

Public Libraries: Enriching Lives In Hampton Roads



PUBLIC LIBRARIES: ENRICHING LIVES IN HAMPTON ROADS

"The only thing that you absolutely have to know is the location of the library."

Albert Einstein

Hampton Roads is home to 63 public libraries across 13 library systems. These public libraries do much, much more than simply lend out books. Libraries provide people with access to information and media of all kinds, while also serving as career and business development sites, creative spaces, technology hubs, play spaces for young children, and all-purpose community centers. Access is free, and everyone is welcome. It is difficult to think of another local institution that is so broadly inclusive—serving residents (and even non-residents) of all ages, interests, classes, and levels of education in pursuit of overarching goals such as enriching lives and promoting lifelong learning.

Libraries have passionate followings. A recent *New York Times* photo essay on public libraries triggered hundreds of reader responses, forming “a warm tidal wave of adoration for libraries and all they represent: freedom, independence, adventure, exploration, experimentation, ideas, ingenuity and so much more.”¹ At the same time, libraries have also become a target of passionate criticism. In just the last few years, libraries across the United States have confronted an unprecedented number of challenges to books in their collections, particularly those dealing with LGBTQIA+ or racial themes. Librarians themselves have been harassed and threatened, and some citizens’ groups and public officials have sought to intervene in library operations or eliminate library funding altogether. In April 2024, the Alabama House advanced a bill to make school and library staff criminally liable for distributing “sexual or gender oriented” materials without parental consent. In the same month, Idaho passed a law requiring libraries to move materials deemed harmful to children to an adults-only section and require libraries to have a form to request a review of materials. In response, some libraries have become adults-only to avoid potential litigation.²

In the summer of 2023, Samuels Public Library in Warren County, Virginia, found itself embroiled in a controversy about books that a group, Clean Up Samuels Library, deemed objectionable. In response to complaints, the Warren County Board of Supervisors voted to withhold 75% of the library’s budget allocation for the coming fiscal year. The library director resigned in the midst of the controversy, which consumed hours of public meetings. In October 2023, the library agreed to include one of the county supervisors on its executive committee and to consider candidates suggested by the Board of Supervisors when seeking to appoint new library board members. For all the turmoil, the library’s funding and holdings were not changed. By October, visitors were up by 15%, and the number of donors had increased by 25% compared to 2022.³

This chapter provides an overview of Hampton Roads’ public libraries—how they function and how they are funded—and the diversity of services and resources they offer to our residents. We focus on the innovative ways that public libraries have evolved to meet their communities’ changing needs.

1 Elisabeth Egan and Erica Ackerberg, “A Love Letter to Libraries, Long Overdue,” *The New York Times* (February 14, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/14/books/review/library-public-local.html>; and “Libraries, You Are My Heroes’: Readers Share Memories of a Favorite Haven,” *The New York Times* (February 19, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/19/books/library-memories.html>.

2 <https://alabamareflector.com/2024/04/25/alabama-house-passes-bill-that-could-lead-to-prosecutions-of-librarians/>
<https://idahocapitalsun.com/2024/04/10/idaho-libraries-must-move-materials-deemed-harmful-to-children-or-face-lawsuits-under-new-law/>

<https://komonews.com/news/offbeat/public-library-to-become-adults-only-due-to-new-idaho-law-donnely-public-library-house-bill-710-library-porn-effective-july-1-2024-adult-material-obscene-content-governor-brad-little>
3 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/10/04/virginia-samuels-library-lgbtq-books/>

Finally, we assess the extent to which the library culture wars have reached Hampton Roads, and we show how our region's libraries are negotiating these challenging times.

In preparing this chapter, we reached out to the directors of all thirteen Hampton Roads library systems. We are grateful for the substantive feedback we received from Amanda Jackson (Chesapeake), Sonal Rastogi (Norfolk), Anita Jennings (Newport News), Neva White (Hampton), Clint Rudy (Suffolk), Sandy Towers (Williamsburg Regional), Ben Neal (Blackwater Regional), Kevin Smith (York County), and Jessica Hartley (Poquoson). We also spoke with Lisa Varga, Executive Director of the Virginia Library Association, and staff members at the Library of Virginia.

Governance and Funding

Every Hampton Roads locality is home to at least one public library. Most of our region's localities operate their own dedicated library system. Two of Hampton Roads' library systems are cooperatively funded by multiple localities. As illustrated in Table 1, Blackwater Regional Library encompasses nine facilities in Franklin, Isle of Wight County, Southampton County, Surry County, and Sussex County. Williamsburg Regional Library serves Williamsburg, James City County, and York County. (York County also maintains two libraries of its own—Tabb Library and Yorktown Library, both in the southern part of the county.)

The largest libraries in Virginia Beach and Norfolk are distinctively organized. Virginia Beach's Joint-Use Library is cooperatively administered by Virginia Beach Public Library and Tidewater Community College. In Norfolk, The Slover (formerly known as Slover Library) provides a home for the downtown branch of Norfolk Public Library and the Sargeant Memorial Collection for local history. The Slover cooperates and shares services with Norfolk Public Library but also has its own budget and staff.

Directors of the city/county libraries report to the governments of their respective localities. Library boards, which are appointed by the city council or county board of supervisors, help to oversee library policies and advise the library director. Library board meetings are typically held monthly or quarterly, and are open to the public. Hampton Roads' two regional library systems are overseen by governing (rather than advisory) boards of trustees, with members who are similarly appointed by the cooperating localities.

Library funding is overwhelmingly local. As highlighted in Table 2, Hampton Roads' three most populous localities—Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, and Norfolk—also maintain the largest library systems, each with eight or more facilities and total operating expenditures of more than \$11 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2022. At the other end of the spectrum, Hampton Roads' smallest localities—Gloucester County, Poquoson, and Mathews County—each maintains just one or two libraries; these systems' total operating expenditures are less than \$1.5 million.



**TABLE 1
LIBRARIES IN HAMPTON ROADS**

System	Facilities	Hours/week (main library)	Staffing (FTE)	Library Foundation	Creative Space	Overdue Fines	Checkout Limit
Blackwater Regional Library*	9	47	30	No	No	No	Unlimited
Chesapeake Public Library	8	60	125.9	Yes	Yes	No	30
Gloucester County Public Library	2	51	11.7	Yes	No	Yes	20
Hampton Public Library	4	56	25	Yes	Yes	No	30
Mathews Memorial Library	1	46	N/A	No	No	No	15
Newport News Public Library	4	56	55	Yes	Yes	No	50
Norfolk Public Library / Slover Library	12	50	149.5	Yes	Yes	No	25
Portsmouth Public Library	4	46	N/A	Yes	No	Yes	30
Poquoson Public Library	1	62	12.45	No	No	No	50
Suffolk Public Library	3	54	33	No	No	No	Unlimited
Virginia Beach Public Library	10	58	245.5	Yes	Yes	No	30
Williamsburg Regional Library**	3	64	85	Yes	Yes	No	40
York County Public Library	2	58	34.5	Yes	Yes	No	50

*Blackwater Regional Library serves Franklin, Isle of Wight, Southampton, Surry, and Sussex counties. **Williamsburg Regional Library serves Williamsburg, James City County, and York County.

