

Fort Madison Public Library Board of Trustees

Minutes of the regular meeting held February 18, 2021, 5:30 p.m. in person and electronically via Zoom.

Board members present in person: Sharon Groene, Jane Bartlett, Ron Welder, Tom Pollpeter and Kathy Burkhardt.

Board members present online: Candice Smrt, Anne Heitz, Phi Hecht and Mary Whitcomb.

Others present: Sarah Clendineng, library staff, in person.

Mark Lair, City Council Liaison, in person.

Mayor Matt Mohrfeld, in person.

Meeting called to order with a quorum present at 5:30.

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Bartlett; 2nd – Welder. The motion was carried unanimously.

Public Comments: There were no public comments.

Approval of Minutes: Motion to approve the minutes of the regular meeting January 21 –Welder; 2nd – Pollpeter. The motion was carried unanimously.

Approval of February 2021 Bills:

Trustee Groene asked what the lawn care middle plan includes. The director explained the weed treatment and lawn fertilizer this schedule would provide.

There was a question about which bills are annual. The director will be sure to note these on future bills sheets. This month the automatic door maintenance and GoDaddy bills were also annual expenses.

Trustee Burkhardt asked about the ServiceMaster cleaning service and if the director had explored other companies as the amount seems high. Trustee Groene mentioned that this cost hasn't raised in some time. There has been discussion at the city about exploring janitorial service options but no action has been taken. Currently the city offices and the library have separate agreements.

Motion to approve the February 2021 bills – Welder; 2nd –Smrt. The motion was carried unanimously.

Correspondence: There was no correspondence.

Director's Report: In addition to the attached report, Trustee Bartlett asked about the relationship between the library and the Friends of the Library. The director explained that the Friends of the Library are a 501(c)(3) that raises funds for the library through book sales and help us by applying for grants that are only available to official non-profits. They were able to hold a sale in November last year and will be having a sale this coming April. A report of their financial status is provided to the city as part of the city's annual audit.

There was also discussion of the drop in library usage numbers. The library has seen a drop in physical use and visitors but this is a trend that libraries across the country are seeing. However we have seen an increase in usage of electronic resources.

Trustee Burkhardt asked about the solar panels and asked who is responsible if the roof needs to be replaced.

The director responded that the library would have to find a way to budget for it or ask the city to amend their budget. Trustee Burkhardt asked if some sort of maintenance fund was included when the library was built. The director replied that there wasn't. The mayor informed the board that the city could create funds where the money is obligated to things like vehicle maintenance or building repair. Solar panels are not an imminent project but the director wanted to let the board know that this is under discussion.

New Business

Discussion with Mayor Mohrfeld on the Special Library Levy

Mayor Mohrfeld began by presenting the following information. First, the library's expenses are growing at a rate that is greater than the revenue generated by the city with a 30% difference over 10 years. There probably will come a time when the city council will have to pull back some essential funding on the library just because of lack of funds to support all of the departments being funded out of the general fund. Mayor Mohrfeld thinks that we need to take a look at the opportunity provided by the \$.27 levy that the state allows which has to be voted on by the community. What this would do is generate about \$80,000 dollars and could inject some needed cash into the library facility that the board would have control over for things such as improving curb appeal and repairs such as a new roof. The general fund has been good to the library because people like Mark Lair and himself and Rebecca Bowker are friends of the library. When the library was built and he was on the board of supervisors he was a huge proponent of this as an expansion, as he was other libraries in the area, and his wife Beth was on the board at the time. Worst case scenario, if the board tells a good story and takes this issue to the voters, and it doesn't pass, we've told a good story and telling a good story is kind of what the library does.

Trustee Burkhardt asked why there wasn't a plan for ongoing maintenance when the library was built. Mayor Mohrfeld replied that it is hard to look back and fix things but we can look forward and fix things in the future. The fact is that the library needs more revenue to implement the library's mission and that's not going to come out of the general fund.

Trustee Burkhardt asked the mayor when he talks about a levy being needed because there is less money does that mean that all groups are possibly taking a cut or is it just the library?

