

Libraries are Key to Building Local Economic Base Says New Study
Researchers find that public libraries impact human, physical and community capacity

January 11, 2007 (Evanston, ILL) – Public libraries build a community’s capacity for economic activity and resiliency, says a new study from the Urban Institute. **Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development** adds to the body of research pointing to a shift in the role of public libraries -- from a passive, recreational reading and research institution to an active economic development agent, addressing such pressing urban issues as literacy, workforce training, small business vitality and community quality of life. The study was commissioned by the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

“The rules of engagement in economic development are changing. Strategies for building a strong base are being realigned in the context of the knowledge economy.” says ULC President Martín Gómez.

In this era of economic transformation, the business of public libraries is being recast. Public access to digital information and technology is a draw for libraries. Their open structure, combined with the power of new digital collections, technology, and media, position them to help communities make the transition from manufacturing and service economies to high tech and information economies.

Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development shows the specific ways local governments, agencies, and libraries are working together to achieve benefits for individuals, agencies and the community at large in four areas:

- **Early Literacy Services are contributing to long-term economic success.** As the strong correlation between investments in early literacy and long-term economic success is documented, public libraries are expanding beyond their traditional story time services, engaging in high-impact strategies with community partners. They are leading public awareness campaigns, reaching new mothers with materials and resources that promote reading early and often. Extensive community-wide training on early literacy with home and professional child care givers is increasing levels of school readiness and success. From Providence (RI) to San Luis Obispo (CA), public libraries are reaching young children and families in diverse neighborhoods. These services are the first link in a chain of investments needed to build the educated workforce that ensures local competitiveness in the knowledge economy.
- **Library employment and career resources are preparing workers with new technologies.** With an array of public computers, Internet access, and media products, public libraries are a first point of entry for many new technology users. Now that job readiness, search and application information are all online, library job and career services focus on using and building technology skills. New library service models are also as mobile as the shifting economy, as illustrated in Memphis (TN), where the JobLINC mobile jobs and career center that started as an initiative for a single high-need neighborhood has now expanded services to cover the entire county, with high levels of use not only by job-seekers but by employers as well.
- **Small business resources and programs are lowering barriers to market entry.** Libraries are the source for new online business databases that reach entrepreneurs around the clock. Researchers find that when libraries work with local and state agencies to provide business development workshops and research, market entry costs to prospective and existing small businesses are reduced and new jobs are created. Libraries are also in the vanguard of trying new strategies. In Phoenix (AZ),

for example, the public library is part of a statewide network of business, economic development and library professionals who are seeking to expand and diversify the economic base by promoting more synergy among clusters of enterprises.

- **Public library buildings are catalysts for physical development.** Libraries are frequented local destinations. Urban Institute researchers repeatedly found that public libraries are highly regarded, and are seen as contributing to stability, safety and quality of life in neighborhoods. Among private sector developers of malls, commercial corridors, mixed-use developments and joint-use facilities, libraries are gaining recognition for other qualities – their ability to attract tremendous foot traffic, provide long-term tenancy, and complement neighboring retail and cultural destinations.

The study concludes that public libraries are positioned to fuel not only new, but next economies because of their roles in building technology skills, entrepreneurial activity, and vibrant, livable places. The combination of stronger roles in economic development strategies and their prevalence -- 16,000 branches in more than 9,000 systems -- make public libraries stable and powerful tools for cities seeking to attract and build new businesses.