TABLE 2
CHARACTERISTICS OF LIBRARIES IN HAMPTON ROADS
FISCAL YEAR 2022

System	Total Circulation	Circulation per capita	Total Materials	Materials per capita	Library Visits	Visits per capita	Total Expenditures (Millions)	Expenditures per capita
Blackwater Regional Library*	306,407	3.8	1,684,555	20.6	165,088	2.0	\$2.6	\$31.5
Chesapeake Public Library	1,258,954	5.1	453,621	1.9	619,346	2.5	\$11.3	\$45.9
Gloucester County Public Library	126,779	3.4	2,624,337	70.8	87,996	2.4	\$1.2	\$32.6
Hampton Public Library	117,121	0.9	287,720	2.1	227,226	1.7	\$2.8	\$20.9
Mathews Memorial Library	24,368	2.8	302,713	35.0	29,330	3.4	\$0.5	\$59.2
Newport News Public Library	556,635	3.1	490,090	2.7	236,265	1.3	\$5.7	\$31.2
Norfolk Public Library / Slover Library	558,196	2.3	1,664,122	6.8	205,127	0.8	\$11.0	\$45.0
Portsmouth Public Library	101,741	1.1	1,774,324	18.8	136,246	1.4	\$2.4	\$24.8
Poquoson Public Library	129,762	10.4	158,366	12.8	58,576	4.7	\$0.9	\$74.8
Suffolk Public Library	331,294	3.5	165,876	1.8	79,484	0.9	\$3.6	\$37.8
Virginia Beach Public Library	1,725,580	3.8	1,858,591	4.1	760,064	1.7	\$18.5	\$40.8
Williamsburg Regional Library**	1,136,138	12.4	305,846	3.4	439,688	4.8	\$7.2	\$79.0
York County Public Library***	434,411	6.2	195,807	2.8	237,016	3.4	\$3.5	\$50.8
Virginia Median	---	3.7	---	7.2	---	1.9	---	\$31.0

Source: Library of Virginia (2024). *Blackwater Regional Library serves Franklin, Isle of Wight, Southampton, Surry, and Sussex counties. **Williamsburg Regional Library serves Williamsburg, James City County, and York County. *** Expenditures include contractual services to Williamsburg Regional Library.

Graph 1 shows that Poquoson and Mathews County, the two single-library systems, have higher per capita library expenditures (\$74.8 and \$59.2, respectively) than anywhere else in the region except Williamsburg/James City County (\$79.0). Hampton, Portsmouth, and Newport News have the lowest per capita expenditures (\$20.9, \$24.8, and \$31.2). Overall, Hampton Roads localities spend more on libraries than do other places in the Commonwealth; the median per capita expenditure for all Virginia libraries is just \$31.0.

Beyond local funding, each Virginia public library receives a formula-based state aid grant, which is chiefly used for purchasing books and other materials. State assistance is proportionately more significant for the smaller library systems. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, the amount of state aid received by Hampton Roads libraries ranged between \$569,082 (Blackwater Regional Library) and \$104,326 (Mathews Memorial Library).⁴

Every Hampton Roads system has a Friends of the Library organization that, in addition to rallying volunteers, also helps to raise money for library programs and special projects. (Blackwater Regional Library has a separate Friends group for each of its nine locations.) Friends members pay annual dues (typically less than \$20 per year, although larger contributions are always welcome), and Friends used book sales are an evergreen fundraiser. The amount of money raised by Friends organizations varies widely from place to place. Friends of the Suffolk Public Library contributed \$10,000 to their library system in FY 2023, while Friends of the Virginia Beach Library book sales have raised a total of \$1 million over the past ten years.⁵

Supplementing the longstanding work of Friends organizations, charitable library foundations provide additional support to several Hampton Roads library systems. Most of these foundations were established in the 1990s or 2000s, as public libraries everywhere sought new means to raise money and fill budget gaps. The goal of these foundations is “to raise large amounts of private funding for their library from individuals, [other] foundations, and corporations.”⁶

Hampton Roads’ library foundations are organized in different ways. The Gloucester Library Endowment Fund, for example, is part of the Gloucester Community Foundation. Williamsburg Regional Library merged its foundation and its Friends organization in 2018, seeking to create a single structure for charitable initiatives. Norfolk, meanwhile, is home to the Norfolk Public Library Foundation and the Friends of the Norfolk Public Library, and also to the Slover Library Foundation and Slover Library Guild (with a proposed membership contribution of \$1,000 per year). The assets and grant-giving capacity of Hampton Roads’ library foundations are similarly diverse. The Slover Library Foundation is easily the largest foundation, reporting assets of \$9.9 million in 2022, while one of the smallest, the Portsmouth Library Foundation, reported just \$120,559 that same year.⁷

⁴ The Library of Virginia Library Development and Networking Division InfoCenter, at: <https://vpl.lib.va.us/grants/state-aid/>

