

**Watchung Library Advisory Board Minutes  
Wednesday, May 2, 2018**

Mission Statement

The mission of the Watchung Library Advisory Board is to advise, support and promote the interests of the Watchung Borough Public Library.

A meeting of the Library Advisory Board was held this day on the side lawn of the Watchung Library (due to a power outage in the area), 12 Stirling Road, Watchung, NJ 07069.

Call to Order

President Amy Fiorilla opened the meeting and called the meeting to order at 3:35 PM.

**In Attendance**

Amy Fiorilla, President  
Margaret (Peggy) Ellis, Vice President  
Eileen Dicken, Treasurer  
Maureen Greenbaum, Member  
Tamara Benc, Member  
Annette von Brandis, Secretary  
Stephen Black, Council Liaison  
Hannah Kerwin, Branch Manager, Watchung Library

Lauren Ryan, SCLSNJ  
Chris Korenowsky, SCLSNJ  
Virginia Hartmann  
Gail Donnell  
Drew Donnell  
Victor Garber  
Thomas Franklin  
Joan DiFluri  
Diana Churchill

**Absent**

Stephen K. Pote, Mayor  
Michael Vignola, Principal Bayberry School

Introduction

This is a meeting of the Library Advisory Board of the Borough of Watchung. This and all other meetings are conducted in accordance with the Open Public Meetings Act.

Review of Minutes of March 28, 2018 Meeting

The minutes of the March 28 meeting were approved.

*C: M+C, T&A*

### Treasurer's Report

Eileen Dicken informed the Board of the following:

Ending Balance for February	\$10,057.48		
March Deposits	\$182.56	finer	
	\$2.33	fish donations	
Debits	\$50.00	Aqua Services for monthly maintenance	
New Balance	\$10,192.37		
April Deposits	\$156.70	finer	
	\$1.30	fish donations	
New Balance	\$10,350.37		

Aqua Service Professionals performed their last fish tank cleaning on April 17 for \$50. Kason was kind enough to provide a detailed list of what he did at every visit. This will definitely help when someone else performs the job. Tammy has located a local Boy Scout and his father who will hopefully take over regular cleaning of the fish tank, on a monthly basis or as needed.

### Council Discussions/Liaison Report

Margaret (Peggy) Ellis read aloud the resolution proposed by Councilman William Nehls from the April 19 Borough Council meeting:

*Councilman Nehls read the following statement: Mr. Mayor, I am presenting this statement regarding the Watchung Library. Over the past several months it has been brought to the Council's attention that many residents feel that the Watchung Library is unsafe and presents a hazard to the workers and to our residents. In fact, the Watchung Library Advisory Board and the mayor have obtained and presented a letter to the Council from the Chair of the Somerset County Library Commission that the library is unsafe and that repairs need to be made to ensure the safety of the employees. The mayor and council have expended money to make these repairs. However, all parties agree that the current library cannot be repaired for extended use. In 2012, Watchung held a referendum as to whether we should build a new library and the amount to be bonded for this purpose was \$4.2 million. The residents of Watchung voted this referendum down by a vote of 1026 to 858. Many have argued that this referendum did not show the true position of the residents of Watchung due to the potential that Superstorm Sandy deterred voters from venturing out to vote. However, this vote was one of the largest that has occurred in Watchung with a total of 2439 residents voting of the 4365 registered voters. The 2017 State Library Bonding issue is not the measure of our residents' position on building a new library. It is the Council's opinion the true referendum is the one which was voted down in 2012 which was specifically for the Borough to build a new library and not the State Bonding referendum. The Council had passed a Resolution in 2014 which allocated \$1.5 million*

*dollars for the renovation of the current library. As part of this resolution an amount of \$500,000.00 was to be raised to offset some of the costs for the construction of this renovation project. The architect who was hired by the Borough at the Mayor's recommendation, stated that fund raising could be done with the design that had been completed. This money was never raised. The Council accepts the position of the architect that fund raising could have been undertaken with the design that was proposed. It should be noted that after several changes to the design the architect's estimated cost for the construction of this library was \$3.14 million dollars. Additional costs would be incurred which would include interior buildout, landscaping, parking areas, etc. The true cost being unknown and would be substantially higher.*

*Councilman Nehls made a verbal motion to move the following: "I move that the Borough of Watchung seek alternative shared service agreements to provide library services to our residents and not pursue renovating of our library or the building of a new one. Once alternative library services are provided we will no longer be using the library property. Therefore, I further move that the Borough investigate the property and surrounding properties for commercial redevelopment possibilities to benefit the residents of Watchung." Councilman Sopko seconded the motion.*

Virginia Hartmann stated that the 2012 vote was about a \$4 million library project, and should not be confused for voting against having a library in Watchung. This year the borough will have the opportunity to apply for grant money from the State of New Jersey, whereby up to half the cost could be paid for by a match from the library construction bond fund—which Watchung voters approved in a vote of 55% in November of 2017.

