

Fairfax County Spends Little on Its Libraries Compared with Other Area Jurisdictions

Terry Maynard
 Reston Citizens Association Board of Directors
 Co-Chairman, RCA Reston 2020 Committee
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Fairfax County spends less money per capita, a smaller share of median household income, less per household, and a smaller share of the County’s total household income on its library system than any other jurisdiction in the area as well as a small, rural Maryland county. The rankings reflect the low priority Fairfax County has given its library system over the last decade. It must reverse course by not cutting the FY2014 library budget and increasing the FY2015 advertised budget by \$2 million.

Fairfax County, one of the top household income earning counties in the United States, is among the worst in funding the operation of its public libraries, especially in comparison with other area library systems. In fact, data indicate that Fairfax County spends less on its library system per capita than any area library system by a substantial amount.¹ At \$24.10 per person, Fairfax spends less than three-quarters of its nearest “competitor,” Prince Georges County (\$32.49) does on a per capita basis and less than 40% of what Washington, DC, does, the top library spending jurisdiction in our area. Reaching outside the local area to “mountain Maryland” Garrett County—the westernmost county in the state and location of Deep Creek Lake, a regional four-season resort area with a population of less than 30,000 people—we find that that county spends nearly twice as much per capita on its library as does Fairfax County.

Library Expenditures per Capita, 2012

Jurisdiction	Public Library Expenditures (2012) ^a	Population (2012) ^b	2012 Public Library Per Capita Expenditure (PCE)	PCE Rank
District of Columbia	\$39,214,762	633,427	\$61.91	1
Arlington County	\$12,433,253	221,275	\$56.19	2
City of Alexandria	\$7,422,000	145,011	\$51.18	3
Garrett County, MD	\$1,313,913	29,850	\$44.02	4
Loudoun County	\$12,916,399	337,248	\$38.30	5
Prince William County	\$14,417,964	430,100	\$33.52	6
Montgomery County	\$32,777,717	1,004,476	\$32.63	7
Prince George's County	\$28,640,670	881,419	\$32.49	8
Fairfax County	\$26,955,558	1,118,683	\$24.10	9

Sources:

a. 2013 Statistical Report Public Library Data Service (PLDS)

b. US Census QuickFacts

The low regard with which Fairfax County treats its library system is further highlighted when we look at library expenditures as a percent of the jurisdiction’s median household income (MHHI)—a measure of county residents’ wealth. Fairfax County again ranks dead last, this time spending by about two-thirds the expenditures per median household income as the next lowest spender (Loudoun County—the wealthiest county in the country!). And the lowest income county in the list, Garrett County, spends more than four times as much. Garrett County and Washington, DC, (#2 in this list) have the lowest median household income in this comparison, the fact that they are willing to contribute so much to their public library system points directly to how important they view libraries in their jurisdictions. Obviously, Fairfax County does not believe its library system is important.

Library Expenditures as a Share of Median Household Income, 2012

Jurisdiction	Public Library Expenditures (2012) ^a	Median HH Income (MHHI) (2012) ^b	Library Expenditures Share of MHHI (100 HHS)	Rank
Garrett County. MD	\$1,313,913	\$45,354	9.7%	1
District of Columbia	\$39,214,762	\$64,267	9.6%	2
City of Alexandria	\$7,422,000	\$83,996	6.1%	3
Arlington County	\$12,433,253	\$102,459	5.5%	4
Prince George's County	\$28,640,670	\$73,568	4.4%	5
Prince William County	\$14,417,964	\$96,160	3.5%	6
Montgomery County	\$32,777,717	\$96,985	3.4%	7
Loudoun County	\$12,916,399	\$122,068	3.1%	8
Fairfax County	\$26,955,558	\$109,383	2.2%	9
<u>Sources:</u>				
a. 2013 Statistical Report Public Library Data Service (PLDS)				
b. US Census QuickFacts				

Still, given the dominance of residential real estate property taxes as a source of revenue for local governments, a better measure of the importance a jurisdiction attributes to its public libraries is its library spending per household. Fairfax County again ranks a distant last in this comparison. Its expenditures are less than half of the top spending jurisdiction— Washington, DC (46%)—and about three-quarters (76%) of the next lowest ranked jurisdiction. Garrett County, with by far the fewest households in this comparison, nonetheless manages to split the difference between the highest spending jurisdiction and Fairfax County at the bottom end of this ranking.

Library Expenditures per Household, 2012

Jurisdiction	Public Library Expenditures (2012) ^a	Households (2012) ^b	Expenditures per Household	Rank
District of Columbia	\$39,214,762	261,192	\$150.14	1
Arlington County	\$12,433,253	92,992	\$133.70	2
Loudoun County	\$12,916,399	104,195	\$123.96	3
City of Alexandria	\$7,422,000	64,729	\$114.66	4
Prince William County	\$14,417,964	129,643	\$111.21	5
Garrett County, MD	\$1,313,913	12,354	\$106.36	6
Prince George's County	\$28,640,670	302,683	\$94.62	7
Montgomery County	\$32,777,717	357,579	\$91.67	8
Fairfax County	\$26,955,558	388,452	\$69.39	9

Sources:

a. 2013 Statistical Report Public Library Data Service (PLDS)

b. US Census QuickFacts

In the end, the most critical question any county governing body must answer is: How much of the county's wealth are we willing to spend on public libraries? The answer to that question shows that Fairfax County, by far the wealthiest county in this comparison, is willing to spend by far the least. Certainly the most amazing comparison is between Fairfax and Garrett counties: Garrett County spent nearly four times as large a share of its residents' income as Fairfax County, which has a county income *eighty (80) times as large*.ⁱⁱ That is simply shameful. In fact, Fairfax County's expenditures as a share of County household income are one-third less than the next lowest county.