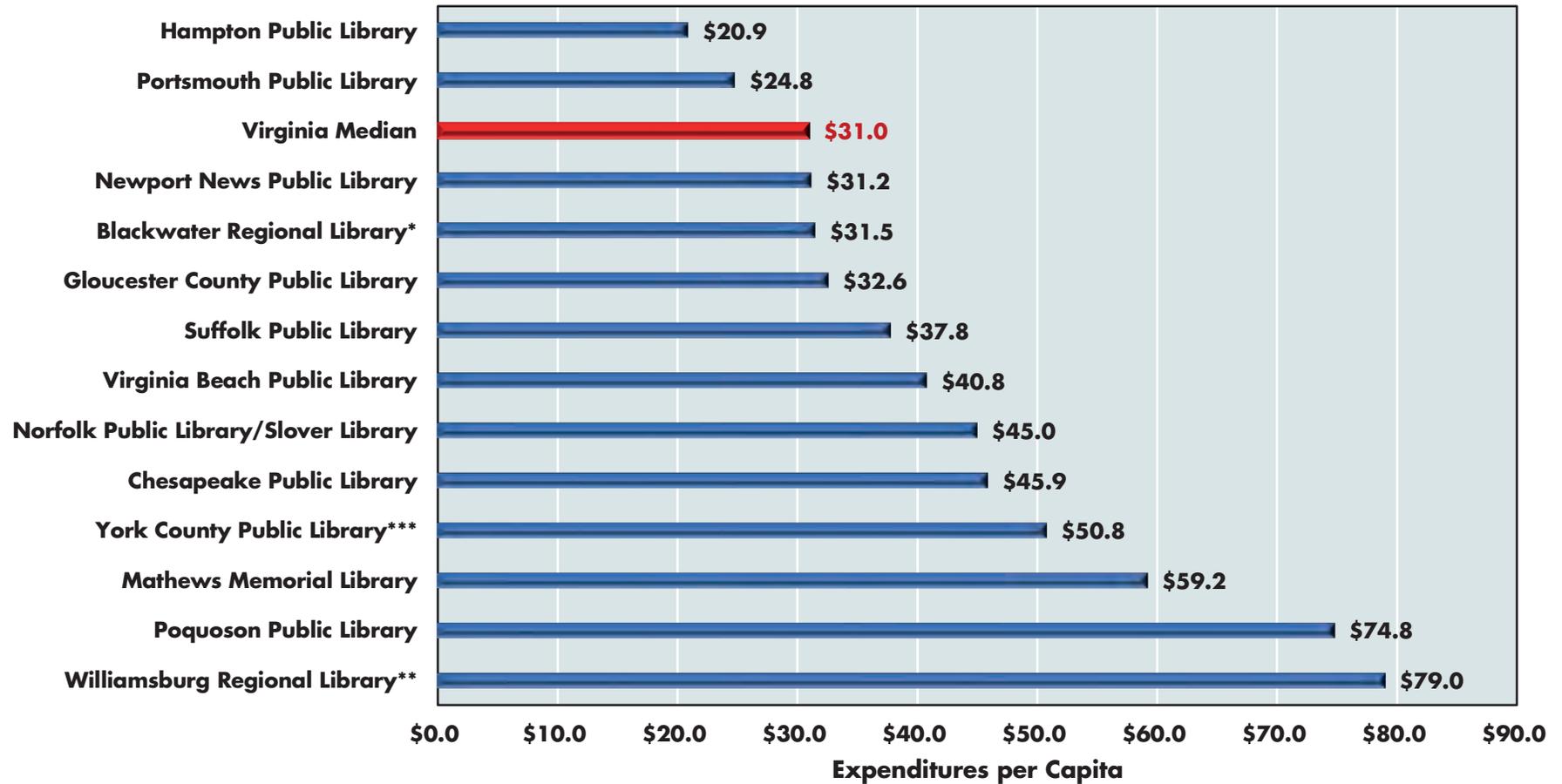
⁵ Suffolk Public Library, Annual Impact Report 2022–2023, at: <https://www.suffolkpubliclibrary.com/152/Annual-Reports>; and Stacy Parker, “Virginia Beach library store used books sales have raised \$1 million for program,” *The Virginian-Pilot* (1 January 2024), at: <https://www.pilotonline.com/2024/01/01/virginia-beach-library-store-used-books-sales-has-raised-1-million-for-programs/>

⁶ Library Strategies, “Library Foundations Raise Money for Libraries... Right?”, at: <https://www.librarystrategiesconsulting.org/2016/04/library-foundations-raise-money-for-libraries-right/>

⁷ <https://www.causeiq.com/organizations/norfolk-public-library-foundation,541758183/> and <https://www.causeiq.com/organizations/portsmouth-public-library-foundation,541556607/>

GRAPH 1

EXPENDITURES PER CAPITA OF LIBRARY SYSTEMS
HAMPTON ROADS AND VIRGINIA, FISCAL YEAR 2022



Source: Library of Virginia (2024). *Blackwater Regional Library serves Franklin, Isle of Wight, Southampton, Surry, and Sussex counties. **Williamsburg Regional Library serves Williamsburg, James City County, and York County. ***Includes contractual services to Williamsburg Regional Library.

Library Collections: Books and Much, Much More

Public libraries, in a sense, are the original “sharing economy.” Libraries were lending books long before internet startups like Airbnb, Uber, and Lime began encouraging consumers to rent or share assets they might not need all the time. While much has changed since Hampton Roads’ first public libraries opened their doors over a century ago, promoting literacy and providing access to reliable information remain core to their institutional mission. Physical books are therefore still the centerpiece of library collections. However, public libraries have long responded to changing technologies and popular demand by supplementing their book collections with other kinds of media. DVDs, audiobooks, ebooks, and various kinds of streaming media are library mainstays today.

Library Journal’s most recent Public Library Materials Survey, which was released in 2022, provides an interesting snapshot of U.S. library collections (Graph 2). As of 2021, nearly half of public libraries’ materials budgets continued to be spent on physical books, while ebooks claimed a distant second place (between 12% and 17%), and DVDs/Blu-rays an even more distant third place (between 9% and 12%). Notably, 11% of librarians said they planned to stop purchasing audiobook CDs in the next two years, and 9% planned to stop purchasing music CDs—a sign of library users’ growing preference for streaming and downloadable media.⁸

Every Hampton Roads library director we interviewed reported steadily growing demand for ebooks, which now represent as much as 30 to 40 percent of all book circulation in some library systems. This has significant consequences not only for library shelves, but also library budgets. Unlike physical books, which are purchased outright and may remain in a library’s collection indefinitely, ebook rights are leased (for a limited period of time, and/or a limited number of downloads) from vendors such as Hoopla and OverDrive (which operates the Libby app). The economics of ebooks are

complicated and evolving, but, for now, ebooks are a much more expensive resource for libraries than are their paper counterparts.

All kinds of useful items can be found in library collections. At least seven Hampton Roads systems now tout a ‘library of things,’ which typically includes recreational, science, and crafting equipment that users might not need all the time or might not want to purchase themselves. Loanable wifi hotspots are in high demand wherever they are offered, helping to bridge the digital divide. Williamsburg Regional Library users may check out a Roku or Firestick device with popular streaming services for up to one week at a time. Chesapeake, Hampton, Virginia Beach, and Williamsburg all host ‘seed libraries’ for giving away seeds and plant cuttings.

Not all library holdings are intended to circulate. Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, and Portsmouth have specialized law libraries. Several of our libraries have ‘Virginiana rooms’ or other special collections and archives that are used by genealogy and local history researchers. These include the Edgar T. Brown Local History Archive in Virginia Beach, the Wallace History Room in Chesapeake, the Sargeant Memorial Collection in Norfolk, and the Martha Woodruff Hiden Virginiana Room Collection in Newport News.

Graph 3 shows that Gloucester County, Virginia Beach, and Portsmouth have the largest overall collections (including ebooks) in Hampton Roads, according to the Library of Virginia. The largest per capita holdings are at Gloucester County Public Library, Mathews Memorial Library, and Blackwater Regional Library. But do Hampton Roads residents make the most of these collections? The Library of Virginia also tracks circulation per capita—that is, “the average number of items checked out in a year by each member of the community.”

