February 10, 2022

To the Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont:

Public library buildings are profoundly important. The surface level purpose of a library building is self-evident: to further the library's mission by providing the necessary space to house and support library collections, services, and programs. But library buildings also play a vital role by functioning as community centers. In most cities and towns, there is only one place where people can go and 'just be' for as long as they like, free of charge: the library. Consequently, the library is the place where people from all walks of life mix and mingle, creating a true community space and sense of connection.

Everyone has the need for a 'third space' at one point or another. At Ilsley Public Library, people use library spaces for board meetings, tutoring, and supervised visits. Adults socialize while working on puzzles in the library lobby, while young families play with community toys in the youth room. Teens do their homework in the computer lab after school. Libraries provide neutral spaces where government representatives can meet with their constituents and where local and state government can host informational meetings. Some people come to the library just to be comfortable and warm in the winter, or to cool off with the library’s air-conditioning in the summer. These uses of the library are not just appropriate, they are necessary, because there is simply no other community space that could meet these diverse needs.

Sadly, many public library buildings in Vermont are in a state of serious disrepair. The Ilsley Public Library's original building was constructed in 1924, and was expanded with additions in 1977 and 1988. Today, the library building faces significant challenges when it comes to safety, accessibility, and functionality. The library’s activities have long outgrown the spaces that were originally designed to contain them, and our mechanical systems are all in desperate need of repair. We have reached a point where our facilities actually limit our ability to further our mission.

How can a library welcome everyone when not everyone can access library spaces? The Ilsley Public Library does not have a handicap accessible entrance on Main Street, forcing many community members to access the library through our side door. This side door opens onto a cramped, split level landing. All patrons see when they enter the library is a staircase and an elevator; no librarian to welcome them, no collections to peruse. For the many patrons that must take the elevator to get to the main floor, there is the added stress of getting stuck: the library's elevator is over forty years old, and entrapments are a terrifyingly regular occurrence.

Equally problematic is the lack of sightlines throughout the library. How can a library function as a community space when people don't feel safe in the building? Because library staff cannot see the side door (where over 75% of our traffic enters), and because the side door is a few steps away from the single-use public restrooms, there are regular security concerns and misuses of the restrooms. Troublingly, the side door and these restrooms are only a few feet from the children's room. The lack of sightlines in the library's reference room, stacks, computer lab, and children's room means the majority of library spaces are unmonitored. This has led to all manner of concerns, including the consumption of alcohol and other illegal substances in the library.

The library's heating system, which runs on fuel oil, is a source of perennial frustration and expense. When the heat won't turn on, we place costly service calls. When the radiators spew water, we close library spaces. Most troubling of all, the heating system does not allow for any air exchange. The only way to get fresh air in the building is to open a window (not an option during Vermont winters). This has led to mold and poor air quality, especially in the children's room, which is located in the basement. During the pandemic, this lack of ventilation and circulation has limited our ability to continue operations as usual.

Beyond accessibility and safety, there are significant programmatic shortcomings. There are not distinct spaces for elementary, middle, and high school students. The library doesn't have adequate space to hold multiple group meetings or programs at once. The building's design precludes a 24 hour book drop, something that patrons regularly request. Storage and staff workspaces are in woefully short supply. Countless pillars and steel trusses make spaces inflexible and prevent reconfiguring as library services and collections evolve.

For all of these reasons and more, the Middlebury Selectboard is poised to create a new committee, called the Ilsley 100 Project Team, which will be tasked with developing a design for a major library renovation and expansion. The team’s name references the upcoming 100 year anniversary of the library’s historic 1924 original building, and also acknowledges the need to design a library with the flexibility to serve Middlebury and the surrounding towns for the next century. The library is at a crucial inflection point, and we have an opportunity to create a building that will benefit generations of community members to come.

Cost will be the single greatest barrier to achieving this goal. Given the scope of work, the limited property footprint, and the nature of renovating a historic structure, this is going to be a major project. There are no quick fixes, and Band-Aids won't cut it. A feasibility study from 2017 produced a ballpark figure of $9.6 million dollars. Middlebury is a large town by Vermont standards, and the library enjoys widespread support in the community. The project team will pursue any and all types of funding available to bring this renovation/expansion to fruition, including seeking grants, private fundraising, and, ultimately, a bond vote. But $9.6 million dollars is a staggering amount of money for a town of 8,000. It is important to be realistic about what these traditional sources of funding can accomplish.

In order for this project to be a success, there needs to be government grant funding. The scope of work and cost of construction will simply be too large to be funded by conventional grants, private fundraising, and municipal bonding. The Ilsley Public Library is not an isolated example--far from it. Many public libraries in Vermont are in need of capital funding to make improvements to their facilities, and the need isn't limited to small rural towns. State funding would make these necessary improvements possible.

Directing state funding to public library facilities is an investment worth making. Libraries have proven themselves time and again to be critical to healthy, thriving communities, as well as indispensable to the mission of local and state governments. Librarians are often called upon to "do more with less," but when it comes to safety and accessibility, there are no workarounds or shortcuts. This is the time to invest in the aging and failing infrastructure of Vermont's public library facilities.

Thank you for considering my testimony, and for the important work you are doing to study and report on the statewide status of Vermont’s libraries.

Respectfully submitted,



Dana Hart

Director