reading, collections, intellectual freedom, and privacy remain the core. New functions should extend that core, not replace it. Nor should the library become an unfunded substitute for a shelter, school system, police station, clinic, or technology company. Where patrons need health, housing, benefits, or crisis support, funded specialist partners should work alongside—not be impersonated by—library staff.

"Number one" should be a public standard, not a slogan. Portland should publish a 2040 scorecard covering universal reach, equitable outcomes, reading and collection quality, digital and AI agency, learning and creativity, civic belonging, staff and patron safety, resilience, environmental performance, co-governance, and operating sustainability. No single flagship and no huge circulation total should compensate for a neighborhood or demographic group left behind.

1. What purpose have libraries served?

1.1 The durable public purpose

The [IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto](#) defines the public library as a local gateway to knowledge and an essential force for education, culture, inclusion, and democracy. Its modern missions include reading, lifelong learning, information and media literacy, digital skills, cultural expression, access to scientific knowledge, preservation of local and Indigenous knowledge, and participation in community life. That breadth is not mission drift. It describes the capabilities a person needs to act freely in a knowledge society.

For Portland, the most useful definition is this:

The library is public infrastructure for human agency and democratic belonging: a trusted, noncommercial system that gives every resident the knowledge, tools, places, relationships, and practical help needed to read, learn, create, participate, and recover.

The phrase “public infrastructure” matters. A library is not only a collection, program calendar, or building. It is a durable platform—funded in common, governed in public, professionally staffed, and obligated to serve people the market would underserve. “Human agency” protects the individual’s freedom to explore without surveillance or purchase. “Democratic belonging” makes the library more than a transaction: people must be able to see themselves in collections and staff, encounter difference, and shape the institution.

1.2 Six purposes visible across Portland’s history

Curated access to knowledge and culture. The original reading room organized scarce books and information. Today this means deep, plural, multilingual physical and digital collections; skilled reference; preservation of local memory; intellectual freedom; and privacy.

Education beyond school. Children’s librarianship, school collections, lectures, literacy services, GED and language learning, homework help, and digital instruction all make the library a lifelong learning system. Its comparative advantage is voluntary learning across age, institution, and credential boundaries.

Geographic equalization. Deposit stations, storefront branches, bookmobiles, delivery, a countywide network, Library Connect student accounts, and online service all answer the same question: how does public knowledge reach people who cannot easily reach a central institution?

Civic and social infrastructure. Meeting rooms, lectures, clubs, exhibitions, and neutral-seeming shared space support association and public life. The stronger standard is not neutrality alone, but a

demonstrably welcoming environment in which marginalized residents can participate and exercise voice.

Practical welfare infrastructure. Portland libraries have hosted baby clinics, jail and homebound service, cooling and smoke refuge, internet and charging, and referral to social support. These are not foreign to library history. The boundary is professional: access and navigation fit the library; clinical care, case management, and law enforcement require partner agencies and trained specialists.

Community identity and belonging. Language- and culture-specific positions, Black and Indigenous collections and teams, and locally rooted programs help communities produce knowledge, not only receive it. This is a shift from “service to” toward shared authority.

1.3 The recurring tension

Public libraries democratize knowledge while curating it. Early Portland librarians opened access and promoted education, but also restricted popular fiction, discouraged some children’s series, and participated in wartime campaigns that blurred education with conformity. Later expansion often rested on planning decisions made without equal power for the people affected. A world-leading institution must acknowledge this tension openly: expertise is indispensable, but professional judgment must coexist with intellectual freedom, community authorship, transparency, and appeal.

2. Portland's library history: access widening in layers

1864–1902: from membership privilege to public right

In 1864, a small group of Portland businessmen organized the dues-supported Library Association of Portland. It was civic-minded but exclusive by design: only paying members could use it. A separate Portland Public Library opened free of charge in City Hall in 1891. John Wilson's 1900 bequest to the Association required free access, while Oregon's 1901 library law allowed cities to levy taxes. In March 1902, the Association became tax-supported and absorbed the city library. ([MCL history](#); [Oregon Encyclopedia](#))

This transition established the central public-library compact: access would be a right of residence rather than a consumer privilege. But the phrase “open to all” should be read as an aspiration, not retrospective proof of equal access.

