

Multnomah County Library District 2021-22 Hearing Minutes

Wednesday, May 19, 2021
Multnomah Building 501 SE
Hawthorne Blvd.
Portland, Oregon Via
Webex

Present:
TSCC:

Chair David Barringer, Commissioner Margo Norton, Commissioner James Ofsink, Commissioner Mark Wubbold, Commissioner Harmony Quiroz, Executive Director Craig Gibons and Budget Analyst Tunie Betschart

Absent: None

Multnomah County:

Multnomah County Board of Commissioners: Chair Deborah Kafoury, Commissioner Sharon Meieran, Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson, Commissioner Susheela Jayapal and Commissioner Lori Stegmann

Staff: Library Director Vailey Oehlke and Director of Operations Donald Allgeier

(Chair Barringer lost connection at this point)

Vice-Chair Ofsink opened the public hearing and asked the Commissioners and staff to introduce themselves. He then asked if any Commissioners have business relationships with the district that could be perceived as a conflict of interest. There were none. Vice-Chair Ofsink asked the Library staff to introduce themselves.

Vice-Chair Ofsink turned the floor over to Library Director Vailey Oehlke to make brief introductory remarks about the budget, and then the TSCC commissioners would ask a few questions. Following the questions, they will take testimony from the public.

Multnomah County Library Director Vailey Oehlke gave a brief overview saying it's been an incredibly tumultuous year, as evidenced by closures and different ways of using the library that came with the pandemic. She said they are cautiously optimistic about the coming year even though it is still a time of great uncertainty. They are trying their best to be flexible.

TSCC questions:

Chair Barringer was able to reconnect to the hearing at this point and asked the following questions:

It would be hard to underestimate the impact of the pandemic on the library. Tell us about how you adapted this year and how it changed your spending plan. How did you reassign staffing, and what services replaced the person-to-person contact the libraries are known for? Will this change the

way libraries look in the future?

Multnomah County Commissioner Lori Stegmann responded, saying that the library closed its physical locations to the public in 2020. They started to serve the community through a holds-pick-up service along with expanded digital and virtual offerings.

The library completed revising core priorities a year ago to focus work and resources to support people most profoundly impacted by Covid-19 and historical marginalization and systemic oppression.

This year the library has focused on changing services such as distance learners, adult literacy, workforce development, and expanding virtual programming. These changes resulted in a budget modification in November that eliminated positions, created new jobs, and shifted existing positions to support that work, along with holding 75 positions vacant to prepare the library for whatever lay ahead.

Starting at the end of 2020, the library began planning for expanded operations by seeking community input on the most critical services to prioritize in reopening. The library is centering on race in this work, through feedback, with deep connections to communities that face the most significant barriers to library services. The district expects to spend more money on physical changes to provide modified services. Due to the number of positions held vacant, they expect to be underspent.

She went on to say in answer to your question about what the future of libraries looks like; there will be more conversation in this hearing.

Commissioner Norton asked the following questions:

The budget talks about some of the challenges, both service-wide and even physically, to reopening the libraries. Can you speak to us about that? What changes have to happen at the library? And how are you preparing for district-wide reopening?

Multnomah County Commissioner Lori Stegmann answered, saying on June 1, the library will reopen five locations to the public, and then others will follow. The library expects a busy year for services in the fiscal year 2022. The library has provided more distance between computer stations and has utilized more library space for computer access based on community feedback to provide modified services.

The library will remain safe, obeying the physical distances based on the state and county's latest guidance. This precaution is particularly challenging given the small sizes of the current buildings and the volume of library materials in those buildings. The fiscal year 2022 budget will continue to support modifying facilities and programs to ensure success with current safety needs. In addition, the library is prepared to support staffing needs as new services emerge and to support library user needs.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following question:

The budget includes four new positions for a permanent workforce development team. This seems redundant of services offered by many other organizations. So why is the library district moving into workforce development?

Multnomah County Commissioner Susheela Jayapal answered, saying this is a program that people have been asking for since well before the Covid pandemic. It is something that the library saw accelerate during the pandemic. Helping people find work and develop career skills is one of the library's priorities. It has always supported job speakers with in-person services and computer support focused on resumes, job applications, and navigating job searches.

