

Multnomah County Library District 2020-21 Hearing Minutes

Wednesday, June 9, 2020

2:45 p.m.

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

Following introductions he commended the district for stepping up to meet the current public health crisis. He acknowledged that it is difficult forecasting the budget for next year in the current environment of constant change. He encouraged them to continue to monitor the budget as the year unfolds.

Chair Barringer 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. Succeeding the questions, testimony from the public will be taken.

Multnomah County Library Director Vailey Oehlke gave a brief overview saying this is uncharted territory for Multnomah County Library. She said that the library went through a pandemic in 1918. As a result of this pandemic, the library really has doubled down on its efforts to be a resource for this community. The library district has taken a couple of tiny steps toward reopening. They had so many items returned that we are running out of receptacles to store them. Patrons are very excited that they're able to access the catalog again, placed 12,000 new holds yesterday. She concluded by stating she looks forward to the conversation on their budget and future plans.

TSCC questions:

Commissioner Quiroz asked the following questions:

In the current year ending June 30, is the district expecting any year-end budgetary problems arising from revenue shortfalls or unanticipated expenditures due to the COVID-19 situation? What impact will this have on the district's ending fund balances that are not yet reflected in upcoming budget?

County Chair Kafoury responded saying:

The library district will not face any revenue shortfalls that will affect the operating budget for the current year. The vast majority of the Library District's Property Tax collections occur in November and December.

While the library has modified its services to focus on more electronic materials and online services and has contributed to the emergency response with both staff time and supplies, library administration has managed those costs within the framework of the current budget.

The library has temporarily reassigned over 140 staff to support other County functions. Library staff are working in the shelters, supporting logistics in the EOC, and expanding Communications capacity. Library staff have been critical in efforts to reach out to communities that speak languages other than English. With the branches closed, Library staff collected cleaning supplies and distributed them to the shelters and EOC. Along with expanded virtual services for the community, the Library has also distributed over 100 Chromebooks to shelters for people who need access to the internet in ways that are not convenient on a smart phone. Lots of creativity in the library.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:

For the upcoming FY 2020-21 budget year, should the economy remain stalled, where are the district's greatest vulnerabilities? How will the district monitor and respond timely if revenue collections go off track or if unanticipated service requirements continue?

Multnomah County Commissioner Vega Pederson answered saying:

The library district is primarily funded by property taxes. While that makes the district more resilient to economic downturns, it does not make the district immune to a deeper recession. FY 2021 Property Tax revenues will be based on the 2020-2021 Certified Tax Roll, which is itself based on property values and development activity that are largely already set.

The library district will continue to monitor impacts to revenue including anticipated increases to the delinquency rate in future forecasts.

The library district expects to have increased spending on capital costs in the coming

year to support modified library services and is now evaluating what those changes will be and what they will cost.

Chair Barringer asked the following questions:

The libraries have been closed since late March and we understand that Library staff continue to be paid. Would you clarify that for us? How has staff been deployed during this period?

County Chair Kafoury answered saying:

I will let Vailey Oehlke talk about this since we talked about how we are already starting to do our limited reopening and maybe she can talk about the plans for going forward.

Ms. Oehlke said:

We are dipping our toe in the water. I keep reminding our folks that the risk is out there. Those constraints related to the virus, in particular around physical distancing and all of the hygiene and sanitation things that are required, really limit what we're able to provide to the public especially from our buildings. We are really focusing right now on virtual service. But also our staff are busy figuring out how to deploy their services into the community in a safe way.

We have staff in our early childhood program who are figuring out how to essentially, sort of, create grab bags of books that they can deliver to child care centers and the likes once they're reopening. We are definitely actively figuring out how to be out there and how to engage but in ways that are really safe for both our staff and for our patrons.

We will continue our focus on digital content. We shifted some resources away from collecting print materials in order to purchase more digital content which tends to be a little bit more expensive and that has proven to be very popular with the community. We will continue to look at those sorts of opportunities. Then ideally, in the not too distant future, we're opening computer labs that are also complying with physical distancing. Not that many people in a room at the same time.

We will provide access specifically to the folks who really need it for things like filling out job applications and signing up for unemployment assistance and access to job skills training and the like. Those are the sorts of things we'll be doing moving forward. And really focusing on the folks in our community who most need those services. It will be pretty incremental and it may be fits and starts depending on what happens with the virus.

Do you see using 100% of those staff for your purposes?

