

Portland Public Library Planning Process  
Meeting at Peaks Island  
Tuesday, September 16, 2008 at 7:00 p.m.

Present from Library Board of Trustees: Taffy Field, President, Peter Merrill, immediate past President, Nathan Smith, Vice President and chair of the Library Planning Committee; from library staff: Steve Podgajny, Director, Heather Tiffany, Brian Damien, (and for end of meeting) Priscilla Webster. The meeting was attended by approximately fifty-seven citizens.

Meeting was opened at 7:05 by Nate Smith, who introduced board and staff members present, and noted that this is the first of a series of five neighborhood meetings; there will also be a combined meeting at Rines Auditorium at PPL on November 5. Smith spoke of the library's history dating back to 1867 when it was founded by James Phinney Baxter and others, noting that publicly-funded libraries and publicly-funded schools got started at about the same point in the nineteenth century, and that history had demonstrated that quality library service could not survive, or serve the entire population, when based on private funding alone.

Steve Podgajny presented a PowerPoint slide show reviewing the library's fiscal basis, current statistics, and recent planning process which has spanned several years and involved a number of community meetings. The presentation will be made available on the library's website, <http://www.portlandlibrary.com>.

Nate Smith opened the floor for questions and comments at approximately 7:35 p.m. and invited comments on what the library was doing well or not well or could do better and on what an ideal library system should provide.

Question: How will the library be involved in digitization of books?

A. (Podgajny): The library's efforts will be focused on local interest material, and in find ways to connect to existing digitized materials at other locations (ex. Google Book Project) through the library catalog. The library's catalog is a legacy product that needs improvement and enhancement.

Comment: A "ringing endorsement" of the branch. The staff "cares about the elderly, know readers, and deliver book. This library is one of the main centers of the island. There is not a week that I don't bless this facility. It is more important than... than ice cream!"

Comment: Recounted the history of PPL service on the island, starting with the bookmobile. Community support has always been here. Books and reading are always important to children and parents. This has been a "wonderful marriage with the Portland Public Library." The branch is also a great melting pot for islanders.

Question: How is library being affected by Cumberland County funding?

A. (Podgajny): Current version of the County budget funds PPL at the same level as last year. But also important to note that the County did provide \$100,000 in funding for the renovation of Monument Square.

Comment: Peaks has the “best librarians,” and this is “an amazing library.” Please let us know what we can do to assist with fund raising needs.

Comment: “You have a very efficient system.”

Comment: “This is the first library I’ve seen where services start at birth.” This is very important because it has been demonstrated that the more books a child reads, the more likely the child is going to succeed.

Comment: Spoke with appreciation for the personnel at this branch...”so professional, so friendly, so responsive.”

A. (Smith): Can we dig deeper here and identify “best practices” that might be utilized around the PPL system?

Question: Are you collecting statistics on the use of the library’s online service (i.e. the online catalog)?

A: (Podgajny): There are difficulties in getting useful data out of our existing system. We aren’t able to gather as much information as we would like to about what people are looking for...it would be good to know what people are looking for in the catalog that they’re not finding, so that we could use that information to drive the collection management process.

Comment: It’s been fun to see the use of the wireless internet node. At 7 a.m. the other day there was someone sitting on a golf cart, with a laptop, outside the library. “The staff is incredible.” There is service to the summer population as well as the year-round population.

Response: (Podgajny): We understand the seasonal dynamics, and it would make sense to add some hours in the summer, but there isn’t budget money available for that in the current environment.

Comment: It’s wonderful to see the story programs, and to see the children sitting on the floor around Priscilla.

Question: Is there a way to encourage the other towns surrounding Portland to increase their budgets to support the PPL?

Answer: (Smith): The other towns are under their own budget stresses and have libraries and are thus unlikely to step up. You could charge for access – but that runs contrary to the idea of a free public library.

Answer: (Peter Merrill): If we were to start charging nonresidents, we would lose the \$184,000 we current receive from the State of Maine and that would be very, very difficult to make up by charging non-residents. We have much better luck with private fundraising.

Question: My taxes keep going up, and recently went up a lot – why isn’t this money going to the library?

Answer (Smith): It is important for your elected officials to hear from you.

Comment: Jo Coyne from the Reiche Branch neighborhood wanted to make sure that all feel welcome at all meetings. ‘We don’t believe that Reiche is off the hook. We hope that you will share in the planning process. The West End has the highest population density in the state, and ranges from the Western Prom to Parkside, with many immigrants. We need our branch library. Perhaps instead of closing one branch all the branches should cut hours.’

Comment: City Councilors did not know the impact of the funding level that was provided. Urged trustees to take this info to the finance committee.

Response (Smith): “Flat funding” meant laying off 10% of the staff. If there is flat funding again, it will be ugly.

Response (Taffy Field): Observed that Mayor Ed Suslovic is a member of the library board.

Response (Merrill): We clearly learned the lesson about getting out in front of the process.

Question: Do you ever discuss with members of City Council how they could cut other things?

Answer (Merrill/Smith): Nothing is more effective in affecting the outcome of the budget process than citizens speaking with their councilors.

Question: What about developing a private foundation? Manchester, N.H. uses this approach.

Answer (Smith): PPL currently has endowment income and continues to do private fundraising.

Also, we are gearing up plans to launch a Friends of the Portland Public Library. The Friends group here on Peaks has been very effective.

Question: What portion of your budget is devoted to energy? Are you looking at efficiencies?

Answer (Podgajny): Energy efficiency is one of the goals of the renovation project at the main building.

Answer (Smith): We need to evaluate energy use at all of the locations and continue to look for cost savings opportunities.

Comment: There is more and more a “business view” of how things work. If the world is going to a “business view,” we must focus more on the “community view.” The library is more than a business. It is essential to the community. Without the library, “we’d be screwed.”

Meeting ended at approximately 8:30 p.m.