

Portland Public Library Planning Process
Meeting at Riverton Community Center
Tuesday, October 7, 2008 at 7:00 p.m.

Present from Library Board of Trustees: Taffy Field, Nathan Smith, Morris Fisher, Ted Spitzer, and David Brenerman; from library staff: Steve Podgajny, Brian Damien, and Steve Weigle. The meeting was attended by approximately fifteen citizens.

Meeting was opened at 7:00 by Nate Smith, who introduced board members present, and Library Director Steve Podgajny who introduced the staff members. Steve Podgajny presented a PowerPoint slide show reviewing the library's board structure, fiscal basis, current statistics, and planning process. The presentation will be made available on the library's website, <http://www.portlandlibrary.com>. Podgajny noted that the direct costs of running the Riverton Branch are \$112,942. There are also indirect costs that involve support staff who are based at the main library. Hours at Riverton and other locations were recently reorganized in an attempt to focus service during the busiest periods and to recognize life styles.

Nate Smith commented that the library's budget principles, as shown in the PowerPoint presentation, are a work in progress, and that there are qualitative aspects to activity at each branch as well as the quantitative aspects. Smith opened the floor for questions and comments at approximately 7:20 p.m.

(Q=question; A=answer or comment from PPL board or staff; C=comment from citizen)

C: The new hours really make a difference, and make the library more accessible. Also, we really like the children's programs.

C: I was here when the branch was closed several years ago. It was a hardship. I teach here, and can tell you that the children in my class would never see the inside of a library in town. I would die if the library closed here. I rarely go downtown because it's such a hassle time-wise, parking-wise.

C: We make a trip to the Riverton library every week. My daughter knows the librarians...she is comfortable in the library.

Riverton is a split community (split by Forest Avenue). The library is a huge part of the community. We see other families we know. I would not go in town – it is not where my life is centered. If the branch closed, I would go to the Westbrook library; it is closer.

This is a huge resource. This is the heart of the community. This the one main place in our community.

A: It's been pointed out that when a branch closes, it can take years to get it open again. If there is a severe budget problem again this year, sharing the pain among the branches may have greater sway.

C: Could we have a funding check-off for the library on the property tax bill? What about membership charges?

A: There is a strong tradition of free public libraries, which goes hand in hand with the tradition of free public schools. Historically, public libraries that depend on membership fees have not been successful as public service organizations.

A: We are funded in part by the state as a regional library – part of that understanding is that we provide free cards not only to Portland residents but also to residents in the surrounding region (Cumberland, York and a limited number of towns in Oxford County). Our sense is that we would not get as much money from card fees as we do from the state funding.

C: What about using the public broadcasting model – the service is free, but you make people feel guilty about using it, and then convince them to donate.

A. Fees can act as barriers for the people who are in greatest need of the service.

Q: Do you know how much use of the library is from business, the university, and government?

A. We know – by anecdote – that there is substantial use. In particular, the government documents depository at the main library is heavily used by business people. However, at this point we do not have hard data on “professional” or “academic” use of the library vs. other uses.

Q. What are the demographics of the users at the main branch? How many of them are not Portland citizens?

A. Overall, more than 70% of our borrowers are Portland residents.

C. An analysis of your circulation numbers may indicate that there is heavy circulation at the main branch to nonresidents...that the branches are of even greater importance to people in the city than you would learn by just looking at the relative circulation numbers of the branches and the main library.

C. Fundraising efforts need to tap the passion for libraries.

A. We are trying to get a Friends of the Library group going. We are proceeding carefully and trying to sort out the legal and policy questions before launching it.

Q. If the Friends group is raising money, how would the funds be spent? How much would be kept here at Riverton?

A. Usually, money raised by Friends is used to support operations, not capital projects like the main library renovation. We hope that as a Friends group gets going, the idea of one system will be kept in mind. We need to remember too that there are needs for library service in the community in neighborhoods that don't have branches, for example, East Deering and North Deering.

It may be difficult to get a Friends group going but we are determined.

C. I like the idea of a Friends group, but if we have a Friends group, we need to be united to work for the whole community. We all love our own branches – but we need to keep them ALL open.

A. One of the strengths of the system is how the branches and the main library support each other.

C. I recall the closing of Burbank, and the work to get it reopened. People fought long and hard to bring Burbank back.

Regarding the renovation -- it is unconscionable that 60% of the windows that are not energy efficient are not going to be replaced. This was “sold” as a bond issue five years ago on the basis of improved energy efficiency. Energy efficiency should be job one in this renovation.

It looks like you have three entrance/exits. This is going to be inefficient in terms of staffing.

You are making a priority of turning the basement into community space – this should not be a priority.

Do you need a 12 x 18 inch television screen on the front of the building?

Your design makes it more difficult for the handicapped, by removing the ramp and inserting an elevator. [A: There will still be a ramp, but it will be reconfigured.]

I take umbrage at the assertion that the children's area on the first floor was not safe. I was a regular user of the adjacent AV area, three times a week, and never saw any safety issues [C: Disagreement by another citizen]

The function/community space should be deferred so that more focus can go on energy efficiency.

How much money did the public market "fiasco" cost the library?

C. I am so enthusiastic about libraries because libraries have changed my life. I worry about the pressures on Reiche...it must serve 15,000 or 20,000 people. Are the other way of cutting the budget? Is there some way of phasing out CD's or cutting back on computer terminals or some other service?

A. The use of computer terminals by adults far outstrips the use by children...and for the adults who use computer terminals, it can be a critically important service for needs like job hunting. Also the use and housing of non-book items (CD's, DVD's, etc.) is enormous on a yearly basis.

C. If there is going to be a tough budget decision, please try to make your decision as early as possible.

Q. Can the library publicize its submission to the city council so that people know what's being asked for?

Q. If each branch had a boosters group, what percentage would go the branch, and what percentage would go the system?

A. We don't know the answer to that, but that's important question.

C. We need to be aware that some areas have more resources than others.

C. We should not be pitting the branches against each other. We should all work together. The communities of Portland can be easily pitted against each other.

C. We are talking about the future of our children when we talk about libraries.

C. We need to tap into volunteerism at each branch and make that a priority. People may not have money, but they may have it in their hearts to give time.

A. Something that has been lost in our discussions is giving the system credit for working with the resources it has – it didn't grow in staffing over the last twenty years as other public agencies have.

Q. Here are some questions and comments from an accounting perspective:

C. Do you sell coffee? Consider it!

Q. What is the return on your investment?

C. You should consider allocating system costs to each location.