

May 12, 2016

Joseph Curtatone
Mayor
Somerville City Hall
93 Highland Avenue
Somerville, MA 02143

Cc: John M. Connolly, Mary Jo Rossetti, Dennis M. Sullivan, William A. White Jr., Matthew McLaughlin, Maryann M. Heuston, Robert J. McWatters, Tony Lafuente, Mark Neidergang, Lance Davis, Katjana Ballantyne

Dear Mayor Curtatone,

Over the summer, the city engaged in a series of meetings that resulted in a program plan to renovate and expand the West Branch of the Somerville Public Library. While it will preserve the historic façade of the existing building and make the building ADA-compliant, the current plan will also increase the library footprint, allowing space for a 140 person community meeting room, and a makerspace, and an expanded children's room. This plan is an exciting opportunity for the residents of Davis Square and West Somerville, as well as the city at large. As a branch of the Somerville Public Library system, the West Branch provides resources, programs, and services to the surrounding neighborhoods, but also supports the needs of the whole city; and the proposed renovations and expansion would provide significant benefits for the entire community.

The city made a concerted effort to engage the community in the process of developing the current program plan for the West Branch. This process included three community meetings with representatives from the city, the library, and the Board of Trustees, as well as the architects and landscape designers. At these meetings, community members provided ideas and preferences for library space and services, reviewed design plans, and offered feedback on proposals. These meetings were very well attended, with 50-60 people from the community engaging in discussion and offering input. The city also created an online space where residents could take a survey and provide feedback on the design process. The current program plan emerged from these meetings, and reflects the input and ideas of a wide range of community members.

Recently, some objections have been raised to the proposed design. While these concerns are important and must be taken seriously, it is also important not to halt the process and reject the plan that had garnered so much community support and input. The expansion of the library beyond the existing envelope will provide the community with amazing benefits; benefits which those involved in the original community meetings expressed interest in and support for.

These benefits include:

- A 140 person meeting room.
 - This community meeting space more than doubles the current meeting capacity of the Somerville Library system, and would open up opportunities for new

programming and events. Currently, the library has to give up certain programming options due to lack of space. This meeting room would allow for larger story times, author events, instruction sessions, and so on.

- This community meeting space could also be used by interested community groups. This would be one of the only spaces of its kind in the City.
- A makerspace
 - A portion of the basement level has been set aside as a makerspace, which could include a variety of new technologies and tools for public use. Unlike other makerspaces in the city, this space would be open to everyone for free and would give residents and library patrons an opportunity to interact with, learn about, and use many tech tools they might otherwise not be able to access.
 - The makerspace could also be used by school groups and homeschoolers.
- Enhanced landscaping
 - The new plan would include usable green space, where patrons and residents could sit and relax, and would allow for events like an outdoor storytime or other fresh air programming.

It is worth noting that most renovated libraries see a substantial increase in foot traffic, and foot traffic at public libraries translates to economic benefits for local businesses and the city as a whole. Return on investment studies in various communities around the U.S. found between \$3 and \$6 ROI for every dollar invested in the library.¹ One study found that home prices for residences located within 1/4 mile of the library averaged 7.7% more than comparable homes further away (and that was after controlling for other variables) which obviously benefits the home owners, but also means increased property taxes for the city.² Local businesses also benefit as up to 20% of purchases local businesses are an effect of patrons visiting the library, for an estimated \$270,000 to \$7 million in “halo” spending.³ The proposed meeting room at West Branch has been a particular sticking point for some groups; **a study of libraries in Indiana estimated a \$7 million value for the library meeting room, considering that groups using the room would have had to pay roughly \$75 for a half day rental of a comparable site.**⁴ There are also benefits that are more difficult to calculate, but are equally important, such as public library’s contributions to community literacy, support for language learning and access to resources on citizenship for immigrants, support for job-hunters, etc.⁵

The renovation and expansion of the West Branch would truly benefit the whole community, and as such it is important that all community voices are heard. In particular, the library trustees strongly support adding a new community meeting room with a capacity of 125 - 150 people to the West Branch. Although the design of the landscape and meeting room may evolve, we hope that a large meeting room will continue to be part of the project. The benefits to the community of such a meeting, program, and performance space are enormous; and the total amount of green space could be maintained with a careful design. Already there is high demand for and low capacity in the Central Library meeting space.

Possible use of the new space by the Brown School as a place for science fairs, concerts, and exhibitions could be significant. Continuing to provide a place for our expanding ESL program is essential. The possible loss of the TAB Building for Somerville activities would only make the shortage of public meeting space in West Somerville worse. We hope that the city and aldermen will consider the benefits outlined here, and honor the process and input of the community residents who have participated throughout this process.

Sincerely,

The Somerville Public Library Board of Trustees

March 10, 2016

Joseph Curtatone
Mayor
Somerville City Hall
93 Highland Avenue
Somerville, MA 02143

Dear Mayor Curtatone:

The Somerville Public Library Board of Trustees is excited about the progress to renovations of the library's West Branch and we would like to thank the city for its continued effort and support on this project.

The Board is writing today, however, to voice concerns regarding the rear landscape design selected at the last community meeting on February 29th. This design includes no staff parking on the library premises. It is the opinion of the Board that this design shows a lack of commitment and support for library staff at the West Branch and the services that they provide the community, and could cause unnecessary complications to providing services. The Board raises the following points:

- The proposed design is out of alignment with the Central and East Branches, which both provide on-site parking for staff.
- Parking in and around Davis Square is notoriously difficult, especially during morning commute hours, when library staff would be opening the branch.
- The renovations to West Branch include an increase of 2.5 staff, which means even greater need for area parking.
- It provides no parking for the daily delivery van, and or DPW service vehicles.
- Staff from other branches occasionally need to travel to West for meetings and events or to cover shifts in the case of absences and vacations. Having to search for on-street parking could lead to delays and increased commute time.
- Off-site parking is further complicated when inclement weather, especially snow, reduces street parking options.
- Paying for off-site parking in a municipal lot or at the Baptist church, as has been proposed, is not a favorable solution. It seems counterproductive for the city to pay for parking when spaces could be built in to the current design. Also, rented spaces would be vulnerable to changes to the lots themselves or to policy and practice of the renters.

- The Board appreciates the community's desire for increased green space in the Davis Square area. The Board of Trustees' representative to the West Branch design team has offered numerous alternatives for integrating staff parking without losing substantial lawn space.

It is the opinion of the Board that staff parking should be incorporated into the renovation design. We hope that the city will demonstrate its commitment to the library staff and services in considering this proposal.

Sincerely,

Somerville Public Library Board of Trustees

¹ See, e.g., <http://www.ala.org/research/librariesmatter/taxonomy/term/131>

² http://www.freelibrary.org/about/Fels_Report.pdf

³ http://www.libsci.sc.edu/metaweb/ValuingPublicLibraries_FinalReport.pdf

⁴ http://www.ibrc.indiana.edu/studies/EconomicImpactOfLibraries_2007.pdf

⁵ Debono, B. (2002). Assessing the social impact of public libraries: what the literature is saying. *Australasian Public Libraries And Information Services*, (2), 80.