1902–1918: countywide extension and the civic-education ideal

The new system immediately pushed beyond the central building through rural deposit stations, school libraries, reading rooms, and bookmobile service. Deposit collections in stores, post offices, homes, and grange halls could provide a community's only reference works. Sellwood opened as the first public library facility outside downtown in 1905; Albina, East Portland, Troutdale, and other local efforts joined an expanding network.

Under Mary Frances Isom, the institution combined professional librarianship with an expansive civic-education project: children's service, lectures, clubs, immigrant-language collections, meeting rooms, homebound delivery, and outreach. By 1916, almost 3,000 lectures and meetings drew roughly 111,000 attendees. Carnegie funding helped build branches, and Central Library opened in 1913. During the 1918 influenza epidemic, all libraries closed for more than two weeks—a precedent for both the vulnerability and public-health role of the network. ([Historical essay on Mary Frances Isom](#))

1920s–1970s: neighborhood institution and practical social service

Baby clinics in Arleta and St. Johns libraries in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrate that the library-as-welfare-infrastructure is not a recent invention. The Vanport branch, established during World War II, was the country's only public library in a war-housing project before the 1948 flood destroyed it. Its story connects library service to wartime migration, Black Portland, and the fragility of institutions in segregated and disinvested places.

After the war, the system replaced small deposit stations with larger permanent branches. It began jail service in 1971 and delivery to homebound patrons, senior housing, and community centers in 1973. At the same time, the system faced recurring fiscal constraints. Beginning in the 1970s, Portland relied on

ten temporary levy campaigns over the next four decades—a model that made service hours and staffing contingent on repeated elections.

1977–2010: public ownership, modernization, and unequal power

The modern public system emerged through contested choices. [Albina Library's 1977 move](#) occurred despite Black community pushback, within a geography already reshaped by urban renewal and displacement. The episode is a warning: even an institution committed to access can reproduce unequal power through siting and planning.

In 1990, the private Library Association transferred its buildings, books, and holdings to the people of Multnomah County. A 1996 bond funded technology improvements and building renovations; Central underwent a major seismic retrofit from 1994 to 1997. Service widened again: School Corps began in 1997; Spanish/Latino outreach and designated bilingual/bicultural roles in 1998; Russian, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Vietnamese services in 2005; and laptop lending in 2009. The collection-centered branch became an increasingly hybrid place of reading, technology, learning, and outreach.

2011–2026: permanent funding, a digital turn, crisis, and reconstruction

In November 2012, about 63% of voters approved a permanent Library District, authorized up to \$1.24 per \$1,000 of assessed value. Funding began in July 2013, restoring seven-day service and giving the system a stable base. The County Board governs the district and MCL remains the operating department—an important distinction for accountability and partnership. ([County election result](#))

The [2017 Framework for Future Library Spaces](#) found a network with just over 0.3 square feet per resident, with the most severe deficit east of I-205. It proposed destination, maker, literacy, employment, performance, and civic spaces rather than identical book-storage branches, and a major East County library. This planning vision became the basis for the 2020 bond.

The pandemic interrupted everything. Buildings closed in March 2020, sidewalk service returned in summer, and indoor reopening occurred in phases from June to August 2021. MCL expanded holds pickup, mail delivery, phone and chat, online multilingual programming, devices and hotspots, and virtual literacy support. It also [eliminated late fees](#), waived \$730,185 across 72,861 accounts, and restored more than 2,000 accounts that had been blocked from borrowing. Yet workforce disruption damaged trust, later staffing remained below earlier levels in parts of the system, and behavioral-health, drug, and safety incidents intensified after reopening.

Meanwhile, voters approved \$387 million in general-obligation bonds in November 2020. With other sources, the program reached approximately \$458–459 million. Its twenty major projects included eleven refreshes, eight new, expanded, or renovated libraries, and an Operations Center. The work

added flexible community, teen, outdoor, and creation space; automated materials handling; accessibility and seismic improvements; and gigabit connectivity. East County Library opened in May 2026 at 95,000 square feet, approximately Central Library's scale. Belmont's August reopening completed the major program, although Hillsdale closed later that month for additional roof, lighting, HVAC, and accessibility work. ([Bond program](#); [bond compliance](#))

3. What changed in the last fifteen years?

3.1 A permanent institution replaced a permanent campaign

The 2012 district is the largest governance achievement of the period. Before it, the library could be excellent and still periodically threaten closures because operating funding depended on temporary levies. Permanent taxation made long-horizon planning possible.

