

FINAL
Bloomfield Public Library
Board of Trustees
Conference Remote Meeting
<https://youtube.com/live/Us8NSoKpsfY?feature=share>
July 19, 2023 (Special Meeting)

Attendance: Elizabeth Lane (*Library Director*), Ava Biffer (*Chairperson*), Leah Farrell (*Vice-Chairperson*), Todd Cooper, Beverlee Merritt, Maxine Ursery, Penny Pearson (*Friends of the Library Representative*), Christopher Siloac (*Assistant Director*), Allison Wilkos (*Assistant Director*)

Absent: None

Quorum present? Yes, 5 of 6

A. Biffer called the meeting to order at 6:05 PM.

Roll Call – P. DeLorenzo was noted as absent.

Discuss and possible action on status of Library Buildings Project – E. Lane summarized the status of the building project. The bid process did not go favorably, leading to the project being \$9 million over budget. Proposed scenarios are currently on the building committee page on the library website. This issue will be discussed and deliberated on at the building committee's special meeting on 7/20, as well as the town council meeting on 7/24. A. Biffer noted that not all the information is available yet, since Downes is still looking at the bids. The options currently being looked at include waiting for a referendum to start both projects, or starting construction on one project now and then going to referendum. A. Biffer said the board should discuss the issue and consider a recommendation. She stressed the need to focus on library service as opposed to only considering fiscal issues.

The board had a robust discussion about the issue. If there is a decision to start one project now, T. Cooper prefers that the McMahon Wintonbury Library be built first. McMahon Wintonbury is located at the entrance to the town, on the side of town where services need to be enhanced. Additionally, MetLife is located closer to Prosser and will better serve patrons who normally use Prosser. E. Lane said there are discussions about extending the lease at the MetLife space if needed.

B. Merritt prefers that Prosser be completed first, due to its size and location in the center of town. There are enough funds to complete Prosser now, and there is a chance that a referendum won't pass. The McMahon building is in better overall condition than Prosser. L. Farrell and M. Ursery both said that they would rather defer to library staff on a recommendation, due to the staff's understanding of patron needs and library services.

A. Biffer noted that neither building is safe right now and spoke about considerations regarding McMahon Wintonbury. McMahon Wintonbury is located where there is more population density, a greater need for access on foot or by bus, and a stronger youth presence. A. Biffer worries that if Prosser is built first, there may not be the will to build McMahon, whereas Prosser will likely receive support either way. There is also a social justice component, since the east side of town needs more development and funding. A. Biffer said the board can make a formal recommendation, including to forward a staff recommendation, or can decide to speak as individuals on this issue. T. Cooper asked to hear from E. Lane on the topic, since she would have a better understanding of staff consensus.

E. Lane said that this project is decades overdue, and that she believes we need to deliver on the two-library building project that we promised our neighbors, so that everyone receives the library services they deserve. She stressed that Prosser is no longer a healthy and habitable building, and that McMahon

Wintonbury is too small to provide full services to residents. She also noted that the project cannot be cut further and still deliver what the community needs. These buildings will need to serve the public for decades to come. As library director and as a resident, E. Lane wants the town to be on the side of social justice and service for all. After hearing from everyone, A. Biffer encouraged trustees to speak as individuals to the town council, as well as to attend meetings. It is important to put forth a core vision of the library for them to consider.

Review and approve BPL Policy on Animals in the Library – E. Lane introduced the draft of the new *Policy on Animals in the Library* and stated that it attempts to set clear guidelines and rules, based on best practices and legal statutes, on the presence of animals in the library. A Biffer recommended a line at the beginning that makes it clear that animals are generally not allowed in the library. The board agreed this was an important change. A. Biffer said the policy will be sent to the town attorney for legal review. The board discussed the difference between trained service animals, which are allowed, and emotional support animals, which are not. The library director has discretion to make exceptions as needed. **MOTION by L. Farrell to put the policy in place, with the proviso that the policy goes to legal review by the town attorney and that any changes he makes are incorporated into the policy;** seconded by B. Merritt and passed unanimously.

