



Dedham
PUBLIC LIBRARY

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Coming out of the pandemic, the Dedham Public Library has exceeded many of our peers in a number of metrics. While other libraries stayed stagnant, or even declined, in Dedham we were one of nine Minuteman Library Network libraries to have 2022 be their best year of circulation. This growth comes despite aging facilities that lack even basic accessibility features, to say nothing of modern amenities that patrons and taxpayers regularly request.

To remedy this, the Board of Library Trustees commissioned a study of the Library's facilities by the Ivy Group. This preliminary report is the first step in applying for a grant from the Massachusetts Public Library Construction Program (MPLCP) to improve the Library's physical plant. Through a survey that got an exceptional response rate, and four different focus groups--for seniors, teens, town leaders, and young professionals--plus forums for the community and staff, it was widely agreed that the Library's staff and programs are excellent but that the buildings greatly limit modern Library services.

Largely due to space limitations, the Dedham Public Library ranks last among comparable communities for print books (53% fewer) and the total size of its physical collection (58% smaller). Many users report visiting libraries in other communities for the ample parking, small private rooms for studying and tutoring, and childrens' rooms with generous seating for a variety of ages.

Residents with mobility disabilities in particular are poorly served by the Library's current facilities. At the Main Library there are multiple levels with no elevators or lifts, and the main level has steps and thresholds between spaces. Staff spaces are also not fully accessible and do not allow staff to complete assignments in an efficient manner.

The lack of task-specific areas greatly hinders usage of the Libraries. Adults avoid using the Library because the main work space is often used for meetings and programs. This is particularly a problem for those who are looking for a work-away-from-home space in the post-pandemic world. Both parents and grandparents lamented that the children's room at both branches is too small for the number of families who want to use it, and can't accommodate all of the programming, independent play, and stroller parking that is needed.

The Main Library, a French Romanesque building constructed with Dedham Granite, was built during Grover Cleveland's first administration in the 1880s. At nearly 140 years old, it is the Town's oldest building. The Endicott Branch Library was originally Katherine Endicott's nine car garage. They are attractive from the outside, but on the inside neither space is adequate to meet the needs of a modern, fully staffed Library.

While the MPLCP grant is substantial, it will not provide the full cost of completing a building modernization plan if awarded the grant. Knowing this, as well as recognizing the other Town building projects currently in the pipeline, the Library Trustees voted earlier in the month to expend \$150,000 from the Library's trust funds to complete the planning and design phase of the project so as not to further burden taxpayers. Town Meeting will be asked in May to allow the Trustees to move forward with the grant application and the expenditure of the trust funds.

Even with the many physical limitations imposed, Dedham residents and others have shown they value the many services and programs offered by our Libraries. This is demonstrated not only by being one of the few libraries in the area to continue to increase usage, but also by the 3.1 million dollars the Library saved taxpayers in 2023. The Library Trustees are confident that with a modern facility we can serve an even greater number of residents from every neighborhood and every walk of life.