

WHY LINCOLN NEEDS A NEW DOWNTOWN LIBRARY BOARD OF DIRECTORS, LINCOLN CITY LIBRARIES

I. INTRODUCTION

The Library Board of the City of Lincoln has determined that the current main library, known as Bennett Martin Public Library (BMPL) no longer meets the needs of the city and should be replaced by a new library on Block 63, the current location of Pershing Center. This paper discusses the reasons why we need a new library.

The City of Lincoln Library System consists of the main library, BMPL and seven branches. The annual budget is about \$8M for fiscal year 2012-13, which is about 5.2% of the \$154M Lincoln city budget. We have a collection of about 800,000 books, magazines, and other items, and 113 public computers.

Residents visited our libraries 1.5 Million times last year. There's simply no question that statistics like these demonstrate that people use Lincoln's libraries. The questions remain, though: What kind of a main library will those people use now, and in the future? And what role should the City of Lincoln play in ensuring the citizens of Lincoln have a vibrant main library to use their daily lives?

According to the 2012 US Census estimate, Lincoln's population is 265,000 and Lancaster County is about 293,000. We must not forget that the current main library was built when Lincoln's population was less than half its current size.

II. EDUCATION

A cornerstone of our democracy is a well-educated population. We may disagree with each other, and often with great passion, but even in this time of political polarization our fighting has been done with words and ideas rather than with guns and bullets.

We take free public education for granted now, but public education in the United States is relatively new and only goes back to the 19th century. Public education as we now know it, consists of two separate, but equally important branches.

a) First are the public schools. In colonial times, education was often considered a function of the churches. But, during the 19th century, public education became increasingly accepted as a public community duty. The first public high school was started in Boston in 1821. By the 1870's, all states had free elementary schools. By the close of the 19th century, almost all communities had free public secondary education. The 20th Century saw an ever-increasing rise in the number of Americans who were high school graduates in order to meet the challenges of the country's industrial and technological development.

b) The second branch of public education is the public library. Public libraries have a mandate to serve the general public's information needs. Equal access to information is a

core value of our country, and the American library system is an essential part of an educated and literate population. The first libraries, such as the one founded by Benjamin Franklin in the 18th century, were subscription libraries, and were only open to people of means. But free public libraries, are truly an American innovation. Free public libraries in the United States began to flourish in the 19th century alongside public schools. The first major public library in the United States was also established in Boston in 1852.

The free public library as we know it is truly an American innovation. The most significant contributor to American libraries was Andrew Carnegie. Mr. Carnegie, the Bill Gates of his Era, donated money to build 2,509 libraries between 1883 and 1929. Of those, 1,689 were built in the United States through the use of Carnegie grants, Lincoln was a beneficiary of these grants.

The history of libraries and public schools in this country – as well as their continued support – show that such financial support does not constitute a public handout, or ‘entitlement’. It is a public duty and obligation. They are the twin backbones of an educated population, which is the lifeblood of our democracy.

Free public libraries should not be thought of as public entertainment, like parks or the new Arena. Free public libraries are a local responsibility, like police and fire protection. Local governments are obligated to ensure we have a well informed and educated public. Virtually every town or city in the country has a public library.

When it comes to Lincoln’s main downtown library, this obligation has been neglected, almost to the point of abandonment.

III. History of the Lincoln libraries.

The Lincoln library system is governed by a board of directors. The current system goes back to 1936. The Board consists of seven directors who must be residents of the City of Lincoln and are appointed by the City Council. Their terms are seven years and staggered so each year, a new board member is selected, and an old member rotates off. The Board has broad powers including (1) supervising the public library facilities, (2) selecting and purchasing books and magazines, (3) approving the annual budget, and, (4) along with the Mayor, hiring the Director. See Chapter 4.20 Lincoln Municipal Code

Public libraries have been a part of this City since its beginning. Lincoln became the capital of Nebraska in 1867—the same year Nebraska became a state. The first library was established in 1885. Twenty-seven years later, in 1902, the Carnegie Library was built at 14th and N thanks to the Carnegie Foundation at a cost of about \$77,000.00.

After 60 years, the old Carnegie Library no longer met the needs of a growing city and Bennett Martin Public Library was built in 1962, thanks to a generous gift of \$300,000.00 by Bennett Martin, a Lincoln businessman and former mayor. Lincoln’s population at the time was 125,210, roughly half the current population. Bennett Martin Public Library was expanded in 1968 and again in 1978 by which time the population was about 172,000 people.

Bennett Martin Public Library was a gem for its time, but it was designed for mid-20th century technology and community needs. Computers and e-books were not even mentioned in science fiction when Bennett Martin Public Library was last expanded.

IV. COMPARISON WITH OTHER LINCOLN PROPERTIES

By comparison, almost all other public and commercial buildings built in the mid 1900's have been replaced.

