

AKRON-SUMMIT COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY
BOARD OF TRUSTEES
SPECIAL BOARD MEETING
DECEMBER 29, 2020

NOTE: Due to the Coronavirus pandemic and the State of Ohio mass gathering limits, this meeting was held entirely on Zoom.

President James Casey called the special meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Akron-Summit County Public Library to order at 4:04 pm. The following members of the Board answered the roll call: James Casey, Jill Darlington, John Frola, Angela Neeley, William Rich, Bernard Rochford, and Ray Weber. Pamela Hickson-Stevenson, Michelle Scarpitti, Carla Davis, Ryan McCoy, Pam Plumley, Carl Roxbury, and Barb White. Guests were Jason Dodson and Galen Schuerlein of Roetzel & Andress, and Rich Krochka of Triad.

Mr. Weber moved, seconded by Mrs. Darlington, to adopt the agenda. The roll call followed: Mr. Casey, Mrs. Darlington, Mr. Frola, Ms. Neeley, Mr. Rich, Mr. Rochford, and Mr. Weber all voted aye. The motion carried. 20-91
AGENDA
APPROVED

Galen Schuerlein said that the PowerPoint presentation she developed had been updated. She stated that it included information on in-depth interviews, online surveys, and the statistically accurate telephone survey. After the Board makes a decision regarding the type of levy, work will begin on an educational campaign. She highlighted that 76.7% of those surveyed rated the Library excellent or good while 15% had no opinion. Importantly, only 1% rated it as poor or very poor and 90% said the Library was a valuable community asset. More than 90% said the Library was important to childhood education. All were excellent points for the Library.

Ms. Schuerlein stated that the survey showed cost really does matter in whatever decision the Board makes. A straight renewal scored 20 points higher than a renewal plus additional money. The issue was even more pronounced when comparing the suburbs with Akron. The support of Akronites drops from 72.6% to 62% if the ballot issue includes additional money. In the suburbs support drops from 79.6% down to 50.5%. Even among those who regularly visit the Library, support drops from 83% for renewal to 66% support for additional money. Asking for additional money is considerably more difficult than asking for a straight renewal. She reported that on-line surveys are being promoted. Currently, more than 1,600 people have taken the survey. The survey link will be open until Jan. 9, 2021. Preliminary results support the findings of the telephone survey. Nearly 78% of the respondents did not know the Library would be on the ballot in 2021, which is not surprising because the communication process has not started. This emphasizes, however, the importance of educating people that the Library will be on the ballot.

Jason Dodson reiterated that the Library is held in high regard among the community leaders who were interviewed. The Library is viewed as a good community partner. There is some concern that the Library is either not viewed as, or is not promoting itself as, a modern and innovative institution in the community. By and large, however, there is very positive sentiment about the Library itself. Those interviewed demonstrated knowledge regarding the services provided by the Library; this was evident in both those who use the Library as well as those do not or are not frequent users. Additionally, the interviews revealed the same concern about asking for

additional money as opposed to asking for a renewal. None of those interviewed stated a belief that the Library needs more money, which indicates the need for a clear, prolonged, and sustained information campaign regarding that need. This would need to be a precursor to asking for additional funds.

Mr. Casey thanked them for all of the information. He asked if there was any additional discussion. He stated that Ms. Hickson-Stevenson and Ms. Scarpitti would have to adjust the budgets over the life of the levy and that the Board was not anticipating any additional money.

Mr. Frola stated that it is his third levy and this is the best statistical information to date that is meaningful in preparation for going on the ballot. He thinks there is not much discussion needed as to what direction should be taken. Given the continuing issues of the pandemic, he cannot see fighting an uphill battle now. He suggested that perhaps at some point in the next few years, the idea of additional funding can be revisited.

Mr. Rochford asked for Ms. Hickson-Stevenson and Ms. Scarpitti's comments on moving forward. Ms. Hickson-Stevenson stated one of the biggest questions is the status of the State's Public Library Fund. If state funding remains stable, or at least the percentage remains stable, and the economy starts to recover, the Library benefits. If there is a negative change in state funding, it is hard to predict how much help a simple renewal will be. She also quoted the old adage "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush;" given the time frame with the pandemic, the uncertainty around the economy, and the survey and interview results, she does not see that there is much choice other than to proceed with a request for renewal. The work in crafting and communicating a message about going for a replacement in the available time frame is much more complicated. She also stated that the current Library levy must be renewed; if it is not, the results will be catastrophic for the system.