We certainly hope so and some of those staff will continue to be deployed through the county in terms of supporting. If it's not the case we will be figuring out what that looks like going forward. Our biggest challenge is uncertainty that's out there in terms of what we can expect we're able to do versus what we would really like to do. We are playing it

by ear.

Commissioner Norton asked the following questions:

I am sure the library staff probably had planned to spend this time and the next couple of months in the final planning stages for a potential November capital bond measure. We know some of the media outlets have been critical in their endorsements or lack of endorsements when bond measures have been really slim, specifying to the voter, what am I going to get for my tax dollar? Are we still on track for a bond measure this year? Will you have the necessary specifics that would be persuasive to voters? And will the projects we heard about before be changed because of this?

County Commissioner Jayapal responded saying:

I will start that but I will probably kick it off to Vailey for more detail. Obviously the context has changed a lot since when the library first started talking about that bond measure. And the planning is continuing with that context in mind. One of the things that the pandemic has done is highlight the need for the bond measure in the sense that it's really thrown into relief the space limitations of our current branches. So thinking about how you can physically distancing at an Albina, for example. The issue with space limitations what become even more evident and therefore even more important to address.

The planning is continuing; looking forward for a successful implementation should the voters vote for the bond measure in November.

There have been no changes to the list of planned projects. Vailey anything you want to add?

Ms. Oehlke said:

I would only reinforce what you just said. We are definitely sensitive to the very real ways people's financial situation have changed as a result of the pandemic. That's a conversation with Chair Kafoury and the rest of the board in terms of what it actually looks like. I assure you whatever it ends up being, we will be very clear what would be included in those projects, just as we were when we first took it before the board.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:

Are social distancing and other pandemic issues impacting the design of the new facilities?

County Commissioner Meieran responded saying:

The short answer is, absolutely! In terms of the impact on design -- the contact of the pandemic on design of new facilities, the library district has learned a tremendous amount about the inflexibility of the current library buildings that reinforces the critical need for updated spaces that can adapt to new and changing circumstances. The library and the department of county assets will make sure that those lessons will be part of the design

process for future buildings. And so the timing is very interesting as it impacts our library design process. So, yes is the short answer.

So are you likely to be bringing in some new voices? Some new perspectives, folks that have perhaps been affected directly, more directly than I. I mean, I just stopped going to the drop box and I stopped going to the library. I have plenty of books. But I wasn't, you know, I wasn't using those facilities in the ways that they are used by a lot of other folks. So I'm just curious about including new voices in the design process.

That is, again, just an excellent, and such an important, question. I know when we as a board were hearing about the process that the library department engaged in really bringing people in to talk about their experiences, what they were looking for in libraries, it was an incredibly diverse and inclusive process. I imagine it will be even more so. It's hard to imagine that but I anticipate it will. Vailey, I will turn it over to you for the official response to that question.

Ms. Oehlke added the following:

I will give you a thumbs up on that one, Commissioner Meieran. That's exactly what I would have said. Built into the whole process, all of the projects going forward, each one is a pretty significant amount of community engagement. That was planned long before this current crisis. But I think you are right. That will make that kind of community engagement even more important as we take into account the sorts of the things we weren't thinking about when we were originally thinking through the design of those buildings.

I think we are lucky in that there has been a lot of work done on healthy buildings and healthy design and design that contributes to healthy spaces. That has been sort of top of mind for us. But never with a global pandemic as a filter, so we'll definitely be taking that into account.

I just can't emphasize enough how just blazingly clear it is that the size of our buildings are significantly problematic. It is quite possible given the requirements of physical distancing that until there's a vaccine, some of our smallest branches simply will not be able to open to the public. To me that's really problematic in terms of serving our communities as they go through this recovery.

These are going to be amazing opportunities for this library to create spaces that are really resonant and not just in general but specifically to the kinds of needs we're seeing services as a result of this pandemic.

Chair Barringer asked this follow-up question?

People have mentioned their libraries, mine is Hillsdale but the back-up one is on the Capitol Highway, and it is on the schedule for being replaced. My question is, will we see some physical changes in that when it gets built that will be a result of this pandemic?