Discussion and possible action concerning employee appreciation – A. Biffer originally added this item to the agenda. She described the difficult work the staff has been doing, including the move from the buildings and the setting up of the temporary location, and suggested a respite of sorts. E. Lane said a staff away day may be best and that she can send an estimate to the board for approval. **MOTION by L. Farrell to approve a staff appreciation event, with the final number to be decided once E. Lane has an estimate,** seconded by M. Ursery and passed unanimously.

Discussion and possible action on supporting the Town Attorney's negotiations regarding the state library grant – The town attorney emailed the library board regarding his ongoing negotiations with the Assistant Attorney General, in response to the dispute with the state library over the construction grants. He has asked the board to give a recommendation on one of two options should the discussions fail: 1) The library/town voluntarily forfeits the construction grants. 2) The library/town refuses to voluntarily forfeit and allows the state library to withdraw the grants. A. Biffer does not like the idea of voluntarily forfeiting, because it implies that library staff did something wrong when applying for the grants. The staff followed the state library's guidance every step of the way. The problem is that not forfeiting will disqualify BPL from seeking state library funding for five years, which is why many libraries voluntarily forfeit. Ultimately, the library board is not tasked with making the decision, but only with making a recommendation.

L. Farrell has worked with the state library over the years and believes that Bloomfield should stand its ground, and that it is unlikely we would seek funding from them again after what has occurred here. E. Lane expressed profound disappointment with the state library's administration of this grant program, and with the way that the state library has handled this issue. She noted that she has always communicated frequently and transparently with the state library on grant-related matters. E. Lane emphasized that the state library's move to take \$2 million back from Bloomfield, when the money is currently available, speaks to the state library not seeing this issue through a social justice lens. Bloomfield deserves updated libraries and is long overdue. She also wondered if the state library board is fully aware of this issue and the ongoing problems with administration of this grant program.

C. Siloac, who worked closely on the grant process, spoke about how troubling it is that Bloomfield could somehow be considered disqualified for the grant before we even applied and long before construction. He pointed out that Bloomfield could not have applied in the previous funding year because it would have been too early, before space planning and architectural drawings were complete. Considering the language in its own guidelines and contract, the state library's justifications for taking back \$2 million do not seem

adequate. C. Siloac added that the state library and a public library should be able to work out an issue like this for the good of residents.

A. Biffer reiterated the two options before the board. B. Merritt said she would rather not voluntarily forfeit, since she does not see why, in light of this issue, we would pursue state library funding again in the near future. The board discussed confusion around the state library's claims and the process around the dispute. The fact that library staff have not been part of the discussions being led by Attorney Needelman may be part of the problem. The state library has given the deadline of this Friday for voluntary forfeiture. The board discussed the feasibility of pursuing state library funding again in light of how unprofessionally state library leadership have treated BPL staff, as well as different strategies for trying to adjudicate this process, such as appealing directly to the state library board. M. Ursery expressed disbelief that library staff have not been part of the ongoing discussions. **Motion by L. Farrell for the board to share its opinion—that Bloomfield should not voluntarily forfeit the state library construction grants—with the town attorney;** seconded by B. Merritt and passed unanimously.

Public Comments

Robert Berman – Robert Berman, 8 Hiram Lane, commended the library board on taking the stand that it did regarding the state library construction grants. Mr. Berman concurred with the director and assistant director that everything was done appropriately in the proper time frame and following the rules and guidelines, including the process of applying for two separate grants. Mr. Berman does not believe contacting the state library board would be helpful since the issue is now in the hands of the Attorney General's office.

MOTION by B. Merritt to adjourn the meeting at 7:27 PM; seconded by L. Farrell and approved.

Respectfully submitted,

Christopher Siloac
Assistant Director