The library provides open free access to everyone in the community. People start their job searches at the library. This allows the library to be an initial access point to support people with employment support and connect people to further resources in their employment journey.

Often, the library collaborates with or refers patrons to other community organizations to meet their unique needs. Library staff who speak Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, and Chinese languages are also critical links to many people's services. This team will focus on those residents who face the most significant challenges to getting employment services elsewhere. Creating the unit more formally provides structure and support for the staff that does that work.

The question about collaboration and connection with other resources is a great one. The team will work with those other service providers to identify the gaps and work to fill those gaps. Often the cracks are at the earliest stages, and they're for the people with the most significant challenges in otherwise connecting with the workforce development system.

Commissioner Norton asked this follow-up questions:

Could you talk a little bit more about this unit? I'm certainly aware that all the libraries have been providing technical support to job seekers. So I am guessing this will be a centralized unit that will provide the core and training to all the library systems. Is that what you envision?

Ms. Vailey Oehlke fielded this follow-up question stating one advantage is that this team will be concentrated on this particular area of service. They can deepen and hone their skills around resources available. They can develop deeper relationships with those other organizations with whom the district will be partnering.

The library has always provided resume writing and interview skills and those sorts of things, but that is one of a myriad of services the district is providing people when they walk into the buildings. This team will enable the library to bring additional resources like language skills to these conversations in a way they weren't able to provide when those services were being offered more on-demand in various locations. The staff is excited about this. A determination will be made if there is a real need for this. If so, it will continue.

Everything about this budget is about flexibility and addressing the near-term needs and then longer-term needs in the future.

Commissioner Ofsink asked the following question:

We are pleased to see that you are holding your levy rate steady next year and anticipate doing the same for a few years to come. How have you been able to achieve that?

Multnomah County Commissioner Jessica Vega Peterson answered, saying the forecast is much improved due to the changes in the urban renewal areas. That plus the library's conservative budgeting approach with guidance from the County Budget office, the library is expected to have a positive operating balance in the coming decade. Eventually, the district will experience the results

of the structural deficit related to the state's property tax restrictions.

Commissioner Quiroz asked the following question:

The successful bond measure was the culmination of an extensive public process. That process worked, and now we have funding for new library facilities. But much has changed since the start of this process. How do you plan to get updated public input to the design of the eight new facilities?

Multnomah County Commission Sharon Meieran answered, saying a lot has changed in the community over the past year. But one thing that's not changed is the library's commitment to public engagement that informs how libraries will be built or remodeled. That is a core value of the capital plan for library buildings.

As the program management office, a collaboration of the Department of County Assets and the library continues to plan, they anticipate changes based on project needs and community feedback. Each public library project will have a specific community engagement period before design that is meant to inform the planning for these buildings. The program management office is hiring library staff that will focus on community engagement and communication. Those staff members will focus on culturally relevant strategies and meet people where they gather input.

Commissioner Norton asked the following question:

The bond sale garnered a \$49 million premium. There are upsides and downsides to premiums. We ask a particular question about what the county plans are for the premium funds. Will you be using it to augment the contingency in the face of rising construction costs?

Multnomah County Commissioner Jayapal responded, saying it was a little bit more than that. It was \$54.7 million, a pretty nice premium. It will go into that contingency fund to deal with any unanticipated expenses or sharply rising construction costs. Although it will be put into the contingency, the planning for the bond incorporated sound contingencies and escalating factors with lots of review and input. The district is confident in those projections but will have this contingency if needed.

Thank you for that answer. With conservation as our middle name, we understand that there has been a benefit to this bond sale, but the taxpayers have not shared in that benefit yet. TSCC is concerned because you are re-engaging in design. That was one of our original comments when we held the bond hearing. Without final designs, the confidence level in the construction costs is lower than when you have a firm plan, so we are happy to hear that you will be placing this in the contingency.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following question:

The County will begin using the proceeds from the library bond sale in earnest next year. So what is the first thing library patrons will notice from their approval of this bond measure?

