

# \$50K GRANT PRESERVES LEGACY OF ST. LOUIS' HISTORIC CARNEGIE LIBRARIES

BY ABBY WOJCIK

More than a century after Andrew Carnegie funded the construction of St. Louis' earliest public libraries, his legacy is resurfacing through a renewed investment. The St. Louis Public Library received a \$50,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to split among the five branches established with the original \$1 million gift Carnegie made in 1901.

Carnegie, a Scottish immigrant and one of the richest men in American history, funded the construction of 1,681 public libraries across the United States between 1886 and 1917, including seven in St. Louis. Today, five of those branches remain in operation: Carondelet, Central, Barr, Cabanne and Carpenter.

SLPL chief executive officer Waller McGuire said the funds



Mural in the children's room of Carondelet Library.

will go toward capital expenses to extend the lifespan of these City Landmarks. The grant will go a long way in supporting repairs, preservation of historic features and rising energy costs.

For the Cabanne Library on Union Boulevard, which remains closed due to damage from the May 16 tornado, this grant will certainly help - although it covers only a fraction of needed repairs. It remains the only Carnegie branch that is not fully ADA accessible and hasn't undergone a full renovation. Cabanne is expected to reopen in the coming months as SLPL works to purchase the surrounding property and make necessary renovations that meet ADA requirements.

"We thought [the Carnegie branches] still worked very well, that they were in valuable places, and they add a sort of historic place in our communities — people had a relationship with them. So, that was worth preserving in many cases," McGuire said. "And, they're just beautiful buildings. They took some care and some investment, but it was important to reinvest in the communities and those buildings, so I think it was more than worthwhile."

Both the Central and Carondelet locations reopened in 2012 after being extensively renovated with improvements to the auditoriums, restoring original light fixtures, and more. Local architects worked to unobtrusively insert elevators and make upgrades to modernize these century-old buildings. The refurbishment of Central received several awards, including the



ABBY WOJCIK PHOTOS

**The renovations at Central Library received the Honor Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.**

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This year, the Carpenter Library on South Grand installed geothermal heating and cooling, which involved excavating the parking lot, removing boilers and burying the new technology 200 feet underground.

"I think that's pretty remarkable to have a 100-year-old building that doesn't take any energy now, it's heating and cooling itself from state of the art technology," McGuire said.

SLPL's sustainability projects, completed in partnership with Veregy, received the 2025 Champion Innovation Award from the Missouri Botanical Garden's Green Business Challenge. In addition to the geothermal system at Carpenter, both the Julia-Davis and Buder branches had roof replacements and solar panels installed, although the finished work at Julia-Davis was completely blown off the roof during the tornado.

In some cases, it may have been easier and cheaper to build new branches from scratch, but McGuire and SLPL recognized the Carnegie locations as valuable pieces of history that continue to preserve stories of their respective communities.

That decision echoes Carnegie's vision, which emphasized libraries not simply as buildings, but as public resources meant to serve, enrich and inspire generations.

"I really do think he changed the world," McGuire said. "It's something we take for granted now, which is that communities can provide a library and that they're open to everyone and that resources are available. That was really started by Carnegie. He really made that possible."

McGuire announced his retirement as the chief executive officer, effective in October 2026. His tenure reflects a commitment to balancing modernization with preser-

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hopeful that Code Studio will help move St. Louis onto a trajectory similar to its thriving peer cities.

For example, the zoning update is specifically aiming to encourage transit investment by allowing greater density along major corridors and throughout neighborhoods. The proposed changes to parking requirements look to reduce costs and make it more feasible for residents to live near transit, jobs and amenities without relying as heavily on a car.

The project has a goal of ensuring community members are substantively involved throughout the process. An interactive web map is available on ZOUP-stl.com. There are also supporting materials to help people understand the changes and proposed zoning districts. Citizens are able to contribute comments that are seen by staff right away.

The first public draft of the map was released in March and remained open for comments until the end of May. A second round of drafts and a comment period will begin in July, with public interactive



The St. Louis skyline

will be adopted by the Board of Aldermen in summer 2027. The best way to stay updated is by following the ZOUP Instagram @zoup\_stl or sign up for the newsletter.

“We want people to get on board and feel invested and see their voices heard,” Fister said. “We’re not going to please everybody and that is a good thing. But I do believe whatever happens, we’re moving in a good, positive, modern direction.”



Central Library interior renovated ceiling.

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vation, while expanding programs and prioritizing evolving needs of the public. The SLPL Board of Directors will conduct a national search for his successor.

As St. Louis Public Library looks ahead, the latest grant serves as a continuation of Carnegie’s original endowment and a reminder that, over a century later, libraries remain invaluable community spaces.

In a letter to St. Louis, Carnegie wrote, “The building is only the frame; the treasures of a Library are within.”



Readers at Carpenter branch.

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