Amy Fiorilla noted that Mr. Nehl's resolution included reference to a WLAB letter presented to Council in November. The November letter was reviewed and the appropriate response on the part of the Board was discussed. A draft of a clarifying letter to be read at Council May 3, 2018, and the November letter referred to, were read aloud:

*Watchung Borough Council,  
In a statement read to the Borough Council at its meeting on April 19, 2018,  
Councilman Nehls referred to a letter presented to Council last November by the  
Watchung Library Advisory Board. We attach a copy of that letter here.*

*To clarify, the total intent of that letter was to encourage our Council to continue with its  
commitment to keeping a physical library in the town of Watchung, and to expedite the  
process in order to apply for the NJ State grant funds. At no time did we suggest or  
foresee the idea of closing Watchung Library without reconstructing the existing  
building.*

*We greatly value the presence of the library in our borough, and are baffled by  
Council's change of course, after having committed to preserving the physical library in  
town through the 2013 commitment of \$1.5 million, the earlier earmark of \$600,000 for  
the project, and the continued engagement of an architect to pursue renovation plans—  
at considerable borough expense of at least \$137,000 at last count. We judge that it is  
not fiscally responsible to invest in a project, commit to funding, and then drop it just at  
the point when a fifty percent match becomes available for the cost of construction of a*

*public building—an offer that the town is not going to find in any other way. The NJ Library Construction Bond Act provides the opportunity for \$125 million in grant money, something our neighbor Warren is taking advantage of to improve their own public building. Neither is it fiscally responsible to give up what Somerset County Library System has provided to our town—in-town resources of staffing, materials, and programs which are provided to us by the system at no added cost, with the understanding that we provide a building for the library. In addition, the town will forfeit the annual rebate of \$6,000 that SCLS provides to us as a hosting town, as well as the fine monies (about \$2,500 per year) that are collected from our residents and visitors.*

*Council made a judgment when it purchased at considerable expense the pocket park on Somerset Street that the circle area would not be conducive to further commercial development. Now, Council has voted to invite more business and more traffic right on the circle, selling off what is the center of our town and sacrificing the most-used town resource in the process. More businesses would likely increase traffic at the already-strained circle at the rush hour times of day, much more so than a library. This is not in the best interests of our town, the library or its patrons, or property owners in the borough.*

*We call upon the Council to address and replace the resolutions voted in on April 19, and to recommit to a physical location of a modern, fully accessible, full-service library within the Borough of Watchung, and to act with great expediency so that we do not miss out on the NJ State grant funds offered to towns for this very purpose.*

*members of The Watchung Library Advisory Board*

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*November 2, 2017*

*Honorable Mayor Pote, Council President Joren, and Council Members:*

*The mandates of the Watchung Library Advisory Board (per town ordinance) include making recommendations concerning our library to the Mayor and Council. To that end, we hereby recommend that*

- 1. Plans for a new library building of adequate size to serve our community be adopted and approved no later than December 31, 2017, in accordance with Somerset County Library Commission Chair Chris Corsini's letter of August 2, 2017. (Copy of Corsini's letter attached.)*
- 2. Funding for the construction of the building be obtained.*
- 3. The construction of a new library for Watchung be completed as soon as possible.*

*By commonly accepted industry standards (researched by the Watchung Library Study Committee), a library for a community of 6,000 residents should be, at a minimum, 12,000 square feet. We therefore recommend that our new library building contain usable space of 12,000 square feet, or more.*

*Time is of the essence in this project, as the current library building is deteriorating and fails to comply with 27-year-old ADA accessibility requirements. The fiscally responsible*

*course of action is to correct the building's deficiencies properly - by replacing the building - rather than to continue incurring expenses on stopgap repairs to keep this dilapidated building functioning at a compromised level.*

*Thank you. Watchung Library Advisory Board*

Members made minor edits. Amy Fiorilla moved to approve the letter, Margaret (Peggy) Ellis seconded that motion. All agreed to move forward with it.