⁸ Neal Wyatt, “Collection Rebalance | 2022 Materials Survey,” *Library Journal* (July 11, 2022), at: <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/Collection-Rebalance-2022-Materials-Survey>

Hampton Roads' libraries of things

Here are some of the most interesting items we found in the catalogs of our region's libraries, all free to borrow with a library card:

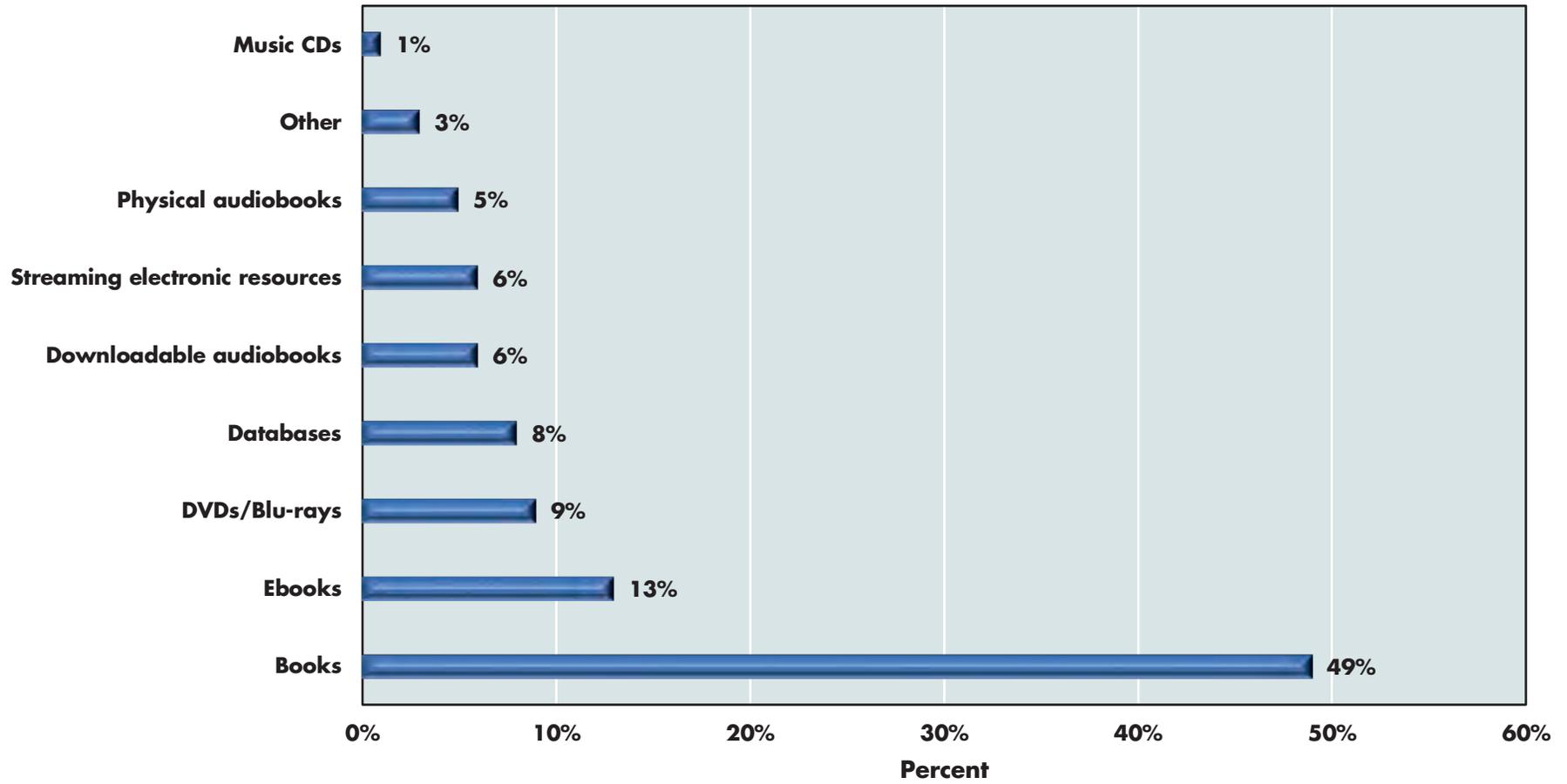
- Air fryer (Blackwater)
- American Girl Doll kit (Norfolk)
- Bird-watching kit (Virginia Beach)
- Blood pressure kit (Chesapeake)
- Cake pans (Suffolk)
- Children's Museum of Virginia passes (Portsmouth)
- Electric guitar kit (Norfolk)
- Car diagnostic scanner (WRL)
- Green screen kit (WRL)
- Hot glue gun (Blackwater)
- Kids scavenger hunt in a box (York)
- Litter clean-up kit (Newport News)
- Metal detector (Chesapeake)
- Noise canceling headphones (Virginia Beach)
- Pickleball set (York)
- Surfboard (Virginia Beach)

Eliminating library fines

Almost everyone who has borrowed books from a library has sometimes forgotten to return them on time. Until very recently, most libraries imposed daily fines for each overdue book; if the accumulated fines grew too large, a user's library account would be blocked. Several years ago, libraries began noting that overdue fines disproportionately deterred lower-income residents from using their services. Libraries that lifted fines not only saw more visitors, but also more overdue materials were returned. The financial impact of eliminating fines was comparatively minor. In 2019 the American Library Association (ALA) adopted a formal resolution on Monetary Library Fines as a Form of Social Inequity, noting that fines created "a barrier in public relations," absorbed "valuable staff time," and distracted from libraries' core mission. Only two of Hampton Roads' library systems (Portsmouth and Gloucester County) still charge late fines. In this regard, Suffolk was a pioneer, eliminating fines in the early 2000s. More libraries stopped collecting fines during the pandemic and later made this change permanent. All libraries, of course, still charge users for materials that are damaged, lost, or otherwise unreturned after a month or more.

