

Library Oversight Hearing  
February 15, 2012

*Testimony by Robin Diener, Director, DC Library Renaissance Project*

You have heard a good deal about the achievements of the DC Public Library system as it nears the completion of a \$180M five-year capital building program funded by District backed bonds -- otherwise known as the taxpayers -- to renew neighborhood libraries. This has been a great success overall and the Library has achieved much.

At this juncture, I want to remind everyone that the political will to transform the Library system through its neighborhoods came from residents who live here, not the government or business interests or real estate developers or the library trustees all of whom had a different plan -- to offload the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library and build a trophy central library on the old convention center site. The citizens of the District narrowly saved MLK from the auction block. They then insisted that the District instead concentrate on renewing neighborhood branch libraries across the city.

Without that intervention by we the people, we would not have the dozen or so impressive new libraries that residents are flocking to and which are being lauded here today and, which I feel compelled to point out, are a great boon to officials seeking reelection. The roll call of neighborhoods is quite wonderful to hear: Anacostia, Benning, Deanwood, Northwest One, Parklands-Turner, Petworth, Shaw, Takoma Park, Tenley and the soon-to-be-completed Francis Gregory, Mt. Pleasant, and the library formerly known as Washington Highlands, now renamed Bellevue. And finally Georgetown, not initially included in the transformation plan but which suffered a fire and emerged as a truly great renovation success.

I take nothing away from DCPL's accomplishments and those of the city but I must remind us that *if not for* the advocacy and political organizing of Friends of the Library, unaffiliated library users, and advocacy groups like mine, it would be a different story.

I drag up this ancient history because we are about to embark on another five year neighborhood library building program, at taxpayer cost, and because the fate of MLK -- our central library -- still remains up in the air.

We welcome the completion of the transformation of the remaining neighborhood libraries, in principle. We have questions about cost, which we've raised in the past and will continue to monitor. Most importantly, and easiest to address, DCPL needs to improve its public input process to avoid in future some of the snags it ran into over the past five years -- most of which were eventually resolved, in a sometimes time-consuming effort -- although not all have been resolved. Mt. Pleasant remains a problem.

Public inclusion in design is not just about tweaking -- such as the size of the Friends rooms, which are too small. What is really lacking is the sense of excitement and anticipation that public inclusion creates for neighborhoods that yearn to feel a spark of something better to come.

***We recommend DCPL adopt the charrette process for public input, which every architect knows how to carry out. This should be at the front end of the process before any designs are under consideration. We strongly recommend that the Library let the architect conduct the public inclusion process. And we recommend that Office of Planning be present as an observer, even if not directly involved. It would be illuminating for OP to hear some of the concerns that come out of the sessions with the community, and that have impact beyond the library.***

As regards MLK, there is a history of mistrust between the Library and the library-going public. In 2004, the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Libraries was held behind closed doors.

The recent Urban Land Institute draft study about MLK was misrepresented to the public by library officials who said just prior to its being convened that "everything was on the table." In fact, as the ULI report laid out, the group was asked to examine two -- only two -- specific scenarios, neither of which was retaining the building as the central library at its current size or larger. We don't know if the concept of additional space being developed on top of the library for various purposes looked at use of space for non-profits or groups with an educational mission, because the report still has not been released. However, at the Mayor's One City Summit, on Saturday, space for nonprofits was one of the top requests. So incidentally, was affordable housing, which is a component of the West End Library and Parcels development that is not guaranteed by DMPED.

Misrepresenting the scope of the ULI study was not good, but worse is not allowing the public into the planning and recommendation process. My organization and others have asked repeatedly for a Task Force on the Future of MLK. We were told repeatedly that it was too early. At the Board of Library Trustees meeting in January 2012, there was mention of another study of MLK, and a request for a million dollars to carry it out, again with no mention of how or even if the public would be involved.

This history of bad faith goes deeper and has many more instances than I can enumerate here. What we really want to see is the transformation of the library system move forward to completion, including MLK, with the public as a fully vested partner in planning and decision making. It's simply best practices in Planning 101 and DCPL can do better.

***We recommend again that a Citizens Task Force on the Future of MLK Library be convened with a broad spectrum of DC citizens seated on it and that its meetings be held in public.***

Respectfully submitted,

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