

Portland Public Library Planning Process  
Meeting at Reiche Community Center  
Tuesday, September 23, 2008 at 7:00 p.m.

Present from Library Board of Trustees: Eric Altholz, Janis Cohen, Taffy Field, Peter Merrill, Nathan Smith, Ted Spitzer and Laurie Williamson; and from library staff: Steve Podgajny, Heather Tiffany, Stephanie Lorigan, and Brian Damien. The meeting was attended by approximately forty citizens.

Meeting was opened at 7:00 by Nate Smith, who introduced board members present, and Library Director Steve Podgajny, who introduced staff members. Steve Podgajny presented a PowerPoint slide show reviewing the library's board structure, fiscal basis, current statistics, and planning process. The presentation and handouts will be made available on the library's website, <http://www.portlandlibrary.com>.

Nate Smith opened the floor for questions and comments at approximately 7:20 p.m. and suggested that participants limit their comments and questions to approximately three minutes each, a guideline used by City Council.

Q: How much flexibility is there regarding cutting back on the renovation project...given the economy changing for the worse, wouldn't it be wise to scale back the project. How fully committed are you?

A: We're in pretty deep, but we are working within our means. A significant portion of the project provides for work on the heating, ventilating, and air conditioning (HVAC) infrastructure, which will work to reduce operating costs for the building. The teen center is needed, and we need to create a better, safer children's center, which will attract more traffic. The Monument Square location is also by far the busiest location lending close to 400,000 items yearly.

Q: How was the planning document re Reiche branch conceived?

A. The intent was to create a document that was a starting point for internal discussions about how the branch should move forward, and then go out and do surveys and hold conversations with members of the community. This was done last spring before budget matters came to a head.

C. We want assurance the all of the branches will stay open.

A. We want to keep all of the branches open. But PPL will need an additional \$150,000 more to maintain the status quo for the coming year. The figure is based on a preliminary estimate of how much it will cost to fulfill contracts (labor, utilities, etc) in the year ahead.

C. You can't use the same set of criteria in looking at each branch – you need to be flexible. It would be unfair to compare Reiche and Peaks.

C. Comment regarding distance of branches from the Main Library...observing that the Main Library is no farther from the ferry terminal (i.e. for Peaks residents) than Reiche is.

Q. If the library is \$150,000 short, what about using private sources of fundraising? We would welcome opportunity to participate with the library in raising money.

A. The Library is in the process of establishing a Friends of PPL and that would be an opportunity to help. There is a sign-up sheet to be on the mailing list. The hope is that next spring, the group would be operational.

Q. It looks like the library is not having difficulty raising money for the Monument Square renovation...isn't this just a matter of the library diverting the funds to that project instead of using it to keep our branch open?

A. It's a different kind of "ask" – it's much easier to raise private money for capital investments and especially buildings, and sometimes for special programs, than for ongoing operating expenses. Private donors generally don't want to pay for lights, heating, and staffing whereas government funds support basic infrastructures.

A. There was a history of privately funded libraries in the U. S...Public funding for libraries came at about the same time as public funding for schools. Public funding for operating expenses was recognized as a necessity 150 years ago.

C. Statement of Aaron Shapiro, recognizing special qualities of Reiche branch, and observing the populations of the "catchment areas" of each branch. (Copy of statement attached.)

Q. Are there vacancies on the Board of Trustees? What is the process for filling those?

A. There are three vacancies at present. Like many nonprofits, the library board fills its own vacancies. There is a nominating committee, current chaired by Kaighn Smith. The committee has already approached individuals about filling the three current vacancies, but this is an ongoing process. You can contact the trustees to make nominations at the email: trustee@portland.lib.me.us

A. Two members of the trustees observed that they went to the library to offer their services as volunteers, and wound up on the board.

Q. Where did the \$150,000 plan come from?

A. This comes from preliminary budgeting work, knowing what the amounts will be that will be necessary to meet the obligations of the union contract, pay for increased utilities, and pay for other services (for example the network fees that are paid to be part of the national interlibrary loan service.)

Q. How is it that the library is talking about adding a new position (teen center) when it's contemplating cutting positions elsewhere?

A. There is no new position this year...the new position is contemplated for when the renovation of the main library is completed in Spring 2010. Also, it is important to note that the 10% staffing reduction at the end of the last fiscal year was done entirely at the Main Library. The Main Library started this year with 4.5 fewer positions than the previous year.

Q. We came from a town with a county system. Is the library looking at regional approaches?

A. An observation from the library director that county systems usually work well, and that we pay a high price in Maine for our municipally-based systems. Portland is one of three libraries in Maine (the other two being the Maine State Library and Bangor Public Library) that serve as Area Reference and Resource Centers. The state appropriates \$184,000 annually to Portland to fulfill this role...and Portland in turn extends free library cards to residents of Cumberland and York Counties, and to a few towns in Oxford County.

Q. Do you have a sense of whether the state monies cover the costs of providing the regional services?

A. Yes, we feel that they do. If we lost the funds, it would further reduce staff to the detriment of Portland residents.

C. If budget times are tough, you should consider skimming resources off all the branches, rather than just closing one of them.

C. \$150,000 is not a lot of money in the scale of things, considering your budget. You should consider hiring a professional fundraiser...they work for a percentage of the monies raised, and can be very effective.

Q. Is there a plan to respond if the library does not get the \$150,000?

A. We are listening to the comments and will test our Principles as to how we should respond. The budget will be submitted in February with the current schedule as the basis.

Q. At the Trustees meeting that was a public hearing on the Reiche closure proposal last spring, a member of the community who is experienced in grant writing offered to assist the library. Did you follow up with her?

A. No.

C. I recall the terrible distress over the closure of the old Burbank branch several years ago. It was very difficult for that neighborhood. When a branch is closed, it is like severing a limb. You should know that it is really hard to reattach a severed limb.