GRAPH 2

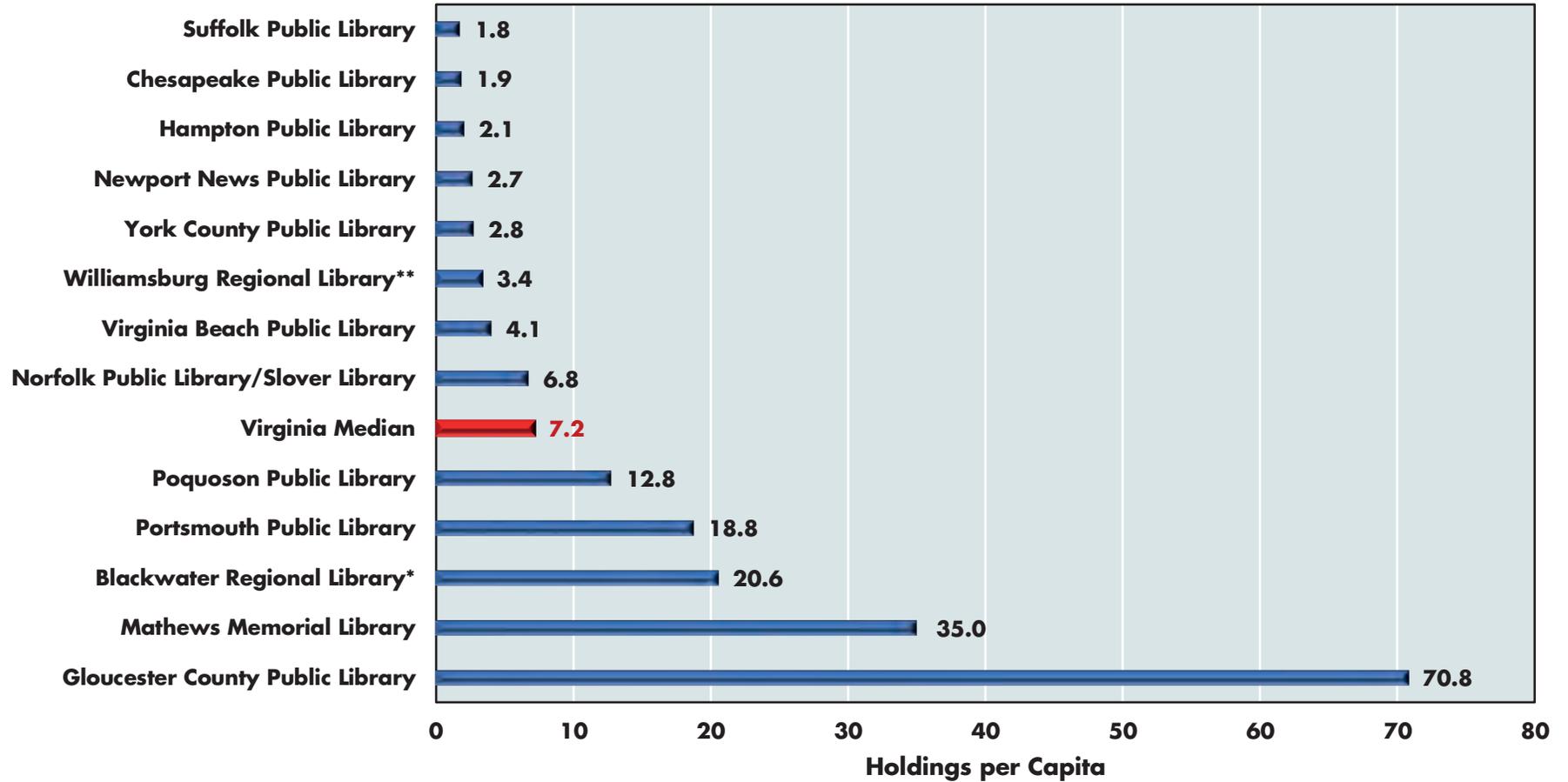
BUDGET ALLOCATION FOR LIBRARY MATERIALS, 2021



Source: Library Journal (2022).

GRAPH 3

VIRGINIA AND HAMPTON ROADS LIBRARY SYSTEMS
HOLDINGS PER CAPITA, FISCAL YEAR 2022



Source: Library of Virginia (2024). *Blackwater Regional Library serves Franklin, Isle of Wight, Southampton, Surry, and Sussex counties. **Williamsburg Regional Library serves Williamsburg, James City County, and York County.

A high number “indicates heavy use of the library’s circulating materials” — as shown in Table 2, Williamsburg Regional Library (12.4 items), Poquoson Public Library (10.4), and York County Public Library (6.2). A low number, on the other hand, might indicate “(1) the library’s collection may not meet the community’s needs or interest; (2) residents may be unaware of the library’s resources; [or] (3) the library may have an extensive collection of noncirculating materials.”⁹ Hampton, Portsmouth, and Norfolk have our region’s lowest per capita circulations.

Here it is also important to note that a growing proportion of library resources are not actually captured by these numbers. For example, streaming movies and music, and magazines and newspapers accessed through the digital newsstand Magzter, are not part of library “holdings” — although they may be tracked by library “circulation.” And neither of these statistics capture the use of other popular library resources—for example, New York Times Digital Access, ancestry.com, and all kinds of online databases. Thus, “holdings per capita” and “circulation per capita” are an incomplete, and perhaps somewhat old-fashioned, way of measuring library resources and how frequently these are used.

Creative Hubs and Third Places

In the past decade or two, public libraries have undergone a broad cultural shift, increasingly styling themselves as ‘people-centered,’ rather than ‘collections-centered,’ institutions.¹⁰ This transition was undoubtedly hastened by the digital revolution. Now that many traditional library resources have moved online (where public libraries still have a critical role to play, ensuring access for all), the function of library buildings as repositories of information has become less important. Libraries increasingly view themselves as creative hubs and sites for developing new skills and also as ‘third places.’

Seven of Hampton Roads’ library systems now host maker spaces or other creative studios where users can craft and engage in all kinds of hands-on projects. Laser cutters, 3D printers, Cricut machines, and sewing machines are not only used by amateurs to create art projects, clothing, and other household items, but also by entrepreneurs and small businesses for producing promotional items and prototypes. The creative spaces at The Slover in Norfolk are the most extensive in our region, including four separate studios for design, maker technology, sound, and photography/video production. Norfolk, Chesapeake, and Williamsburg also have memory labs for preserving family photos and digitizing older media. All of these libraries offer classes, training, and workshops for users of all levels.

Libraries have also become sites for career development and working remotely. Libraries provide comfortable work space with reliable wifi, high-quality printers, and meeting and conference rooms. Several of our libraries offer job counseling and other kinds of professional development. The Roy E. Hendrix Business Center at the Slover in Norfolk provides “resources for people in all phases of the business cycle, from startup to expansion to economic growth.” Several libraries offer free notary service, and Newport News’ Main Street Library and Poquoson Public Library are U.S. passport acceptance facilities.

⁹ Library of Virginia, 2013–2022 Statistical Data for Virginia Public Libraries, at: <https://www.lva.virginia.gov/lib-edu/ldnd/libstats/>

¹⁰ Gensler Research Institute, *A New Model for the Public Library* (2019), 4, at: <https://www.gensler.com/gri/a-new-model-for-the-public-library>

Public libraries are increasingly leaning into their identity as “third places”—that is, as physical locations “other than work or home where there’s little to no financial barrier to entry and where conversation is the primary activity.”¹¹ Libraries foster actual conversations by sponsoring book clubs, hosting community meetings, and connecting people with shared interests. More broadly, libraries provide a site where people from all walks of life mingle, and where community ties are forged. Living and working patterns in the 21st century can be isolating, and the experience of the pandemic underscored our need for social connectivity and human interaction. Already in 2018, author Susan Orlean wrote that “the publicness of the public library is an increasingly rare commodity. It becomes harder all the time to think of places that welcome everyone and don’t charge any money for that warm embrace.”¹²

Graph 4 shows the two most visited library systems in Hampton Roads are in the two largest cities—Virginia Beach, which counted 760,064 visits in 2022, and Chesapeake Public Library (619,346 visits). The next busiest system, Williamsburg Regional Library (439,688 visits) serves a significantly smaller population, but boasts the highest visits per capita (4.8). Hampton Roads’ two single-library systems, Poquoson and Mathews, had the next-highest visits per capita (4.7 and 3.3, respectively), but the smallest total number of visitors. The systems with the lowest per capita visits are Norfolk, Suffolk, and Newport News. According to the Library of Virginia a low number of visits may indicate several things: “For example, (1) the hours the library is open does not fit the needs of the community; (2) the library’s collection and programming does not meet the interest or needs of the community; (3) residents may be unaware of what the library has to offer; (4) the facility may be uninviting; (5) the location may be inconvenient.”¹³

Here, too, we note that ‘library visits’—people walking through the doors of a building—may no longer reflect how much a library is actually used. People who download ebooks, stream movies, or use other online services may be avid library users but rarely visit one in person. Likewise, patrons who utilize curbside pickup (a service that some libraries introduced during the pandemic and continue to offer) may not be counted as library ‘visitors.’