But “permanent” does not mean unlimited. The [FY2027 adopted operating budget](#) is \$128.5 million with 544.8 full-time-equivalent positions. The levy rate is \$1.22, close to the \$1.24 legal maximum. Slow assessed-value growth, downtown value decline, inflation, internal-service costs, and the operating needs of larger buildings produced a roughly \$2 million gap addressed through reductions. Capital ambition now requires an equally serious operating model.

3.2 The library became genuinely hybrid

[State Library of Oregon records](#) show a decisive shift from 2019 to 2025. Digital circulation rose 113%, from 3.46 million to 7.37 million; its share of total circulation grew from 19% to 42%. Physical circulation fell about 32%, while combined circulation was only 5% below 2019. In-person visits fell 40%, but construction closures and the pandemic make that an unreliable measure of long-run demand. Electronic-material spending rose while print spending declined in nominal dollars.

Metric	FY2011	FY2019	FY2021	FY2025	Reading the trend
Service population	736,785	813,300	829,560	799,109	County population grew, then softened.
Registered borrowers	436,949	416,935	388,868	369,377	Registered share fell from about 59% to 46%; definitions and account cleanup may matter.
In-person visits	5.52m	3.61m	N/A	2.18m	Down 60% from 2011, but COVID and rolling bond closures heavily distort the endpoint.
Physical circulation	23.95m*	14.89m	6.95m	10.15m	Recovered from the pandemic but below the prior era.
Digital circulation	N/A	3.46m	5.21m	7.37m	More than doubled from 2019.
Total circulation	23.95m*	18.35m	12.16m	17.51m	Transaction volume recovered more than visits.
Public computer sessions	1.07m	700,579	3,443	352,166	Home devices and closures changed the role of terminal sessions.
Print-material spending	\$3.59m	\$2.65m	N/A	\$2.30m	Nominal decline; not adjusted for inflation.
Electronic-material spending	\$0.98m	\$4.13m	N/A	\$4.87m	Digital licensing became a major collection cost.

*FY2011 used older circulation categories; long-run comparisons should be treated as directional. Source: State Library of Oregon Public Library Statistics. FY2025–26 MCL reports a more current 18.1 million checkouts and renewals.

The strategic meaning is not “digital replaces buildings.” It is that the library now has two front doors. Digital convenience can reduce transactional visits even as rebuilt branches gain value for study, meetings, creation, children’s learning, trusted help, and social connection. Success requires treating the digital and physical networks as one service, with shared identity, discovery, staff support, and outcomes.

3.3 Barriers were removed, but universal reach was not achieved

Fine-free service removed a small revenue source and a large access barrier. Library Connect gives K–12 students in six districts automatic accounts using student IDs. The new website and multilingual staff improve navigation. Black Cultural Library Advocates, an Indigenous team formed in 2021, and language- and culture-specific positions strengthen belonging and knowledge production.

Still, the FY2026 budget’s “active cardholder household” measure was about 38%, and the [current cardholder count](#) is less than half the service population. These measures are imperfect—one household can use another member’s account, school accounts operate differently, and visitors need not borrow—but they are incompatible with a claim of universal reach. MCL also [ended School Corps and Books2U](#) after the 2024–25 school year. A world-leading system should restore or replace their functions through a jointly funded school-library compact.

3.4 New social burdens arrived faster than the operating model

After reopening, staff encountered more severe behavioral-health crises, drug use, weapons concerns, and unmet housing needs. A [2023 County Auditor report](#) counted 2,241 incident reports in 2022, including 1,109 at Central. In a November 2022 survey, only 27% of in-person public-facing employees and 23% of remote public-facing employees said they felt safe, compared with 55% of non-public-facing staff. Communication, protocol consistency, and employee involvement were also weak.

