

Building notes, Rutland Free Library, for the state Working Group on Vermont libraries.

February 16, 2022

On priorities: A framing narrative

These notes respond to the initial charge from the framers to the working group in that they discuss ways our building is deficient in “energy efficiency, accessibility, flexibility, human health and safety ... and intergenerational needs.” Historic preservation is both a massive cost driver if we were to renovate and a handy roadblock to folks trying to keep us from moving.

I am sorry I am not directly addressing your priority topics more, but the answer to virtually all of them is “Yes, we could do more, but only once our basic infrastructure is working.” I drive a 2008 bare-bones Honda Element. My wife drives a fully equipped 2018 HRV. Your priorities are like asking how the seat warmers work in my car. I know seat warmers exist; my wife has them. I would like to have seat warmers. On cold mornings I wish I was driving my wife’s car. Please make sure Vermont libraries have four wheels and a working engine before we spend a lot of time and money on seat warmers.

The exception: I could write a master’s thesis on the challenges raised by the conflict between the economic development value of a “historic downtown library” versus the potential value of a custom-built library on a campus shared by the city recreation center, where we could expand our services.

As for the pandemic, we adapted time after time. We wiped surfaces, then we didn’t. We masked, then we didn’t, then we did again. We closed when we had to, opened when we could, and did curbside in between. We printed a huge number of government forms when the various state offices (DMV, Health & Human Services, Labor) were closed or remote-only. I’m not sure we were a lot different than a lot of other service occupations. The one function we could not fulfill was provide basic shelter against the elements, which is in high demand in normal times.

Building notes

Rutland Free Library is housed in a city-owned building, where it has been since 1938. The building went up in 1858; it was expanded in 1966 and 1988-89, and is just short of 25,000 square feet, spread out over five floors (basement, main, mezzanine, second, third). Plus there’s an attic. We have no lease or formal documentation allowing us to be here; we’re essentially squatters. Thank you to the City of Rutland for putting us up.

The original box has significant historic value. It was a post office and courthouse, designed by noted Vermont architect Ammi B. Young, for those of you collecting Vermont Civil War-era architect trading cards. Its sister is the Windsor (VT) Post Office; my understanding is that nothing above the main floor of that building is in usable condition, which speaks to the work over many decades by dedicated library staff & trustees to maintain our facility. RFL is also in the Rutland Courthouse Historic District on the National Registry, which greatly increases renovation complexity and therefore costs.

It is an extremely well-made *building*, which is different than being an extremely good *library*.

About two years ago, we looked at moving across the city to the former College of St. Joseph’s campus, which has a modern, well-equipped library sitting empty. As with most ideas these days, public opinion was split. In our case, it was into roughly three camps: Folks who supported the move; folks who opposed the move because they have fond memories of the current building from their

childhood; and folks who think the library performs too large a function driving traffic for the downtown core to consider us moving to a campus location. Many of the latter said the move would be “good for the library, bad for downtown.” The regional plan described libraries as important but an afterthought.

Major repairs start with dickering with the City as to who is going to pay how much for what work. And work on the building takes away, dollar by dollar, money we could use very well to do more / better library work instead.

The major problems with the building itself include:

- Can't use the third floor except for long-term storage (no ADA / fire access);
- No line of sight. Fully staffed, we have no idea what's going in in 90% of the building.
- Isolated locations for staff (help desk, meeting rooms, staff offices on the second floor, stacks on the mezzanine) are a safety hazard. Patrons in the stacks and meeting rooms are also at increased risk. This increases as libraries are more often used for delivery of social assistance.
- The children's area is not sufficiently divided from the adult area, and is particularly too popular with people wandering in looking for a chair (normal traffic pattern leads them there, I'm told) and it's too close to adults looking at the internet.
- There's nothing like a solid wall separating the public spaces, so a cell phone call in the mezzanine is clearly heard on the main floor, and excited kids coming out of a program upstairs drive adult patrons looking for a quiet work space out of the building.
- Aging mechanical systems. In the past several years, the ceiling of our main meeting room (Fox Room) collapsed; the boilers died; we replaced the lights with LEDs; rewired the second floor (it's now grounded!); replaced tiles that had failed; replaced the A/C, which burned itself out; renovated the main public restrooms; and had porta-potties on the lawn several weeks while the sewer main was repaired.
- Still outstanding is the rest of the heating system (pipes, valves, controls); the building envelope (the 1858 windows are failing, very little insulation, leaks air everywhere); failing plaster on the third floor outside of the Fox Room; interior repainting (some percentage of the flaking paint is likely lead); historically accurate new railings for two three-story staircases. The brick exterior is starting to need patchwork and there's a 1 ½ inch heave in a floor tile near one corner of the original masonry foundation. We have a 32-year-old, 1,000-gallon underground fuel tank that we don't think is leaking?
- The “new” part of the building was built with the goal of squeezing the most stacks into the smallest space, instead of as a modern library, so it lacks meeting spaces, quiet work areas, room for tech offerings. And the whole building is brick, concrete, cast iron and steel, so renovations are ... challenging. And expensive. There's one electrician who knows what conduit goes where. If he's not available, we can add half a day to any wiring project just to run a trace (and drill through 18 inches of rubble-filled masonry floors). Widening a floor drain took the better part of a day's drilling.
- For years / decades / perhaps forever, interior work has been done on the cheap, like not grounding electrical wires serving our meeting room, using household-grade plumbing instead of commercial, etc., etc. Those decisions – penny wise but pound foolish -- continue to haunt us.
- It's on the fringe of the official downtown core and has no off-street or handicap-accessible parking.

In short, it's a grand old building that's terrifically expensive to maintain, which is unfortunately the state of many of Vermont's libraries. We compete for a grant for a façade here or an entrance ramp there, but there's no money or support for addressing when it's the right time to up stakes and move, or renovate from the ground up.

Estimates to do a renovation (pre-Covid pricing) ranged from a partial renovation for \$1.4M to a full-building renewal for \$7.5M to \$11.4M.

Thank you for your time.

-- Randal Smathers, Director, Rutland Free Library