¹¹ Allie Conti, “Do Yourself a Favor and Go Find a ‘Third Place,’” *The Atlantic* (April 4, 2022), at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2022/04/third-places-meet-new-people-pandemic/629468/>

¹² Susan Orlean, *The Library Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 67.

¹³ Library of Virginia, 2013–2022 Statistical Data for Virginia Public Libraries, at: <https://www.lva.virginia.gov/lib-edu/ldnd/libstats/>

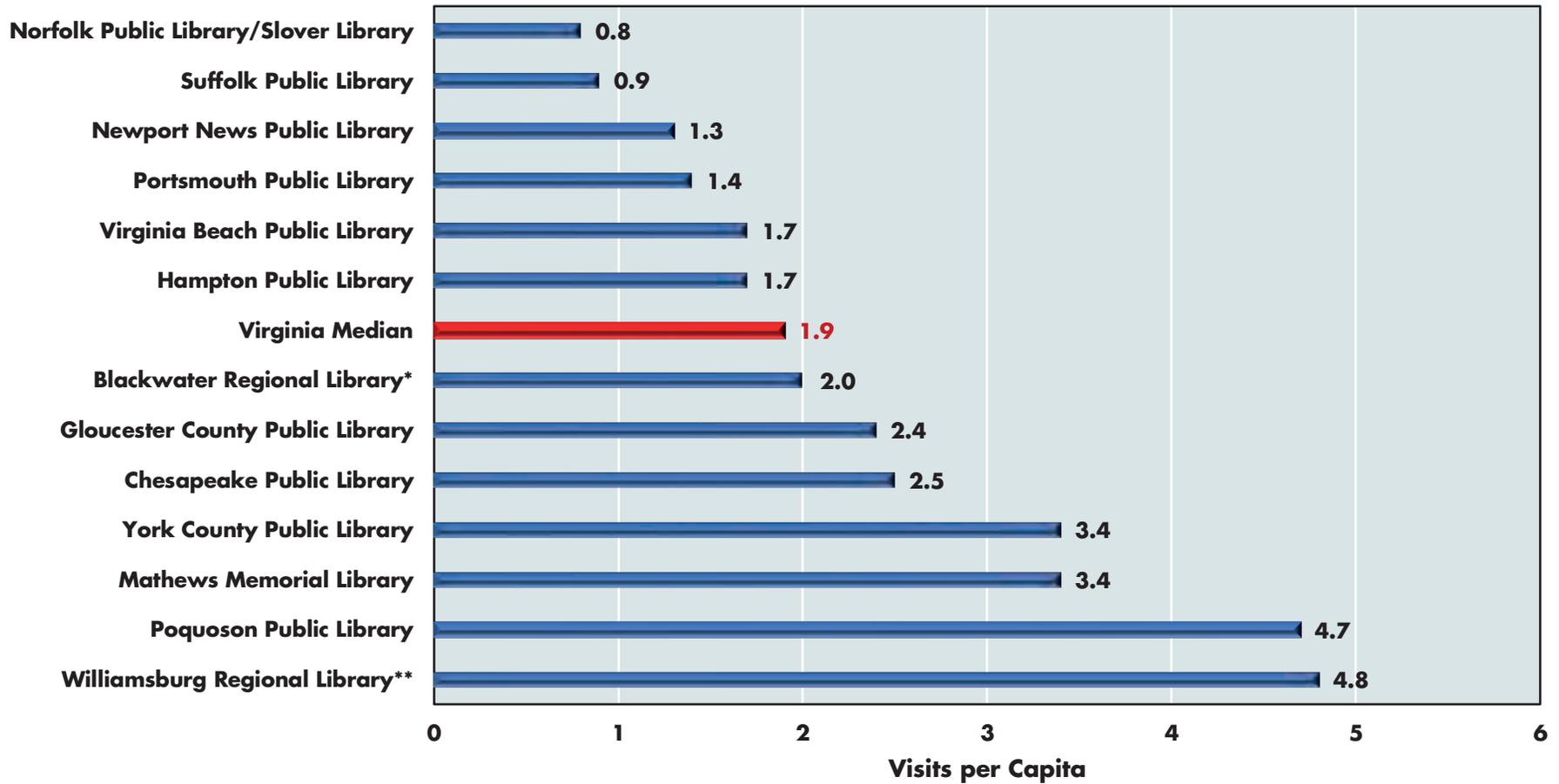
A week in the life of Hampton Roads’ libraries

Hampton Roads’ 63 libraries regularly host public programs and special events for people of all ages. Here’s a very small selection of the activities in just one week, March 1–March 7, 2024:

- Anime club (Norfolk)
- Art workshop with the Suffolk Art League (Suffolk)
- Author visit and book signing with Jeffrey Blount (Blackwater)
- Battle of the Books, 5th-grade finale (Virginia Beach)
- Cena con Cuentos, story time program in Spanish (WRL)
- Chesapeake Yarn Guild (Chesapeake)
- Coffee and Crosswords (Blackwater)
- Dr. Seuss Day (Hampton)
- ESL Casual Conversations (Norfolk)
- Female Pirates That Roamed the Seven Seas: Mariners’ Museum presentation (Newport News)
- Free math clinic (Chesapeake)
- Getting Started in Beekeeping (York)
- Introduction to Mahjong (Poquoson)
- John Jorgenson Bluegrass Band concert (WRL)
- Medicare benefits counseling (Suffolk)
- Meet up Monday: Activities for adults with intellectual disabilities (Newport News)
- Mobile Monday: Cellphone and tablet assistance (Hampton)
- Let’s Code! Grades K-2 (Virginia Beach)
- Super Smash Bros Ultimate Tournament (Poquoson)
- Toddlers on the loose (Gloucester)
- Ukulele for homeschoolers (York)
- Who’s Your Granddaddy? Local genealogist offers free assistance (Gloucester)
- Yoga at the Main Library (Portsmouth)

GRAPH 4

VISITS PER CAPITA OF LIBRARY SYSTEMS
HAMPTON ROADS AND VIRGINIA, 2022



Sources: Library of Virginia (2024). *Blackwater Regional Library serves Franklin, Isle of Wight, Southampton, Surry, and Sussex counties. **Williamsburg Regional Library serves Williamsburg, James City County, and York County.