Mayor Mohrfeld replied that he's not talking about what the library is getting today but, right now, what is being allocated to the library is increasing faster than the increase in city revenue. If the increase was 2.5% or 2.25% and the library board is good with everything the library is doing and has provisions for maintenance then the Mayor wouldn't see this as an issue but, as he drives by every day and listens to the board talk about issues like the roof, he doesn't think this is the case. This also plays into the board's plan for the future. So, what are the strategies? One would be to make the library a higher budgeting priority. Another strategy would be to reduce the budget. Other strategies would be to look at the community and how much it values the library and ask them to invest in a \$.27 levy.

Trustee Burkhardt asked what happens when the levy doesn't pass. What was presented to the board was that either the board pursues this or they are going to lose money.

Mayor Mohrfeld replied that his exact words were, when he was getting frustrated that there was no acknowledgement of the levy, "Do you not need \$80,000?"

Trustee Welder said that he has two problems. First, he cannot find anyone who supports the levy. Second, if the board works hard and this passes and then there is a council change in two years and the new council looks at the library budget and sees the \$80,000 that the library is getting from the levy and reduces other funding because it cannot be guaranteed that the library's other general funds cannot be reduced.

Mayor Mohrfeld agreed that, while the levy funds can only be used for the library, it does not dictate what general fund allocates to the library. However, if you play out the scenario without the levy, it is also possible that the council sees the library's expenditures escalating faster than the general fund and they pull that back. With a solid plan for where the board wants the library to go. If the levy passes, the board has taken control of this funding to plan for the future of the library.

Trustee Bartlett asked if there were other departments whose budgets were also increasing at a higher rate than the city's revenue stream.

Mayor Mohrfeld replied that the big budgets right now are fire and police and they are not increasing. If anything, they are helping keep the general fund down. The parks department has escalated because they were managing their budget through diminishing assets, they weren't taking care of their stuff and that is not a good way to manage a business.

Trustee Pollpeter said that he understands the mayor's point but he has concerns based on the previous history with school board elections.

The director pointed out that one difference between the school referendum and this levy is that the school referendum was school district wide and included portions of the county and other incorporated cities. This levy only be taken to the citizens of Fort Madison because it would only be levied on the citizens of Fort Madison.

Mayor Mohrfeld asked the board what their hesitancy was, the desire to not put the effort in? being afraid to tell the story? that the library is not important? Right now, the board is not fully completing their mission, year after year, they are balancing their budget and letting their assets deteriorate. Nothing said tonight is a threat but, instead should be seen as a warning of what is being observed, that the library's expenses are growing faster than the general fund revenues.

Trustee Burkhardt asked the mayor, as a member of this community, what are you doing or what are you willing to do to help get a levy passed?

Mayor Mohrfeld replied that, if the board starts a committee to pursue the levy there are two things he would do. First, he would absolutely be a champion for the board and, number two, if that involves a small contribution for collateral material, of course he would contribute to that.

Trustee Burkhardt stated that a problem for her is that she has no idea how a committee promotes and lobbies for a successful ballot measure, like a levy and several other trustees agreed with her. Trustee Bartlett added that she is not sure how you tell that story when she hears a lot of people saying they want the city to take care of the library.

The director replied that she doesn't know how to lobby for a levy, either, but she knows people who have worked on them and we could definitely bring someone in who has done one to give instruction and guidance. There are also great materials through the ALA that could be used as a tool by this committee to tell the library story.

Trustee Pollpeter stated that he thinks it is an uphill climb to a levy but queried if it would be better to sell it as we need a new roof, we need new carpet as an operations type levy.

Trustee Burkhardt and Mayor Mohrfeld both agreed that there needs to be a plan. Trustee Welder mentioned that the money can't be obligated. Mayor Mohrfeld agreed but also added that part of the process for the board

is to look in the mirror and see who they are and have a plan for the future of the library.

Mayor Mohrfeld asked if the board had created a five year plan. He has challenged the parks board to develop a five year plan. The director replied that the board had started this process last spring but then weren't able to hold community groups due to Covid restrictions.