Multnomah County Commissioner Jessica Vega Peterson responded, saying the first thing will be a significant effort for county engagement about the initial bond projects. In terms of services, the first thing that users will notice is how materials are getting sorted and distributed throughout the library system. The current distribution system is undersized, outdated, and almost entirely done by hand,

which is uncommon. The new operation center will help patrons get the library materials they want more quickly and easily, thanks to a modern operation that can run at scale at one of the nation's busiest library systems.

Chair Barringer asked the following questions:

Multnomah County has not had a bond measure with a mandated citizen oversight committee before. Based on the experiences of other jurisdictions, citizen expectations of "oversight" committees and "annual audits" vary significantly from the reality. What we can expect from the committee?

Multnomah County Chair Kafoury fielded this question saying the recruitment is underway right now. The focus is to make sure that the work that is happening matches what voters expect. In addition, they make sure that projects are done in a way that does not exceed the budget or prolong the timeline for come completion. The library's goal is that the committee members will reflect a diversity of backgrounds, viewpoints, and professional experience. They're seeking members with expertise in design, architecture, engineering, construction as well as public contracting, and financing and auditing.

Members will ensure transparency and accountability in activities and outcomes and monitor the progress of bond projects related to the voter-approved work scope. They will I also advise on modifications to achieve goals and to align with project principles and budget. They will consider project outcomes for historically underserved populations and neighborhoods. They will make recommendations to the library district board for approval and issue public reports at least once a year.

While the County has not had an oversight committee for bond measures, they have had them for levies. They have had extensive work with oversite committees. The community working to put this measure on the ballot had extensive community input over several years and had several committee involvement groups.

One of the issues that we have seen is that sometimes words have different definitions for people. For example, with the school district, spending money on remodeling might be things where voters thought were not included in the measure, yet the district felt it was appropriate spending. Do you have pretty strict definitions of words and what they mean?

That will be the committee's work as they get started to set those definitions and expectations so that people all are on the same page from day one. She said they did have that experience with the Historical Society Levy Committee. There was some confusion about their role because the definitions were not mutually agreed upon at the start of the committee. She concluded by saying they will take lessons learned and best practices into account as they put together this committee.

Commissioner Wubbold made the following comment:

When we did the OHS hearing, having the oversight committee report before we held their hearing was very helpful. I recommend this report be available before the budget hearings.

Ms. Oehlke thanked Commissioner Wubbold for the insight and said she would make a note of that. She went on to say that when they were considering the formation of the committee, they also spoke at length with other jurisdictions like Metro, PPS, Beaverton, and other organizations that created these committees to ensure that the district could take advantage of their lessons learned

and apply them.

Commissioner Norton asked these follow-up questions:

My follow-up question has been augmented by what Ms. Oehlke just said, and I wanted to refresh on, this is the County's debt. This is a County committee, not a library committee, is that correct?

Ms. Oehlke responded, saying, yes, that is correct. All of this work right now is being done in partnership between the library and the Department of County Assets. She added that it is also being informed and supported by a lot of other County resources. So it will be broadly defined as a County committee.

When we held the bond hearing, the County's Facility's group will be lead in the construction management of whatever projects come out of this, is that correct?

She said yes. The Department of County Assets has been an outstanding partner, and their expertise has been critical to the progress this far, and they expect that to continue to be the case.

Chair Barringer thanked Multnomah County Commissioners and Library staff for the answers to the questions and asked if anyone had any comments they would like to make. There were none.

Chair Barringer asked if anyone had signed up to give testimony. No one had.

With no other comments, questions, or testimony, Chair Barringer closed the public hearing and opened the meeting of the TSCC Commissioners to consider the County Library 2021-22 Approved Budget.

He asked if the Commissioners had any additional questions or comments. There were none.

He asked Executive Director Gibons for his perspective. Mr. Gibons said that the budget was well done from the TSCC Staff's perspective. He suggested the commissioners certify the budget with no recommendations or objections to the budget or the budget process.

Commissioner Wubbold moved to certify that the Commissioners has no recommendation or objections concerning the County Library's 2021-22 Approved budget. Commissioner Ofsink seconded the motion. Motion passed with a unanimous vote.

There being no further business, Chair Barringer adjourned the regular meeting.

**Minutes Approved by Commission
At June 8, 2021 Meeting**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'CJD', is written over the text of the minutes approval.