MCL simplified rules, created security leadership, expanded training and guards, and partnered with Cascadia social workers. A [2025 audit follow-up](#) found most recommendations implemented or in progress, but only 15% of surveyed employees felt appropriately involved in changes. A targeted federal workplace-health assessment at three high-impact branches identified ventilation, disposal, and protocol issues relating to suspected drug-smoke exposure. The evidence should not stigmatize patrons or imply confirmed toxic exposure throughout the system. It does show that welcome and safety are operational disciplines requiring building engineering, trained peers and social workers, de-escalation, clear escalation pathways, employee voice, and cross-agency responsibility.

3.5 Space changed from a deficit to a platform

The bond corrected a long-standing east-west space imbalance and added the room types a contemporary system needs. This is real progress. It also intensifies a legitimate debate: lower shelves, redistributed collections, flexible rooms, and centralized materials handling can improve visibility and adaptability, but may reduce browsable depth or make a library feel less like a library to readers.

The answer is not “books versus people.” It is portfolio transparency. MCL should report collection breadth, browsable items per branch, holds wait and fill rates, multilingual depth, serendipitous discovery, seating, room use, creation-studio use, and patron outcomes together. A world-leading system protects both the pleasure and autonomy of browsing and the public value of flexible space.

4. Where Portland is now—and the gap to world leadership

Domain	Current assets	Evidence of the gap	World-leading move
Funding and governance	Permanent district; strong voter mandate; near-complete capital renewal	Levy near legal maximum; larger estate raises recurring costs; fragmented responsibilities across County, cities, schools, and service providers	Ten-year operating compact tied to service levels, lifecycle costs, and outcomes; annual joint public accountability session
Reach	19 locations; 385,828 cardholders; Library Connect; online service; mobile capacity	About 38% active-cardholder-household penetration in the FY2026 measure; patron survey is self-selected, not a resident reach study	Representative resident panel; outreach to nonusers; 80% annual resident use by 2040; no branch service area below a published floor
Reading and collections	Nearly three million physical and digital items; very high circulation; specialist collections and selectors	Patron “find what I need” fell; browsing/space tradeoff lacks a public portfolio dashboard; digital licensing pressure	Protected collection floor, deep multilingual/local/Indigenous collections, transparent wait/fill/browse metrics, privacy and intellectual-freedom audits
Learning and youth	Summer 100,000+ student reaches children; automatic accounts; literacy programs	School Corps and Books2U ended; account creation does not prove use or outcomes	Countywide school-library compact; embedded librarians and mobile delivery; shared early-literacy and graduation-linked outcomes
Digital and AI agency	Digital circulation is now a coequal channel; public computers, devices, databases, and gigabit upgrades	Broadband/device/skills gaps persist; web traffic is not proof of capability; AI raises misinformation, privacy, and labor risks	Digital navigator corps; privacy-protecting AI/media literacy; assistive tech; secure creation tools; public-interest technology help
Belonging and power	Language/culture-specific teams; Black and Indigenous collections; multilingual programs	Unequal satisfaction; historic displacement/exclusion; role recognition and workload concerns	Paid community curators; tribal-government relationships; participatory program budget; disaggregated outcomes and community veto/appeal paths
Safety and wellbeing	Security leadership, training, simplified rules, social-work partnership	2022 safety survey baseline was unacceptable; employee involvement remained weak in 2025	Specialist health/housing peers at high-need sites; building controls; joint incident command; ≥90% staff safety target and transparent severity rates
Resilience	Libraries have served as cooling/smoke spaces; expanded buildings create a strong network	Libraries are not automatically resilience hubs; backup power, supplies, staffing, and coordination are inconsistent	All branches clean-air/cooling/communications capable; at least six full hubs with backup power and extended emergency operations
Measurement	Strong transaction statistics and patron survey tradition	No global ranking; survey excludes many nonusers; closures confound trends; little public outcome evidence	Open quarterly dashboard, representative panel, ISO-aligned performance and impact evaluation, independent review every three years

The core diagnosis

Portland’s gap is not a shortage of aspiration. It is the distance between **hardware and operating capacity; patron satisfaction and resident legitimacy; transactions and outcomes; universal rhetoric and branch-level equity; welcome and safe working conditions; individual programs and a coherent cross-government compact.**

The new estate makes this the right moment for a reset. If Portland measures success mainly through circulation, it will underuse its investment. If it treats the library as a catch-all social-service site, it will

burn out staff and blur accountability. The opportunity is to define a limited set of protected public purposes, organize the whole system around them, and enlist partners where different expertise is required.