Library Expenditures as a Share of County Household Income, 2012

Jurisdiction	Public Library Expenditures (2012) ^a	Households (2012) ^b	Median Household Income (MHHI) (2012) ^b	County Household Income*	Expenditures as a Share of County HH Income*	Rank
Garrett County, MD	\$1,313,913	12,354	\$45,354	\$ 560,303,316	0.23%	1
District of Columbia	\$39,214,762	261,192	\$64,267	\$ 16,786,026,264	0.23%	2
City of Alexandria	\$7,422,000	64,729	\$83,996	\$ 5,436,977,084	0.14%	3
Arlington County	\$12,433,253	92,992	\$102,459	\$ 9,527,867,328	0.13%	4
Prince George's County	\$28,640,670	302,683	\$73,568	\$ 22,267,782,944	0.13%	5
Prince William County	\$14,417,964	129,643	\$96,160	\$ 12,466,470,880	0.12%	6
Loudoun County	\$12,916,399	104,195	\$122,068	\$ 12,718,875,260	0.10%	7
Montgomery County	\$32,777,717	357,579	\$96,985	\$ 34,679,799,315	0.09%	8
Fairfax County	\$26,955,558	388,452	\$109,383	\$ 42,490,045,116	0.06%	9

Sources:

a. 2013 Statistical Report Public Library Data Service (PLDS)

b. US Census QuickFacts

* Using MHHI to calculate County Income significantly understates the value of County household income because incomes are open-ended at the top. Wealthier counties, such as Loudoun, Fairfax, Arlington, Montgomery, and Prince William counties, have a disproportionately higher county income. As a result, the public library expenditure shares shown here are overstated (i.e.--Fairfax spent an even smaller share than reported here), but not significantly affecting the jurisdiction rankings.

No doubt those opposed to increasing Fairfax County's library budget—and maybe even wanting to cut it further in the revised FY2014 budget— will say that these cross-jurisdictional comparisons are not truly comparable. Here is quick look at some of their likely criticisms:

- Economies of scale. Economies of scale exist, but are not nearly substantial enough to account for the major shortfalls in Fairfax County library spending. Montgomery County is most comparable in population and income and it spends about one-third to one-half more than Fairfax County on all of the metrics provided above.
- Higher personnel costs elsewhere. Although Maryland and Washington have higher labor compensation standards than “right to work” Virginia, there is absolutely no reason to believe that Fairfax County’s personnel costs are significantly different (higher or lower) than other area Virginia counties. In the comparisons above, Virginia’s other counties generally rank in the upper half of each comparison. Even Loudoun County, which ranks just two notches above Fairfax in the comparison of expenditures to total county household income above, spends two-thirds more than Fairfax County.
- Higher tax rates elsewhere. For example, the Loudoun County property tax rate is \$1.205 per \$100 valuation according to its official website. Prince William is \$1.181 per \$100 valuation. Maryland generally has higher property tax rates, but it significantly undervalues properties (and does so every three years in advance on a statewide basis). As in Maryland, the question that is unanswered in Virginia is the valuation of the property that is taxed. We suspect that Fairfax County—the economic engine of Northern Virginia and total county household income more than three times that of its nearest Virginia competitor, Loudoun County—has a substantially higher county-wide taxable property valuation that enables it to keep its tax rates significantly lower than other jurisdictions while providing needed county services. Failing to account for property values in this argument is misleading.
- No doubt there are other criticisms, but the above make the point.

The critical issue is Fairfax County’s budget priorities, not valuations, tax rates, costs, population density, etc. Every other jurisdiction discussed in this paper—large or small, wealthy or poor, more or less expensive—has made *at least* a one-third greater investment in its library systems’ operation than has Fairfax County. And on expenditures per capita and expenditures as a share of County income, Fairfax County spends less than one-quarter of the leading jurisdictions.

The bottom line is that Fairfax County has demonstrated a tremendous disregard for the nurturing of its public library system since at least the middle of the last decade. Its spending on public libraries is disgraceful in any reasonable comparison with area jurisdictions and especially so when compared to a strawman jurisdiction, Garrett County, MD, with a tremendously smaller population and income. If Fairfax County’s public library spending is not reversed now, the library system will become an empty shell. The fact of the matter is Fairfax County is in an excellent financial position to reverse course. It has just chosen not to so far.

It is time to change direction and meet the needs of County residents by investing in re-creating a first-rate County public library system with more books, librarians, programs (especially for youth), and community involvement. There must be no new cuts in the FCPL budget in FY2014 and its leadership must be directed to actually hire people in a timely manner for the more than 40 vacant positions that have been available since last fiscal year. Moreover, as the County moves forward with the FY2015

budget, we believe the Fairfax County Federation of Citizens Associations (FCFCA) recommendation to add \$2 million to the advertised FY2015 budget represents a minimum first step in beginning to correct the library budget mistakes of the last decade.

ⁱ This accounting of library expenditures includes the City of Fairfax, which is served by Fairfax County Public Library. None of the other columns in the tables used in this report include the City of Fairfax and, therefore, they slightly overstate the “per” or “share” values for Fairfax County. These differences are minimal and do not affect the rankings or judgments in this analysis.

ⁱⁱ In addition to the adjustments in County household income noted in the table below, County gross product is also substantially affected by corporate incomes. Total County gross income is not available. Published estimates of gross County product we’ve seen range between \$95 billion and \$190 billion for Fairfax County in recent years.