

New Hartford Public Library, N.Y.

To inform and to counter misinformation about the New Hartford Public Library.

Sunday, January 27, 2013

Reality Check at New Hartford Public Library



Residents of New Hartford, NY you are losing your library a slice at a time. As the county, town, and state budgets now stand, it will be necessary for the library to close additional hours beyond the Wednesday closure already in place.

These cuts mean much more than locked doors. They will mean reduced services across the board. They will mean an aging and reduced book and magazine collection, obsolete and limited technology services, dingy carpets and walls, dimmed lights, a deteriorating building, and much, much more. Instead of pointing out to visitors a shining example of the region's commitment to quality of life, you will be pointing at community's failure to invest in its future.

You may have read the editorial by Edmund Waitr in the December 20 OD. In his article, Mr. Wiatr fussbudgets about the Library's budget process and record keeping. There is no doubt that the Library's book keeping methods are basic but apparently, Mr. Wiatr cannot tell the difference between his former employer the Department of Defense and a smallish town library. He also does not get that the level of formal tabulation and oversight that he demands requires special tools and attention from an experienced, dedicated employee, an expense the Town Board is in no mood to pay for. The day-to-day reality is that serving library visitors is a priority and record keeping is done piece meal during spare moments or during those hours that are "outside the scope of (regular) library hours" as Wiatr puts it. This is intended and not an example of lack of oversight as he insinuates. The Library does recognize the importance of a professional audit and has enthusiastically welcomed the town's offer to provide one.

Wiatr states that he was appointed to the Library Board of Trustees by the Town Board. Readers should be aware that his appointment was made against the wishes of the Library Board, apparently so the Town Board could assert its authority in the final selection of library trustees. As such, it must be assumed that Wiatr represents the views of Town Supervisor Tyksinski and other town board members who voted for him.

The qualifications for the Library Board of Trustees state that a trustee must have "...a strong and genuine belief in public libraries and their mission in the community as centers for information, referral, recreation and lifelong learning". Wiatr's statements and actions

make clear his intention is to minimize the library's mission not support it. He says in his article that, "I must take into consideration the needs of the residents and taxpayers" as if the Library provides no service for those individuals, and that the library's many visitors are neither residents nor taxpayers. Mr. Wiatr publishes a blog that is critical of the Town and the Library, and that is his right, but he should not be using his responsibility as a board member to cherry-pick ammunition for his blog.

Please notice that Wiatr wants to assure that the library continues its downward spiral by using its reduced circulation figures as a reason for further cuts. He apparently does not make the connection between reduced funding and lower circulation numbers. His figure of a 65% circulation drop for 2012 is mysterious since at the date of his article the figures for the year were not complete. The 25% drop during 2011 is correct, but that is what would be expected from the reduced hours and services forced upon the library that year. To a true supporter of the library these lower figures would be a matter of concern not an excuse to reduce them further.

The operation of a library is as complex as any business, perhaps more so, yet we are beset by advice from people who never use the library, have never worked or volunteered at the library, and appear not to understand the role of a library in society. Mr. Wiatr, Supervisor Tyksinski, Town Board members, and even the OD editorial staff, lead this charge. We have heard it all: libraries are obsolete; library users do not need broadband internet; reference librarians should be cut, there are too many children's programs; we should not be part of the Midyork system; we are not a community center, and so on, and so on. I guess it is always a temptation to offer advice in areas you know nothing about.

A naive theme among the library critics is that the library can be operated by volunteers. Many of these individuals did not even realize that the library has always depended on volunteers and could not manage without them. Volunteers are never refused but they do come with limitations. They vary widely in skill level and availability. They require instruction and coordination from an experienced staff, and they do not have the inherent responsibility of a paid employee. Volunteers just want to help, they do not want to be locked into an unpaid commitment. You may have read in the OD (11/21/12) about Mr. Tyksinski's threats to remove an additional \$50,000 from the library budget if the Library dared to cut back on hours due to a reduced budget. What is at the bottom of this is that Mr. Tyksinski does not want to be blamed for closing the Library but he does not want to pay for it either. In this regard, employees (volunteers) you do not have to pay for seem like a brilliant solution.

Sadly, the library employees have suffered the most from Tyksinski's budget cutting and Wiatr's unfounded opinions. It has been implied that they do not do anything, can be replaced by volunteers, are paid too much, have too many benefits, cheat on their hours, etc. I can tell you from personal experience that the people who work at the library are very nice people. They are dedicated to the Library's mission, love books, enjoy serving the public, and work hard at helping the library to function. Most are part time employees and their benefits are few. Some also volunteer at the library in addition to their paid time. They do not deserve to be blamed for the true costs of operating a fully functional library.

Up to no more than two years ago, the New Hartford Public Library was perfectly fine. It was in a shiny new building and open seven days a week. It was close to being number one in circulation among the libraries in the Midyork system. Casual and committed visitors were on the increase as people discovered what a great place the library was to browse the

rich collection of books and magazines, obtain information important to their lives, and to meet and talk with others in the community. The meeting rooms, study rooms, computers, classes, and other services all became very popular, but three consecutive years of cuts in public funding have taken their toll. As the library has become less accessible and its services greatly reduced it has fallen well behind in circulation and attendance compared to other local libraries of comparable size.

The New Hartford Public Library as it currently exists was a community effort. Over those many past years, a committed, volunteer board overcame many naysayers including the Observer Dispatch by soliciting help directly from the New Hartford residents. The building that you now see was entirely paid for by public donations. At each step the way, the town board had committed to staffing and maintaining the building if a public campaign could attract sufficient funds to construct the building. Now, as public officials back away from this commitment, it seems as a terrible insult to the thousands of donors big and small and volunteers who have contributed to its construction and support over those years. As the loss of public funding continues, it is unlikely that the Library will ever return to a full service library in any current resident's lifetime.

If you are a New Hartford resident who regularly uses the reading materials, computers, and other services at library, or just believes that a library is a vital element of a democratic society, you must learn about the views of the officials who represent your interests in your village, town, county and state governments. You must contact them to express your interest in an up to date and fully functional library. If they do not respond to your satisfaction, you must show your displeasure at the voting booth. Contact information for these government entities can be found on their web sites or in the blue pages of your phone book.

If you do not live in New Hartford, you have to be equally vigilant in the protection of your own local libraries. Your library's fortunes can change at the blink of the eye as it did with New Hartford when local government representatives becomes insensitive to the institutions that make a community attractive to potential residents and investors.

Posted by Library Tortoise at 9:30 AM 

About Me



Library Tortoise