Here are but a few examples:

The Lancaster County Court was originally built in 1890—approximately five years after the first City library. The County Court was replaced in 1969 with the County City Building. This was approximately seven years after the Bennett Martin Public Library was constructed. A new addition to the Court was completed in 1997. The jail, built in 1980, has just been replaced.

The Pershing Center was completed in 1957 at a cost of \$3 million. At that time, Lincoln's population was about 99,000, and the Pershing Center was designed with a capacity of 7,500 people. As we know, the future use of Pershing is up for discussion.

The Devaney Center was built at a cost of \$13 million in 1976 with a capacity of 13,500. This was 21 years after the Pershing Center was built. Lincoln's population was 145,000. Though its use as a basketball arena is over, the Devaney Center is being redesigned as a state of the art venue for our nationally ranked University of Nebraska volleyball team.

Construction has now been completed on the Pinnacle Arena. This new arena will have a capacity 16,000 at a cost of \$180 million. It replaces both Pershing and Devaney.

A number of other developments have occurred in Lincoln over this same timeframe. The common theme is that buildings the age of Bennett Martin Public Library have uniformly been replaced, upgraded, or significantly redesigned to fit the City's economic growth and the 21st Century.

Memorial Stadium is a prime example of this change. Constructed in 1923, when the population was 55,000, the stadium originally had a capacity of 31,000 people and cost of \$430,000. The stadium now seats over 90,000, which is slightly smaller than the entire population of Lincoln when Pershing was built. Recent additions in the east stadium sky boxes and 6,000 new seats cost \$63.5 million dollars

The old UNL baseball field was replaced by Haymarket Stadium in 2000.

Among commercial buildings, Farmers Mutual has just replaced a building that was built in 1962, and Assurity recently built a new building in the Antelope Valley area. Moreover, none of the hospitals are in the same buildings that they occupied in 1962.

In contrast to all of these private and public buildings, the Bennett Martin Public Library remains fixed in time. As a community, we need to ask why.

V. COMPARISON WITH OTHER CITIES

Some people seem to think that libraries are going the way of the dinosaur, but, in fact, almost all American cities, big or small, have built new main libraries in the last 15 years in response to public demand and evolving uses of libraries.

A review of libraries in 26 peer cities demonstrates just how far behind Lincoln is by comparison. We attempted to find cities that have something in common with Lincoln such as population, geography, and government. See Attachment 1.

A. Football cities - Let's take cities which are both state capitals and home to major state universities and have an intense interest in college football.

Madison, Wisconsin - Similar to Lincoln in both size and government, Madison, Wisconsin is completing a new downtown library that will be 124,000 square feet--about twice the size of Bennett Martin Public Library...and they are crazy about the Badgers.

Columbia, South Carolina - The State capital and home of the University of South Carolina and an undying love for the Gamecocks, a city of about 300,000 built a 250,000 square foot library in 1990.

Baton Rouge, Louisiana - Certainly no stranger to college football and also a State capital, the home of the LSU Tigers is completing a 126,000 square foot library this year.

Tallahassee, Florida - The capital of Florida and home to Florida State Seminoles, built a new library in 1988, which was 88,000 square feet.

Austin, TX and Columbus, OH have also invested in library improvements, but they are substantially larger than Lincoln, so we are not using them for comparison.

These cities are no less interested in college football than Lincoln—all have large stadiums and skyboxes. They have done one thing that we have not. They have seen the necessity and the duty of maintaining a modern, up-to-date main downtown library.

B. Peer cities –A review of cities in neighboring states demonstrates the same thing.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota – a city of about 160,000 modeled their main library in 2010 to about 62,000 square feet, the size of Bennett Martin Public Library.

Topeka, Kansas – also about the size of Sioux Falls, added to their library in 2001 and now has a total size of 170,000 square feet.

Pueblo, Colorado – Also similar to Sioux Falls, built a new library in 2003 of 109,000 square feet

Des Moines, Iowa – about 100,000 larger than Lincoln, opened a new library in 2006 that is 110,000 square feet.

Cedar Rapids, Iowa – roughly the same size as Lincoln, is opening a new library this year at 95,000 square feet.

Cheyenne, Wyoming – The smallest of our peer cities at 93,000, opened a 103,000 square library in 2007.

The purpose of looking at these other cities is not to figure out whether we're "keeping up with the Joneses." The purpose is to see whether we're keeping up with the educational, informational, and community needs of our population; and as of 2013, Lincoln is not doing that.

The attached chart shows exactly where Lincoln is in comparison with our peer group. The common denominator is that Lincoln is far behind everyone else. See Attachment 2.

