Here's my testimony about facilities for the Working Group on behalf of the John G. McCullough Free Library. If further testimony is desired or required, or if there are questions, please ask! I can be best reached via email or at 401.536.8012.

In recent years, the John G. McCullough Free Library in North Bennington has seen a surge in renewed interest and activity. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, building visits, circulation, program offerings and attendance, and new memberships had dramatically increased over previous years. These exciting increases have put a strain on this historically significant, 100-year-old building, and highlighted an urgent need for a more accessible building with up-to-date electrical, plumbing, and fire safety systems. The COVID-19 pandemic and related public health concerns prompted the need for indoor air quality improvements.

In the past and due to financial constraints, urgent problems like flooding in the basement and a complete replacement of the furnace, hot water heater, and heating fuel storage tanks were dealt with on an emergency basis, rather than through maintenance, planned replacement, or other preventative measures. I am pleased to report that the flooding and heating problems have been solved, that these new features are being maintained and that a building plan has been developed. Sourcing funds for even planned building improvements continues to be a challenge.

The first phase of the McCullough Library's accessibility improvement project is currently underway, with construction expected to be completed in late June or early July of 2022. These extensive improvements include accessible, family-friendly restrooms on both floors, new plumbing throughout, a new water fountain, a complete electrical re-wiring, a fire alarm system, the installation of an HVAC system to improve indoor air quality, a new back door, critical repairs to water damaged areas on the library's front porch, and the conversion of a large closet into a laptop bar/ small meeting space. This project would not have been possible without ARP funds through one of our supporting municipalities, grants, donations, and a generous bequest.

The second, much larger phase, will expand the library building's footprint considerably, with a two-story addition off the back of the building to include an elevator and fire safe staircase, a covered ramp which will lead to the sidewalk, and a small event space. This phase will be necessary for persons with disabilities and mobility challenges to fully engage with the improvements made in the first phase. At this point, funding for this project is uncertain, and so is a timeline for this phase.

The elderly and those with small children in their care are key populations served by this library. Additionally, persons with disabilities have indicated that they cannot take full advantage of the library due to its lack of accessibility features and feel marginalized because of this. In a state with an aging population and in a location where a relatively large number of persons with disabilities live, accessibility improvements will help us better meet our community's needs.

Also, I'm not sure if this fits within the purview of "facilities", but we are also struggling to find funding for new furnishings, especially for the Children's Room. Sturdy, uniform shelving to store children's materials would do much to improve the look, feel, and safety of this popular and essential space. The current furnishings are a motley assortment of castoffs from schools, the military, and homes. Updating these furnishings would undoubtedly encourage children and their caregivers to visit the library more often and to make their time here more pleasant.

Kind regards,

-Jennie

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