5. What the best international systems teach

There is no authoritative “best library system in the world” ranking. The IFLA Public Library of the Year award evaluates individual new or rebuilt buildings, not entire systems. National datasets use different definitions, and high circulation can reflect good access, cultural habits, pricing, or counting rules. Portland should therefore benchmark practices and outcomes, not chase a league-table claim.

Helsinki Oodi: co-design and a civic living room. Residents contributed 2,300 ideas to [the design](#); continuing user-developer groups and participatory budgeting shape service. The building combines books, studios, maker tools, events, public services, and informal belonging. In [2025](#) it recorded 2.7 million visits, 550,000 loans, and 1,200 events—proof that loans alone miss its value.

Aarhus Dokk1: one civic platform. Dokk1 integrates the library with citizen services and flexible public space. Its four-space model— inspiration, learning, meeting, and performance/creation—offers a useful design lens for every branch, not just a flagship.

Singapore NLB: system reach and distributed access. Singapore reported 70% reach, 20.8 million physical visits, 38.8 million loans, 89.2 million digital uses, 19,541 programs, and 134 service nodes in its [2024 review](#). Its S.U.R.E. program treats source evaluation and information literacy as an essential public capability.

Toronto Public Library: universal presence and social-impact evidence. [Toronto reports](#) that 81% of residents use the library, through 100 branches, 45 million total visits, and 28 million annual borrows. More important, it has used a [representative resident panel and mixed methods](#) to measure emotional, social, intellectual, and creative impact. Portland needs that kind of evidence, not only a larger patron survey.

Vancouver Public Library: creation and reconciliation. Vancouver pairs free recording and creation facilities with an explicit Indigenous Rights and Reconciliation strategy. Tools matter, but governance and relationships determine who sees them as theirs.

Christchurch Tūranga: bicultural and resilient design. More than 2,400 community ideas and partnership with Ngāi Tahu/Ngāi Tūāhuriri shaped a building that embeds bicultural knowledge, environmental performance, and seismic resilience.

Chicago YOUmedia: mentors before gadgets. Evaluation of teen digital-media programs shows that equipment becomes meaningful through mentors, peer culture, and pathways for participation. Portland’s creation spaces need operating staff and community partners, not merely reservations and devices.

San Francisco: specialist partnership. A library–public-health partnership combines a social worker with paid peer health and safety associates. Its lesson is a boundary: fund the right expertise onsite instead of turning librarians into case managers.

The synthesis is simple: world-leading libraries combine **universal reach, hybrid convenience, strong collections, distinctive places, co-design, creation, cultural authority, specialist partnership, and credible outcome measurement.** No single international example does all of these equally well.

6. What Portland libraries should become

The Portland Public Knowledge Commons

The future system should be understood as one commons with three layers and five protected purposes.

Layer 1 — the universal digital library. Every resident should have a simple, privacy-protecting account that unifies physical and digital borrowing, databases, research help, courses, events, room and tool reservations, civic information, and personalized—not commercial—recommendations. Interfaces and live help should work in the county’s major languages and with assistive technology. AI should be used to help residents search, translate, learn, and assess information, with clear provenance, human escalation, minimal data retention, and no sale of attention.

Layer 2 — nineteen neighborhood commons. Every branch should meet a published service guarantee: compelling browsing and children’s collections; quiet study; public technology; staffed help; free meeting space; flexible learning/creation capability; clean air and cooling; and locally shaped programs. The baseline should be strong everywhere, while the mix responds to each community.

Layer 3 — flagships and mobile nodes. Central should anchor deep collections, special collections, public scholarship, downtown civic life, and large convenings. East County should operate as a full regional flagship, not a large branch with thin staffing. The Operations Center should enable fast systemwide logistics and serve as a base for mobile libraries, pop-ups, and emergency distribution. Mobile and partner-based nodes should reach schools, shelters, jails, elder housing, transit hubs, and rural edges.