C. Other Nebraska cities

And we need not go out of state. According to data from the Nebraska Library Commission during the last 10 years, about 100 Nebraska cities have either replaced or rebuilt main libraries, ranging from Grand Island and Bellevue to small villages such as Pierce and Oconto. Omaha has had four main construction projects in branches during that time. Syracuse and North Bend just built new libraries in 2012. And the new Kearney Library has opened in 2011. See Attachment 3.

As we've seen, cities smaller than, comparable to, and larger than Lincoln all over the country have new libraries. In essence, we stand alone. A city that once called itself the Athens of the Prairie is far behind the times. Why is Lincoln where it is? We can't answer that question, but we can tell you we're not where we should be.

VI. Studies Commissioned by the Library Board.

The Library Board is charged with maintaining the library facilities, and all matters considering buildings start with the Board. (Section 4.20.020 (b), Lincoln Muni. Code).

Pershing is the choice of the Library Board. Pershing is located on Block 63 of the Original Plat of the City of Lincoln. Block 63 was educational land owned by the State. On July 21, 1871 that block was deeded by the State of Nebraska to the Lincoln Public School District and over the years was the site of elementary schools, the original Lincoln High School and an LPS administration building. On July 3, 1940, the school board sold the block to the City of Lincoln. Block 63 has never ever been on the tax rolls, and has always been dedicated for public use. Turning Block 63 into commercial use virtually flies in the face of its intended purpose. It would be similar to turning Antelope Park into an office complex.

In 2003, the Library Board commissioned, the Bennett Martin Public Library Space Needs & Facility Study. It was prepared by Clark Enerson Partners of Lincoln and Dubberly Garcia Associates of Atlanta. It concluded that Bennett Martin Public Library was insufficient to meet future needs and not suited for expansion or renovation. The study concluded that a) Lincoln

needed a new main library; at a full block in the downtown area. The location that made the most sense was Block 63, current site of Pershing. It made sense then, and it still makes the most sense.

Block 63 is right on Centennial Mall, which runs from the Capitol to the University. Over \$10 Million is being spent to revitalize the Mall, and there will be a good deal of foot traffic, which is what a library needs. It is an ideal location for a new library. The Board firmly believes this is where the new library should be. The Block has always been dedicated for public use, and we think it should remain such.

The Library Board commissioned the Main Library Vision and Concept Study in 2012 to again look at the subject. The \$90K study, paid for by private funds raised by the Library Foundation, was prepared by Sinclair Hille Architects of Lincoln, Jack Poling of Minneapolis, a noted library architect, and Susan Kent of LA., a Library Planner. Its purpose was to identify the needs of a new library for the 21st century. Relying heavily on public input and library success stories throughout the nation, the study outlined services that a modern library should provide, determined space requirements, and evaluated potential sites. Pershing was the clear choice. The Library Board, after a good deal of study and discussion, voted to submit a proposal for the re-use of the Pershing Center as a new main library. The proposal was modest by peer standards. It proposed a 107,000 SF library in the block now occupied by Pershing. The cost would be about \$43M; financed by a bond issue and capital donations. The difference between starting from scratch or rebuilding the current Pershing was relatively minor.

The City rejected that proposal, but the matter remains open. The Library Board still believes that Block 63 is the most viable location for a badly needed new library. The Board has been diligent in investigating the situation. It appears to us that Bennett Martin Public Library has outlived its usefulness and all roads lead to Pershing as the best location for a new main library.

The reality is that libraries are no longer only a depository for paper books. We all know that electronic books are increasing each year, and the library's collection of electronic books is also growing. The shift to all forms of media does not mean that the printed page will disappear. One of the important principles of public libraries is they provide access to information to all, not just those who can afford their own computers and e-readers. But contemporary libraries now allocate spaces for people: children, teens, families, studying and tutoring, places for gathering. This is the significance of libraries all over the country and should be the significance of the new library for Lincoln. Again, it is not a matter of keeping up with the Joneses; it's a question of whether almost every other city in the country apparently knows something that we either do not know or do not want to know: that modern libraries play a major role in our educational system and community life, and they need to be kept current like all other institutions.

VII. FAQs

Since the 2012 Main Library and Vision Concept Study came out, there have been some questions raised, some of which we will try to address.

Why do we need a larger library when the age of electronic books is here? As it has been demonstrated in cities all over the country, a vibrant downtown library symbolizes the intellectual and cultural values of a city. Libraries ensure equal access to information, and they will grow in their importance even as the transition to greater emphasis on electronics occurs. They are a gathering place not unlike a public park and, in fact, have occasionally been referred to as “a park for your brain!”. They are the place to go, the place to meet, and that hasn’t changed. Even with the presence and future increase in electronic literary opportunities, it has been demonstrated in those communities that have invested in a new main library, that they are busier than ever. People still want the library experience. Just go to Bennett Martin Public Library, and you will see it is in constant use. It would be used much more if the building was more attractive, better located, and had surrounding parking.

