Claiborne Pell

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Mr. President, as one of the original sponsors of S. 2490, legislation to amend and extend the Library Services and Construction Act, I am very pleased to speak on behalf of its passage today. This measure will extend the important grant programs that serve our nation's libraries for another five years through fiscal year 1989.

I would like to recognize the fine work done by Senator Stafford, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities, in developing this bill and in forging a consensus on it.

The Library Services and Construction Act, which I have been proud to support throughout four Senate terms, is the single most important source of federal assistance for our nation's public libraries. It provides this support to the states by a system of formula grants which have been targeted toward particularly critical areas. These areas have traditionally included under-served groups such as the handicapped, the disadvantaged and those people who speak English as a second language.

As more and more of these targeted populations have been reached with library services, the LSCA has been broadened to include support for urban libraries, construction of library buildings and interlibrary cooperation. The federal share represents only a modest portion of the total expenditure on all of these essential library programs but it is important that we continue the federal role because local jurisdictions alone cannot finance programs that will adequately meet the needs of our library community.

Major urban libraries can now benefit in very useful ways from LSCA funds. Inflation has hit these urban institutions particularly hard and has caused open hours to be cut back as well as curtailing the ability to purchase new books. Urban library services have also
been reduced by municipalities as residents have moved to the suburbs which in turn erodes the local tax base.

I am pleased that this measure authorizes funds for the construction and renovation of library buildings where the need is especially serious. The monies appropriated in 1983 as part of the Emergency Jobs Bill were a helpful beginning but only a fraction of the potential projects could be carried out with those funds. I understand that a figure close to $400 million is the investment currently needed to alleviate overcrowding with new facilities and bring deteriorating library facilities up to date.

In short this piece of legislation renews our government's commitment to a healthy, vital and accessible public library system across the country. Libraries have been described as our most important educational resource - second only to the classroom. For this reason alone, this bill deserves our support. I urge my colleagues to join with Senator Stafford and myself in approving the Library Services and Construction Act Amendments of 1984.