Five protected purposes

1. Read freely. Guarantee intellectual freedom, patron privacy, deep and plural collections, multilingual abundance, local and Indigenous memory, excellent readers’ advisory, accessible formats, and the physical pleasure of browsing. Reading is not one program among many; it is the root capability that enables the rest.

2. Learn and navigate. Make the library the county’s lifelong learning and trusted-navigation system: early literacy, homework, adult education, English learning, media and AI literacy, research, benefits and government-information navigation, job and small-business support. The library should teach people how to judge claims, not tell them what to think.

3. Make and work. Turn studios and tools into mentored pathways: record a first podcast, prototype a product, repair an object, publish a zine, digitize family history, prepare a portfolio, or learn fabrication

and coding. Pair equipment with teaching artists, youth mentors, community experts, and routes to schools, colleges, unions, and employers.

4. Belong and govern. Make branches places where residents can be alone together, join groups, encounter local culture, deliberate on public issues, and shape library priorities. Provide paid roles for community curators and user-developers, participatory program funds, multilingual civic explainers, and transparent forums that protect viewpoint diversity and respectful conduct.

5. Prepare and recover. Treat the network as planned resilience infrastructure. Every branch should offer clean air, cooling, charging, communications, and reliable public information; selected hubs should add backup power, supplies, trained staffing, extended emergency hours, and formal integration into County and city response plans.

Boundaries that protect the mission

The library should be a front door and connector, not the sole provider of every public need. It should not become:

- an unfunded shelter or behavioral-health clinic;
- a police station or surveillance platform;
- a replacement for adequately funded school libraries and teachers;
- a commercial coworking club that crowds out universal access;
- a technology vendor's captive channel; or
- an events venue whose schedule displaces reading, quiet, collections, and spontaneous use.

These boundaries make partnership more—not less—important. Public health, housing, workforce, schools, parks, arts, emergency management, and tribal and community organizations should bring funded specialists, shared outcomes, and clear accountability into the commons.

7. What “#1 in the world” should mean

Portland should reject an opaque composite ranking. To claim world leadership credibly, it should meet a minimum standard in every domain, publish disaggregated results, and undergo independent review every three years. The figures below are proposed north stars; the County should set final targets after a representative 2027 baseline and cost analysis.

Domain	2040 north star	Proof
Universal reach	80% of residents use MCL annually; 70% of households have an active library relationship	Representative resident panel plus privacy-protecting administrative data; report nonusers separately
Equitable access	branch	No branch service area or major demographic group falls more than five points below the county reach floor
Reading knowledge	and	≥95% can find what they need; strong browse depth and multilingual parity; ≥25 circulations per resident retained as a health signal, not the goal
Youth and learning		100% of K-12 students have usable accounts; halve early-literacy and digital-skill gaps with school/community partners
Digital and AI agency		90% of participants can complete defined digital, source-evaluation, and AI-literacy tasks after support
Creativity and economic agency		Every branch offers mentored creation; participants demonstrate skills, projects, credentials, enterprises, or job progress
Belonging and civic value		≥90% say the library strengthens belonging and trust across difference; no demographic group below 85%
Staff and patron safety		≥90% of public-facing staff feel safe and heard; serious incident severity per 10,000 visits declines continuously
Resilience		All branches provide clean air, cooling, communications, and charging; at least six operate as full resilience hubs
Co-governance		Every service area participates in paid co-design; participatory programming becomes a recurring budget practice
Sustainability		Net-zero operational pathway, low-carbon procurement, circular repair/reuse, and lifecycle-funded buildings
Learning organization		Quarterly open data and independent impact evaluation every three years
		ISO 11620/16439-aligned methods, external review, public response plan

Three rules prevent gaming

1. **No averages without distribution.** Publish every core measure by branch/service area and, where privacy permits, by race/ethnicity, language, age, disability, income, and housing status.
2. **No outputs without outcomes.** Continue to report visits, loans, programs, and hours, but pair them with what changed in residents' capability, connection, safety, or opportunity.
3. **No flagship exception.** Central or East County cannot carry a global claim while smaller branches fall below a guaranteed floor.