Ms. Oehlke responded saying:

I'm not an architect, but I would imagine, definitely. What I keep reminding folks is our two biggest community spaces in our entire system hold about 100 people in ways we won't be holding people in a single room for a very long time. The community room at our Midland branch we are hoping to have computer labs in there. For a regular public event we could have 100, 110 people in that space. With physical distancing we will accommodate about 10 people at a computer online doing the work that they need to do. We can only allow them in for maybe an hour because we have to limit their exposure to one another. So as we think about new spaces, we'll think about not just bigger spaces where we are able to accommodate more people if we are ever able to get back to that, bigger spaces that allow us to accommodate more people safely, but also smaller spaces where people can have a private space and be safe. And if they're suffering from any sort of health challenges, they can have their own study room where they can be on their own computer. What we will see is sort of a range of options in terms of how people are able to use that space to their own benefit. I do think that this pandemic will help inform sort of the range of those; what they look like; and how flexible they are so that we can accommodate a variety of different needs depending on how people are presenting in our spaces.

Commissioner Norton asked the following question:

The current situation persuades us to think about different forms of design. Will you need more time to think that through, so much so that a near-term bond measure might not be possible? Design drives cost.

County Chair Kafoury responded saying:

I think that's a really interesting question. We know the need is great. We know that libraries are a crucial part of our recovery and our community. We know how valuable. Prior to the protests that are occurring right now and my email would be taken up with reforming the police; prior to that, the number one issue that I heard from people was about when can the libraries reopen? We are a community of library lovers. While doing nothing doesn't feel like an option, possibly doing something different is something we are going to continue discussing. Knowing that it takes such a long time anyway, once you go through the public process, going through the design phase. We don't want to start all over again. While the architects have some conceptual plans, to rebuild and reconstruct these libraries whether it's a brand-new library, a renovation, or a remodel or rebuild, they don't have the exact plans down. I do think that we are still going to be within the parameters of what we set out for the ballot measure this fall.

Commissioner Ofsink asked the following questions:

The district has a significant reserve in the capital projects fund. What is the plan for the use of those funds? If the capital bond measure is successful, will that funding revert to the district general fund?

County Commissioner Stegmann answered:

The library has focused efforts in recent years to extend the ability of the district to support current library service levels over a longer horizon without additional financial support from the community. A key element of that work is making sure that the district has a reserve for

when the operating balance begins to be negative due to the structural deficit that most if not all Oregon public entities face.

The district will continue to use the capital fund in prudent ways to support the overall goals of capital planning while maintaining a sound balance for future library operations. The library will continue to monitor the forecasts provided by the County Budget Office and constrain spending to ensure the longer term fiscal health of the district.

Commissioner Quiroz asked the following questions:

We have already talked a little bit about the preparations the district is making to reopen the libraries in fits and starts. Feel free to add anything else that you would like to share. We are all anxiously anticipating libraries opening. I have small children that would be thrilled to go to the library. But from a different perspective, if there is an extended period of facility shut downs, how will the district continue to evolve and adjust services and operations over the long-term?

County Commissioner Stegmann said:

Vailey and I were having a conversation earlier that really the libraries have never shut down; physical locations have; but they've still continued through virtual offerings. They've continued to serve the community through this pandemic. Yesterday as Vailey had mentioned, they reestablished in-person services in a way to protect the safety of the community as well as library staff. In this case it's by providing sidewalk service so that people can drive up and get their holds.

They're also going to be using that effort as they rebuild toward opening more, serving the critical needs of our communities most impacted by this pandemic; by providing computer labs that will focus on supporting the community; so people have access to jobs and they can gain resources they need for themselves and their family; especially as a result of COVID-19.

The district has also revised its guiding priorities, which you can find on the Multnomah county website to sharpen its focus on community recovery. The four libraries that are open are:

Central
Midland
Gresham
North Portland

I've had the pleasure to serve as the library liaison. I am always so impressed with Vailey and the entire library district's leadership. They have been thoughtful. They have really worked hard.

We had the opportunity to do story time, each of us county commissioners. So just really being creative about ways that we can serve our community in non-traditional ways and the library has really led the way in making sure that people have some way to have access to books and stories. It's been a real honor to be serving as that liaison.

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 there being 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 2020-21 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 TSCC Staff perspective. He recommended the commissioners certify the budget with no recommendations or objections to the budget or the budget process.

Commissioner Ofsink moved to certify that the Commissioners has no recommendation or objections with regard to the County Library's 2020-21 Approved budget. Commissioner Wubbold seconded the motion. Motion passed with a unanimous vote.

There being no further business the regular meeting was adjourned.

Minutes reviewed and approved at the Commission's June 18th 2020 meeting, with commissioner Norton edits included.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'CG', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Craig Gibons