Ms. Scarpitti observed that funding can be compared to a pie and if the size of the pie isn't changed, only the size of the pieces can be. She commented that Ms. Hickson-Stevenson lets her know the priorities and they work together to determine how much will go towards those priorities. It makes sense that the climate feels like the Library might not get the support for additional funding. She feels it would be safe to go for the renewal. Her approach is to determine the size of the pie and then figure out how to proceed going forward and how to adjust. If the levy does fail, there will not be a discussion about what programs would be cut because the Library will lose more than half of its revenue.

Ms. Schuerlein reminded the Board that surveying was done during a time when it was not known if other city-wide or county-wide levies would be on the ballot. Because cost is so important right now, if other political subdivisions go on the ballot in May asking for money it is going to make the analysis even more pronounced. It may put voters in a mindset of voting for one but not the other. A straight renewal is more likely to pass and a lower millage is more likely to pass. She also explained that the survey did not ask people what they would do if there were other issues on the ballot. She reiterated that voter support is affected by the cost and that dropping 30 points in the suburbs is a big deal.

Mr. Rich said that a replacement would bring in approximately \$900,000 more than a renewal, and would not be as much of an increase as a replacement. He

suggested a replacement would be more difficult than just a renewal. Ms. Schuerlein replied that from a political standpoint, it would be more difficult to get people to support a replacement. Political leaders stated that a renewal would be much easier to support and that cost matters. People don't want cuts at the Library, but additional costs even with additional services would have a huge effect. Anecdotally, it is still easier to pass a renewal than anything else. A replacement affects the rollback that benefits property owner. She stated the survey showed a renewal would most likely pass by a comfortable margin.

Rick Krochka said that there is a wealth of data in the survey. That data is aligning and confirming the interviews. He reminded the Board that the Zoo was at 71% approval in June 2019, but after the pandemic it passed with only 58%. Nothing negative happened except the pandemic and a Bob Dyer column. He would not be comfortable that even the lower numbers supporting a replacement levy would remain stable.

Ms. Hickson-Stevenson reminded the Board that the levy in 2010 had pushback because it was a replacement. The *Akron Beacon Journal* published two articles on it. This was before the provisions were instituted in 2013 that removed the rollback provisions from a replacement levy for property owners. Before the rollback, the pushback was only on increases in property valuations, now it is two-fold with the loss of the 12.5% exemption. Mr. Dodson commented that with the current restrictions on gatherings, it is impossible to get out and talk to people in large groups. This makes it considerably harder to make the case for a replacement. Ms. Schuerlein explained that the Cuyahoga County Public Library went on the ballot in 2008 for funding for renovation. In the following year, the Governor cut public library funding significantly. This removed from CCPL the ability to go back to the voters for a long time, as they had just campaigned that the 2008 levy would take care of everything. If the Library does go for more money, there should be awareness that the same could happen here.

Mr. Rochford stated he understood the need to go for a renewal because of the practicality, but asked what this means for the Library going forward. If revenues remain virtually the same and costs increase, how can the Library continue on at this amount? Ms. Hickson-Stevenson stated that this year was not financially devastating as it was thought it would be. This has afforded an opportunity to set up a plan for reinvigorating a capital fund along with establishing a vehicle replacement fund. It is her hope that while this surprising financial news will not eliminate the potential negative effect of simply going for a renewal, it will provide mitigation.

Mrs. Darlington commented that the next few months are a short time to put together an educational campaign. Ms. Schuerlein responded it is not ideal; it would require some heavy lifting and would be difficult to accomplish.

Mr. Frola said that the Library's aging buildings will have to be dealt with eventually. He proposes to renew now and consider going for more during the mid-levy cycle. This will give the campaign committee time to get information out to the voters. When an institution doesn't show the need, voters will not support the issue. He would rather not have any negativity and would rather show there is financial stewardship.

Mr. Dodson reported he has not received an update from the County Fiscal Office. He does not think the Board should wait any longer to make a decision because it is needed in order to send the request to County Council. The Library does have a certificate from the County Fiscal Office that meets the requirements of the Ohio Revised Code. There are valuations, but not tax millage rates. The current numbers are not to be used for budgetary planning.

Mr. Rochford moved, seconded by Mr. Frola, to adopt the resolution for the renewal of the existing levy and present it to County Council. The roll call followed: Mr. Casey, Mrs. Darlington, Mr. Frola, Ms. Neeley, Mr. Rich, Mr. Rochford and Mr. Weber all voted aye. The motion carried.

20-92
RESOLUTION FOR
RENEWAL OF
LEVY
APPROVED

Having no further business, the meeting adjourned at 5:05 pm.

President

Secretary