8. A practical path from 2026 to 2040

2026–2028: stabilize, listen, and establish the baseline

1. **Finish the operating transition.** Fully staff new and expanded spaces, publish service standards, fund preventive maintenance and technology replacement, and disclose the ten-year recurring cost of the new estate.
2. **Create the evidence base.** Recruit a representative resident panel that includes nonusers; publish branch-level visits, circulation, room/studio use, programs, incidents, hours, staffing, and collection measures; document construction effects so trends are not misread.
3. **Reset safety with employees.** Establish a joint labor–management–community safety council; define incident severity; audit ventilation, restroom design, disposal, and response protocols; publish implementation status of the County Auditor and federal workplace-health recommendations.
4. **Protect the reading core.** Set public collection principles and branch browsing floors; measure “find what I need,” holds performance, multilingual depth, and discovery; make space/collection tradeoffs legible.
5. **Replace lost school-outreach capacity.** Negotiate a school-library compact with six districts, funded jointly and designed around account activation, embedded support, book access, family literacy, and measurable outcomes.
6. **Choose six resilience pilots.** Select sites by heat, smoke, power-outage, transit, and social-vulnerability data; fund backup power, filtration, communications, supplies, and trained cross-agency staffing.

2028–2031: operate the commons

1. Launch the unified digital account and multilingual resident dashboard.
2. Deploy digital navigators and privacy-protecting media/AI literacy throughout the network.
3. Fund mentors and pathways for every creation space; reserve capacity for youth and communities historically excluded from technology and arts investment.
4. Scale specialist social-work and peer-navigation teams at high-need sites under public-health or human-services funding.
5. Create paid service-area councils and a participatory programming fund; require published “you said / we did / we could not” decisions.
6. Make all nineteen branches clean-air, cooling, charging, and communications sites; certify six full hubs.

2031–2036: demonstrate outcomes and share the model

1. Tie budget proposals to the public scorecard and branch-equity floor.

2. Complete two independent impact reviews and publish raw, privacy-safe data and methods.
3. Establish Portland as a global learning site for multilingual, Indigenous, Black, immigrant, and culturally specific public librarianship.
4. Develop research partnerships with local universities and community-based evaluators, including randomized or quasi-experimental studies where ethical and useful.
5. Exchange staff and practice with Helsinki, Toronto, Singapore, Vancouver, Aarhus, Christchurch, and peer U.S. systems.

2036–2040: earn the claim

If Portland meets every floor—universal reach, equitable branches, knowledge quality, learning outcomes, digital agency, belonging, safe work, resilience, co-governance, sustainability, and independent evidence—it can credibly describe itself as a world-leading public library system. “Number one” would then mean not the most expensive, largest, newest, or busiest. It would mean the system most successful at turning shared knowledge infrastructure into freedom and belonging for the whole public.

Conclusion

Portland's library history is a story of widening circles: dues to taxes, downtown to countywide, shelves to networks, English-dominant service to culturally specific teams, transactions to social infrastructure. Each expansion corrected an older limit and created a new responsibility.

The 2020 bond completed a once-in-a-generation physical reset. The next generation's work is institutional: protect reading and intellectual freedom; treat digital service as a full public realm; make every branch a high-quality learning, creation, civic, and resilience commons; pair welcome with safe and well-supported staff; share authority with communities; and measure resident outcomes honestly.

Portland does not need to imitate a single famous library. It can combine what the strongest systems do well—and add something distinctly Portland: a countywide, multilingual, neighborhood-rooted public commons where books remain abundant, cultural authority is shared, technology serves human freedom, civic life has a home, and no resident has to buy the right to belong.

Methods and limitations

This report uses official Multnomah County and MCL histories, budgets, audits, program pages, patron research, capital reports, State Library of Oregon and federal statistics, international library standards, primary institutional reports from benchmark systems, and selected independent reporting. Historical statistics were calculated from state fiscal-year records. Definitions change across years; pandemic and construction closures make visit and program trends especially difficult to interpret. Patron survey results are self-selected and should not be treated as representative of all residents. Current post-bond public square footage and branch-level FY2026 performance were not available in audited form. International examples are practice benchmarks, not a global ranking. Proposed targets are strategic north stars requiring a representative baseline, community deliberation, and fiscal analysis before adoption.

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