How will it function to meet needs 20 years from now? We can’t even imagine the growth in technology over the next two decades, but we do know that the library is a core community resource for utilization of these new services over the next many years. Wi-Fi and other services will be a major part of this new entity as we build and embrace the future. If the experience of other communities is any example, the indication is these needs will grow, not shrink. We know that people’s need for community connections and involvement will not go away. We know that a healthy democratic community will answer the needs of all of its people, rich or poor to access information in a variety of forms. We will have to design a building that is flexible enough in nature so that it can change as its uses changes. Unfortunately, Bennett Martin Public Library is not that type of building.

Why not spend \$3-5M to renovate? We have done extensive studies over the past ten years, and we found it is not feasible to renovate the existing location especially considering size restrictions. The 2003 study concluded the current library is not meeting the needs of the community and is not suitable for expansion or renovation. It is not feasible for the same reasons that the other private and public buildings we’ve discussed have rebuilt entirely new buildings. It just no longer meets the needs and renovation is insufficient.

Why do we need a new “community center” when we have “learning centers,” “recreation centers,” and “senior centers”? None of those examples offer connection to the world of literature and learning that a public library offers.

What percentage of readers today will be using electronic devices compared to bound volumes? Clearly, electronic devices will continue to grow in popularity. We know that. In fact we are consistently increasing our number of e-books. And the cost is about the same, and we get about the same number of checkouts with e-books as with paper books. That isn’t the point. People will come to libraries, as they always have, as a place of knowledge, for equal access to information, and to meet other people. Doomsayers said about 50 years ago, that movie theaters were on the way out because of TV, and then several decades later, because of videos. Likewise, the same was said with the introduction of paperback books libraries were no longer needed. That didn’t happen. The experience of our contemporary cities should answer that question.

What is the response to those who think libraries will be obsolete in 5-10 years? In communities where they invest in libraries and the intellectual quality of life, libraries are growing in popularity. This is also true in Lincoln and will be more evident as we make the necessary investments to build for the future. They will not be obsolete any more than schools will be obsolete.

What is the plan for technology and how will you keep up with it? Every business, government entity and, certainly libraries throughout the country deal with every day. We plan to develop the new location with as much foresight as possible using the best minds available and, it will be our firm desire, to continue leading this process for intellectual access for the citizens of this city for many years to come.

Why Pershing? First, the City already owns the land, and it has been public use land since 1867, when it was platted. Second, the Board has concluded it is by far the best location for the new library. It does not make sense for the City to spend millions in acquisition costs when we have a great location that we already own. Parking will be an issue no matter where we go, but at least Pershing has an underground lot. Centennial Mall is going to be redone, and it will attract many visitors because of its new vision as an educational and public festival space. The announcement of the upcoming "Wi-Fi" investment for the mall also fits our desire to make the main library a totally accessible facility both physically and electronically. It should also be remembered that downtown Lincoln itself is changing with many people moving into the downtown areas, and Pershing's location is within walking distance of many of those new developments as well as housing that already exists.

We cannot ignore the importance of a downtown library as an economic catalyst. Economic development specialists will tell you that when a community builds a new downtown library, which becomes a destination location, there is an increase in the economic activity and the street energy in the surrounding area. A new downtown library will become an eastern anchor of a revitalized downtown.

VIII COST TO AVERAGE CITIZEN

The question will inevitably be how much more in taxes will this cost. The exact cost cannot be estimated accurately at this time. Sure, it will cost tax payer dollars, but it will certainly not have a major impact on the average person. Assuming a \$42M bond issue, a \$150K house, which is about the average value of a home in Lincoln, the yearly cost would be about \$21.60 in increased property taxes, which are tax deductible. Assuming four people live in that house, it's about \$5.40 per year each. That is the cost of a bag of popcorn at the movies. And tax deductible popcorn at that. Compare this with the cost of the Arena, which is a project about four times the expense. In a recent Lincoln Journal Star article, it was estimated that the increased cost to an average person for the Arena would be about \$40 per year if they spend the national average on eating out. The comparison is stark: Both the Arena and the Library offer doors to publicly owned buildings. In one you pay a high price to enter and to be entertained, be it a basketball game or an ice show. In the other you pay nothing to enter the world of education. Entertainment contributes to the economy, but education contributes to our

democratic society. We as a city do not have a duty to entertain, but we have a duty to educate. When you put this in proper perspective, a new library at Pershing makes a great deal of sense.

IX. CONCLUSION

We know that this is the right course for our city. We have never, in the history of this city, been this far behind when it comes to civic responsibility and that is what we are talking about, civic responsibility. When it comes to our downtown library, we are indeed in the cellar. All over the country, communities large and small are embracing new libraries. It is time to bring Lincoln into the 21st century.

Please help with this project.

Adopted by Library Board of Trustees
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