Library Facilities

Libraries are symbols of their communities. Some are beloved and popular destinations, celebrated landmarks or even architectural showpieces; their resources are a source of civic pride. Others show signs of neglect and the effects of long years of lean budgeting—dated technology, stained carpets, and physical spaces that have fallen out of step with the needs of their communities. We have witnessed aspects of both types of libraries in Hampton Roads, sometimes within a single system or even under a single roof.

Libraries, like public schools, make due with limited public funds. Many of our libraries were constructed in an era when long rows of bookshelves were expected to dominate their physical space. Others were repurposed decades ago from different kinds of buildings, including a 1950s furniture store (Suffolk’s Morgan Memorial Library) and an early 20th-century beaux-arts post office (Portsmouth’s Main Library). By contrast, today’s new or newly renovated libraries have typically been designed as multi-purpose community hubs—with flexible work, study, and play spaces; bright interiors with plenty of natural light; meeting rooms; creative studios; computer labs; and separate areas for children, teens, and adults. Two of our region’s largest and newest libraries—The Slover in Norfolk, and the Joint-Use Library in Virginia Beach—offer all of these amenities in facilities that are larger than 120,000 square feet. Most of our libraries, however, are much smaller, and a few—such as Chuckatuck Library (Suffolk) and the Claremont Branch Library (Blackwater Regional)—are under 3,000 square feet.

We heard from our region’s library directors that new buildings or major renovations are planned—or already underway—in Chesapeake, Newport News, Norfolk, Suffolk, Williamsburg, and Gloucester County. Here are other new and notable facilities, built or renovated in the past decade:

- **The Kiwanis Kids Idea Studio** opened within James City County Library (part of Williamsburg Regional Library) in 2021. This space hosts the library’s children’s collection, along with “children’s museum-style interactive elements” such as pneumatic air tubes, illuminated pixel peg and gear walls, a Lego building station, and a play village with a supermarket and veterinarian’s office. Construction is scheduled to begin this fall on the Idea Studio’s second phase, an outdoor natural playground that will use elements like sand, boulders, and “hobbit hole caves” to encourage physical activity and imaginative play.
- **The Dr. Clarence V. Cuffee Outreach & Innovation Library** is a 2020 reimagination of the library space that shares a building with the Dr. Clarence V. Cuffee Community Center in Chesapeake. The library has a small book/media collection and an outdoor book locker that can be accessed day and night. However, the majority of the library’s space is dedicated to other functions—including a dedicated tutoring area, business center, art gallery, maker space and digital media lab, and an outdoor community garden. The reallocation of space and resources was a tailored response to input from the surrounding community.
- **The Slover Library** opened in downtown Norfolk in 2015, with a striking design that joined the historic Seaboard building and Selden Arcade with a large glass atrium and modern six-story addition. It now serves as the downtown branch of Norfolk Public Library and seeks to create “a vital and dynamic center of community learning, leading-edge technology and civic engagement.” It is home to the creative studios, Hendrix Business Center, and Sargeant Memorial Collection mentioned earlier in this chapter.
- **Virginia Beach’s Joint-Use Library**, located on the Tidewater Community College campus, is the fruit of a partnership between Virginia Beach Public Library and TCC. It opened in 2013. The facility is both an academic research library and a full-service public library, complete with a children’s room and young adult section. The building includes two large computer labs, multiple classrooms and study rooms, and also a café. The spacious facility is lined with large picture windows and received Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold certification.

Finally, we note that a significant portion of our public libraries' work occurs outside their walls. Bookmobiles and smaller outreach vehicles visit underserved neighborhoods and sites like preschools and senior living facilities. Williamsburg Regional Library brings children's activities on Saturdays to the Abram Frink Jr. Community Center. Suffolk Public Library offers 'pop-up libraries' and home delivery to homebound residents. Chesapeake Public Library maintains a 24-7 Library Express (similar to a Redbox, but for loaning books) and carts of free books at various sites around the city. And Blackwater Regional Library holds story times in local coffee shops and book clubs in pubs.



Book Battles

The past two years have been difficult ones for public libraries around the country. The culture wars around school materials and policies involving LGBTQIA+ students crossed over to public libraries in 2022: The American Library Association (ALA) counted 1,269 attempts to ban or restrict school and public library materials around the country, "nearly double the then-record total from 2021 and by far the most since the ALA began keeping data 20 years ago."¹⁴ Data from 2023 showed a 92% increase in the number of book titles challenged at public libraries over the previous year.¹⁵

In contrast to the book controversies of years past, these new efforts at censorship are sometimes coordinated by national political groups and may target dozens of books at a time, overwhelming libraries' formal review process and becoming the flashpoint of angry public meetings. Librarians have been harassed and threatened, and some states and localities have sought to withdraw funding or intervene in library operations. Several state and local libraries have announced plans to leave the ALA over its defense of disputed books.

An ALA map shows that more book challenges were issued in Virginia in 2023 (25 attempts to restrict access to books; 387 titles challenged in those attempts) than in any other state except for Florida, Texas, Kentucky, and Wisconsin.¹⁶ Many of these challenges originated in Front Royal, where a community group's Beer, Babysitting, and Cleaning Up the Samuels Library event in a local park led to 590 book reconsideration requests, which were filed by 53 individuals about 134 different books. Most of the books were cited because of LGBTQIA+ themes. In June 2023, the Warren County Board of Supervisors voted to withhold 75% of its appropriation to the library unless the library board revised its bylaws to give the county a larger role. (Unlike the Hampton Roads public libraries, the Samuels Library is an independent nonprofit organization, although it relies on Warren County for most of its funding.) Library director Michelle Ross resigned in August. The library's board of

¹⁴ Hillel Italie, "Book ban attempts hit record high in 2022, library org says," *Associated Press* (March 23, 2023), at: <https://apnews.com/article/book-bans-american-library-association-f84ac6fe3f8e3238fc54931bc1a5e054>

¹⁵ "American Library Association reports record number of unique book titles challenged in 2023," *ALAnews* (March 14, 2024), at: <https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2024/03/american-library-association-reports-record-number-unique-book-titles>

¹⁶ <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/book-ban-data>

trustees ultimately staved off the county's takeover attempt and rejected "further steps that they regarded as discriminating against LGBTQ patrons,"¹⁷ but the trustees did grant some concessions—a new 'Adult' section with restricted juvenile access for books with mature themes, and a means for parents to restrict their children's borrowing.