It was commented that the Council members still do not realize that Watchung is already part of the larger SCLSNJ system. Watchung taxpayers pay about \$827,000 annually through the county library tax for library services. If the town provides a building, the county system provides full library staffing and services—the materials, computers, even the phone service. Watchung taxpayers will continue to pay those fees whether we have a building or not, but will get no local presence in return for our tax dollar.

Stephen Black was asked to update us on how council made the new decisions since we were not aware of discussions to close the library. Last we heard was that we were going ahead with the latest set of building plans by Mr. Iovino. Stephen Black explained that different council people had different ideas to use the area for commercial development. He indicated the fire inspector was not comfortable with the current site of the library. Watchung had spent more than \$137,000 to date for plans on the building project at the Stirling Road site, and the Board wanted to know why this issue was not addressed before incurring such costs. Stephen Black also mentioned that Council could purchase the Valley Furniture buildings for \$3 million and redevelop that site along with the library property even though the Valley property is in a flood plain and Council had previously disqualified it for municipal use. Board members questioned whether the Council was going to get into the business of real estate speculation, and where would they find \$3 million to buy a vacant furniture store, when they could not see their way clear to spend even \$2 million on the existing library.

Chris Korenowsky, SCLSNJ, commented that there has been no official communication for closure of the library yet, everything is continuing as planned through the end of the year. Margaret (Peggy) Ellis questioned if operations are as usual, but was reassured by Lauren Ryan that new materials are ordered by collection management as usual. Amy Fiorilla mentioned that the agreement between the borough and SCLS expires 12/31/2018.

Victor Garber stated that there is a lack of transparency in Watchung and would like to know from Stephen Black why the council would be interested in developing this site if it does not see it suitable for a library. He asked about the vision for the community. Stephen Black replied that another location like the Fireman's Exempt Hall would be a better option. His suggestion was that the occasional program could be held there.

This started a lively discussion, because Stephen Black had voted for closing the library, not for exploring other properties. He had just voted to close the library.

Virginia Hartmann asked Chris Korenowsky, SCLSNJ, if they would sponsor programs at locations other than libraries, such as the Exempt Hall. He said he could not answer that at this time and made no commitment for SCLS to hold events at that location.

Tom Franklin did not remember any public debate about closing the library. He asked if it took place behind closed doors. He would like the rationale for opinions and feels that there is a lack of transparency and credibility.

Amy Fiorilla asked Stephen Black if Council understands that we have shared services already, we are part of a larger system in Somerset County: Does Council understand that Warren and all of the other branches participate in shared services through the system, and enjoy the efficiencies of sharing services countywide? She pointed out that no further monies from Watchung need to be paid to Warren to maintain access at the Warren Library for Watchung residents, that full access is paid for systemwide through the County library tax.

Stephen Black stated that the mayor came to him and asked for unity. He said that there was a breakdown of communication. He said Nehls' resolution was not known. Communication happened via email. He said that he was working with Councilman Mobus on the Fireman's Exempt Hall option. Victor Garber replied that he was told that the Fireman's Exempt Hall was off limits years ago. Stephen Black answered that he feels good about what he is up to. Nehls, Mobus and Black had been in communication. The Exempt Firemen pay \$1 rent per year, and the Borough of Watchung can dissolve the arrangement at any time. Gail Donnell commented that we want a real library, for the community to get together. We are not Warren, we are in Watchung, we will miss out on a huge opportunity to obtain our own building at half the cost.

Tom Franklin challenged the idea of using the exempt hall only for an program and a book drop. He cautioned that council should not try and appease the town by coming up with some 'cockamamie scheme promising a storytime or two, that's not a library.'

Stephen Black replied that we could have a full-service library at the Fireman's Exempt Hall. Margaret (Peggy) Ellis reminded him that he had voted on April 19 to close the library, not to rebuild or relocate. She pointed out that Stephen Black now was stating that he wanted to work something out at the Fireman's Exempt Hall. Margaret (Peggy) Ellis urged him that if that is the case, he needs to reverse the vote.

Tamara Benc suggested to get the residents' side of the story in the media, since it seems that the vote happened without public discussion.

We could not follow the statements that Stephen Black put forth as he contradicted himself.

#### Adjournment

On motion and unanimous agreement, the meeting was adjourned at 5:06 PM. The next meeting of the Watchung Library Advisory Board is scheduled for Wednesday, July 11 at 3:30 PM in the Bicentennial Room of the library.

Respectfully submitted,  
Annette von Brandis