The director added that, while it is true that we can't obligate the money, the board can tell a story and part of that story is that, while the community does have a nice library building, well-situated and centered in town, it is no longer a new building. It is almost 15 years old, it will be 14 years old this fall and we want to keep it looking like a new library. That is one story that can be told. We can also tell the stories of how computer access improves people's lives, of how people use the library to file for unemployment to search for a job or to keep an older relative sane by bringing them books while they heal from a broken hip. We can find those stories. And we can find someone to help us tell them well so that, at the end of the day, if nothing else, the community sees the true value of the library.

Trustee Burkhardt asked about how much the library budget has increased and Trustee Bartlett also asked for this information. Mayor Mohrfeld replied that, with budgets, you need to look at the trajectory. 2% from year to year is small but over 10 years is a 20% increase. But, if you start looking at the difference between income and expenditure, even a couple of tenths of a percent between expenditures and revenue, over ten years is a large amount.

Trustee Hecht said that, as a community, we need to look at who the library serves and the library serves a wide swath of the community. As a community as the city budgets for the entire community they need to keep in mind that there have been a lot of initiatives that have appealed to niche segments of the community.

Trustee Burkhardt asked what would happen if, after the board has worked for the levy, there is still a chance that it won't pass and, if it doesn't pass, will there be a cut to the library's budget.

Mayor Mohrfeld replied probably not in a significant fashion.

Trustee Bartlett asked about how maintenance is being paid for at other buildings in the city. Mayor Mohrfeld replied that the city's maintenance of infrastructure isn't good. There are other city buildings with leak issues, that need technology upgrades or that have outlived their planned life. Trustee Bartlett is wondering why the responsibility for maintenance suddenly falls on the board. The mayor replied that this is a fair question and asked what is the role of the library board? Trustee Bartlett replied that she doesn't know, when she got on the board, she thought the city took care of the property. Mayor Mohrfeld replied that he would be hard pressed to provide an answer because the building is the city's asset but the library board is an autonomous board at the mercy of the funding appropriation of the City Council.

Trustee Pollpeter thanked Mayor Mohrfeld for his comments and added that he does think the mayor has challenged this board to say we have to do a five year plan.

Mayor Mohrfeld commented that maybe the discussion tonight has brought to light simple things such as starting reserve funds, similar to vehicle replacement, and who would shoulder the concept of a solar project and where do we go if we want to start enhancing services outside of where we currently are.

Trustee Heitz asked about the tax increase of the levy on a \$100,000 house, asking if it would be \$27 per year. Mayor Mohrfeld replied that this information is not quite accurate because there is a rollback on property taxes so a \$100,000 house would only be taxed on a certain percentage of the value of the house.

Trustee Heitz also asked if the levy is passed how that would affect the money that the library is budgeted from the city. Mayor Mohrfeld replied that his vision is that the levy money would stack on top of it. The gain to the city would be the hope that it would offset some of the long term maintenance that the city might not be able to fund.

Trustee Bartlett asked if it makes more sense to wait on this until the board has a five year plan in place. It was pointed out that this levy can only be placed on the ballot during city elections which are in odd numbered years. Trustee Burkhardt asked if there were any other city financial measures on the ballot. Mayor Mohrfeld replied that he doesn't know of any.

Trustee Welder shared the boards plan, begun in February of 2020 to start a strategic planning process. The board was going to invite about 40 people, from a wide variety of backgrounds, to discuss the future of the library. Unfortunately, this process was stopped because of the pandemic and the inability to gather a group of people together. Trustee Welder said that the levy would be part of the discussion with the community group. And it sounds like the information about this plan didn't make it from the board to the city. The board should have done a better job of communicating to the city that the library board is working on a community wide approach to developing a five year plan for the library which may, or may not, include a levy.

Unfinished Business

Aarin Guzman Donation Project Presentation

Motion to move the unfinished business to the next meeting on March 18 – Smrt; 2nd – Welder. Motion carried unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 7:15 pm until Thursday, March 18, 2021