

July 20, 2017

To: Chester Board of Finance
Regarding: North Quarter Park Library

Please read at the meeting and include in the minutes.

The BOS have now endorsed this project by moving it forward, in spite of saying, “she did not believe it was fiscally responsible to incur that amount of debt with the current revenue uncertainty and the lack of a state budget.”
- *June 14, BOS minutes.*

This seems to be an obvious conflict. Chester does not have high debt due to responsible management by its BOF, which is, unfortunately, rare in this state. Why take on more debt now in this extremely uncertain climate? Why is the town only behind this one, most costly, proposal? I would urge the BOF to carefully evaluate this plan and the financial burden it would incur. To follow through because “of the time and money already spent” is not a justification for a project of this expense and questionable need.

I have followed various library expansion plans for years, was on one of the focus groups, and am now a member of the Library Board of Trustees. The library’s own surveys concluded that “people resoundingly wanted to stay at the current location.” Why has this finding been ignored?

Some in town have always wanted to develop NQP. In the 2009 POCD the library was inserted there, without even being consulted about such a move. There are well-developed plans for renovation at the current building, the most costly being far below this proposal. At the start of architect Ken Best’s design plans there was a study done to evaluate the library for any hazardous materials, of which none were found to prevent a renovation. The library has this study. ADA regulations are also more flexible when dealing with a historic building.

This library building committee was appointed with the specific agenda of developing a new building at NQP. NQP is a difficult site to work with for any building, it needs to be clear that though there are 22 acres, only 3 acres are buildable. There has been virtually no public input into the design of this new building. The proposed building is the footprint of the town hall. I do not feel this size and design are right for the site and the neighborhood.

The town hall is large for a town this size and underutilized. We have the Meeting House and the community room, and many other libraries close by. Popular proposals such as the NQP walking trails are not included in this 7.4+ million dollar figure. This is another municipal building with perpetual operating, staffing and maintenance costs, that are being underestimated.

At the end of a recent BOS meeting, a group was discussing the project when one of the Library Building Committee members said to us, “Well, what else do you have to spend your money on?” To those of us who need to spend our money on paying bills and making ends meet, that comment was wholly inappropriate. It illustrates the lack of understanding of the cost impact to most residents.

I would ask the BOF to NOT move this particular plan forward, so that a more realistic and suitable plan can be pursued. Possibly utilize an existing building in town, or, as most people have already expressed as their preference; stay and work with the current historic library building.

In conclusion, please read this assessment from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, regarding the library’s plans before this NQP development.

Thank you,
Karin Badger

CT Trust for Historic Preservation Opportunities 2010

<http://cttrust.org/cttrust/page/preservation-opportunities-2010>

Chester: Chester Public Library. The people of Chester love their library. Built in 1907, its neoclassical design, surprisingly elaborate for a small town, conveys a message that books and literacy are highly valued. But the tiny building is clearly overcrowded. Eventually, some alterations, including an addition, may be necessary to accommodate growing collections, says library director Linda Fox. The library also will have to find a way to make its building more accessible, and that will not be possible in the limited space within the existing walls.

Rather than rush into an expansion, the library is concentrating for the present on using its space more efficiently. After all, it's not easy to predict what will be needed in the future, says Fox. "Right now, we need more room for DVDs, but in five years we probably won't"—as viewing technology continues to change. A number of architects are expected to present suggestions in September.

Preservation opportunity: Chester's slow and conservative approach to getting the most out of its historic building provides a model of thoughtful design and development of an existing library rather than falling into the bigger/newer/better trap.