The Samuels Library remained open and preserved its public funding, while keeping disputed books on its shelves. However, its new restrictions on young readers depart from standard public library practices and from the ALA Library Bill of Rights, which states, in part, that "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view and current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval," and "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views."¹⁸

Despite the emotional controversies around policies toward transgender students and sexually explicit school library materials that have preoccupied some Hampton Roads school districts, our region's public libraries have thus far avoided becoming a culture war battleground. The directors we interviewed said that formal book challenges remained quite rare, although a handful of patrons have recently questioned why certain books (generally with LGBTQIA+ themes) are on library shelves. In Hampton Roads and elsewhere, formal policies guide the selection of public library materials and the procedures around reconsidering them. Most of these policies are explicitly informed by the ALA Library Bill of Rights and Freedom to Read Statement,¹⁹ and most are posted on the library websites. Some Hampton Roads libraries have recently updated these policies in response to controversies elsewhere; others have provided extra training for staff in how to deal with displeased patrons or questions about their collections.

The directors we interviewed emphasized the importance of knowing the communities they serve. A library collection in Norfolk or Hampton, for example, is apt to look different than in Suffolk or York County. Librarians want to provide access to books that their users want to read. In general, libraries seek to welcome and include, not to antagonize—although pleasing all patrons, of course, is impossible. As one library policy forthrightly states, "it is not expected that all of the collection will appeal to everyone."²⁰ More than anything else, we heard that our librarians want their institutions to be known not (just) for controversial books, but for the full spectrum of library services that enrich their communities in myriad ways.



17 Gregory S. Schneider, "Public libraries are the latest front in culture war battle over books," *The Washington Post* (July 25, 2023), at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/07/25/library-books-bans-lgbtq-virginia/>; and Matthew Barakat, "Virginia library faces potential shutdown over funding after children's books are challenged," *Associated Press* (September 12, 2023), at: <https://apnews.com/article/library-book-challenge-closure-virginia-lgbtq-183baafd5b5533108b5fd92b650d78c1>; and Gregory S. Schneider, "Samuels library in Va. has funding restored with LGBTQ policies unchanged," *The Washington Post* (October 4, 2023), at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/10/04/virginia-samuels-library-lgbtq-books/>

18 ALA, Library Bill of Rights, at: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>

19 ALA, Freedom to Read Statement, at: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement>

20 Hampton Public Library, Request for Reconsideration Policy (September 8, 2022), at: <https://hampton.gov/1244/Policies>

Final Thoughts

Hampton Roads' largest library systems—in terms of total library visits, circulation, and operating expenditures—are in the southside localities of Virginia Beach and Chesapeake. The busiest, most widely used, and best funded libraries per capita are in the Peninsula localities of Williamsburg/James City County, York County, and Poquoson. These Peninsula localities also possess some of the highest median household incomes in our region and the highest proportion of persons holding a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Williamsburg Regional Library stands out for all of these reasons, as well as for its visionary leadership and dedicated staff and volunteers. It was named the Virginia Library Association's Virginia Library of the Year in 2023, an award based on factors including "creativity and innovation in library programming, the development of community partnerships, the implementation of services that other libraries emulate, and job satisfaction for all employees."²¹ Further, it is one of just 258 libraries in the United States—and one of only six in Virginia—to receive Star Library status from *Library Journal* in 2022. The Star Library index is based on eight per capita output measures: physical circulation, e-material circulation, library visits, program attendance, public computer users, wifi sessions, and electronic retrievals.

Prosperous communities are apt to have strong public libraries, but it is also true that strong public libraries benefit all communities, especially lesser-resourced ones. These benefits are educational, cultural, social, and economic. A recent big data study of North Carolina public libraries found "consistent, causal relationships between certain library inputs and outputs and higher educational attainment, increased salaries, increased jobs, and decreased poverty."²² And an Institute of Museum and Library Services report identified statistically significant relationships between library presence/usage and school effectiveness and community health; these relationships were strongest in rural areas.²³

One way of measuring the economic benefit of public libraries is Return on Investment (ROI)—that is, the dollar value of direct and indirect benefits produced for every dollar spent. Direct benefits of public libraries include access to books and other library resources, while indirect or intangible benefits (which are much harder to quantify) might include personal well-being and stronger community ties. A 2018 ODU student project proposed that a "reasonable estimate" of Norfolk Public Library's ROI was between \$3.33 and \$4.72. This suggests that every dollar spent by the library produces roughly three to five times that amount in direct and indirect benefits to the larger community. Other studies in localities across the country, using various methodologies, have estimated similar, or higher, public library ROIs.²⁴

Given the wide-ranging advantages that strong public libraries can bring to their communities, public policies that facilitate library access ought to be commended. This need not necessarily entail expensive facility construction. Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, and Virginia Beach stand out for providing all local public school students with public library privileges. Students in these localities can use their school ID numbers to access online resources anywhere, anytime, year-round; parents may opt out for their children if they desire. Young people receive an early orientation in library services, and the libraries and schools share resources in a cost-effective way.

One of the geographic peculiarities of our region is that the nearest or most appealing public library might not necessarily be in the locality where a user lives and pays taxes. We heard from several libraries that a significant proportion of their clientele come from different localities. Some libraries, such as Hampton and Newport News, allow patrons to use the same card number in both systems and regularly swap items that are returned to the wrong place. The Williamsburg Regional Library card policy is the most geographically restrictive in the region. While anyone may visit the library and use its resources on site, only Williamsburg, James City County, and York County business or property owners or public employees, and members of the College of William and Mary community are eligible to hold a library card. Norfolk

21 Williamsburg Regional Library press release, "WRL Named Virginia Library of the Year" (August 24, 2023), at: <https://www.wrl.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/PRESS-RELEASE-WRL-Named-Virginia-Library-of-the-Year.pdf>

22 Anthony Chow and Qianfei Tian, "Public Libraries Positively Impact Quality of Life: A Big Data Study" *Public Library Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2021), 28.

23 Institute of Museum and Library Services, *Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation's Libraries and Museums* (2021), at: <https://www.ims.gov/publications/understanding-social-wellbeing-impacts-nations-libraries-and-museums>

24 City of Norfolk, "Norfolk Public Library Teams Up with Old Dominion University for Economic Impact Study" (April 3, 2018), at: <https://www.norfolk.gov/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=3798&ARC=7740>

Public Library charges an annual fee of \$35 to people who do not live or work in Norfolk and would like to use its electronic collection.

As libraries' most popular (and expensive to provide) resources are increasingly moving online, a growing challenge will be balancing libraries' mission to serve and welcome everyone with the finite budgets they receive from their supporting localities. What is evident, however, is there is a clear demand for public libraries and the value they provide to their communities.

If there is a consistent weakness we identified across our region's library systems, it is surely public relations. This is no small matter for institutions that aim to be 'people-centric.' Persons who work full-time may have difficulty visiting a nearby library in person, as many facilities are closed in the evenings and on Sundays. Library websites can be difficult to navigate, particularly on a mobile phone. Many of the resources we outlined in this chapter may not be readily evident to a casual or first-time user or to someone who hasn't visited a library in some time. Some librarians we spoke with felt constrained by social media policies that limit their outreach to younger users. The digital revolution has transformed how we live, work, read, and access information. Libraries have changed, too, although some have responded more nimbly than others. We suspect that many Hampton Roads residents may not be aware of the breadth of resources that their libraries have to offer.

