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Providence Community Library
OUR NEIGHBORHOOD LIBRARIES

July 31, 2014

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Dear Michael,

This will be the last letter I write to you as your Representative on the Providence Community Library Board since I will be retiring from the board in September. I have spent 10 years working to make the libraries of Providence responsive to community needs. I started in 2004, after the Providence Public Library fired more than 20 staff members at the downtown library. Working with Patricia Raub, Maureen Romans and others, we formed the Library Reform Group to try and pressure PPL to respond to the needs of the community. We wanted PPL to add 3 community members to its Board and not close or reduce services at the branch libraries. After three years, when PPL still had not allowed any community representation on its board and decided that it would close five of the branch libraries, we decided this approach was hopeless. I suggested that we secretly explore creating a rival non-profit – Providence Community Library.

We spent many months exploring the fiscal and structural issues involved in running the libraries ourselves. We worked out the name, organizational structure, and by-laws of a new non-profit. Then, on October 31, 2008, four of us – Patricia Raub, Ellen Schwartz and Marcus Mitchell and myself – incorporated the Providence Community Library. Well, the rest is history. PPL decided and informed the City that it would either operate only four branches or no branches at all. And the City, with the offer of a new organization dedicated to operating all nine neighborhood libraries as community-centered institutions, chose PCL to operate its libraries.

We woke up on July 1, 2009 to discover not only that we had rescued five branch libraries but that we now were operating the largest library system in the state. In the five years since that time, PCL has not only expanded traditional library services at all nine community libraries but it has made them into safe, welcoming and exciting community centers, responsive to the particular needs of each neighborhood. Moreover, through its partnership with the Providence Public School Department and its work on the Providence Children and Youth Cabinet, PCL has become an essential part of the education of Providence children.

Once the school day is over, children flock to PCL's libraries for the rich array of learning experiences, from chess clubs and comic and poetry workshops to individual homework help. PCL's educational work even precedes the formal school program. Its "Ready for K" program helps entering kindergarteners prepare for the school experience. And in the summer PCL, having developed a unified summer reading list for the School Department, runs the City's summer reading program, offering students prizes and other incentives to entice them to read. This program is essential to prevent summer reading loss. This year 1500 kids are enrolled in the program. In short, we know that we not only created a major library system. We have created an essential educational system that is, in fact, the second largest public educational system in the city of Providence.

Finally, our libraries are the place where your adult constituents turn to solve their own pressing problems. Whether it is for computer training, adult education – including GED classes in Spanish, ESL classes, to register for health coverage under the Affordable Care Act (PCL received a merit bonus

for outstanding customer service in registering people for ACA coverage), or to use the computers with the help of librarians for job searches and applications, your constituents rely on their community libraries.

I am proud of having been a part of the creation of this system and am constantly amazed at what a library system under good and responsive management can do for the community. But there remains a problem of which I am sure you are aware of. The City of Providence is simply not adequately funding its libraries. Your per capita library spending of only \$19.91 lags far behind other comparable cities both in Rhode Island (Cranston \$31.01, Warwick \$31.02) and New England (Hartford \$63.45, Springfield \$32.64, New Haven \$27.05).

This shortfall in city funding has created major problems that threaten to undermine the entire library system. Because of inadequate City funding, PCL operates with a shoestring staff – on both the administrative and library service levels. We have been unable to afford to fill the assistant director position for 3 and 1/2 years. Incredibly only two individuals, the library director and the business manager, administer PCL's 70 employees, and 9 separate library buildings (a third administrator, the development director, although called on from time to time to problem solve, is primarily concerned with securing grants and donations to underwrite our programs that are needed to supplement the city's contribution to our operating cost).

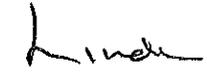
As for library service staff, we have the barest number of librarians and clerks that we need to keep our nine libraries open. This lack of staff doesn't allow us to open our libraries for the hours that your constituents demand and requires us to spend money on temporary personnel whenever a PCL staffer calls in sick.

This shortfall in City funding also makes it difficult to pay our staff reasonable wages. In the five years that PCL has existed we have only been able to give our staff raises just once – 3% and that was 4 years ago! (City workers wouldn't stand for that and have received greater raises in that time.) This situation has definitely threatened the morale of our workers so our Board has deemed it essential to raid our slim cash reserves to offer the employees a small overdue pay raise. This will leave PCL without a cushion to weather any financial emergency and even threatens the organization's ability to manage cash flow problems this year.

This is not right. Such a fine system should not be put in peril. I trust that in this coming year, you will reevaluate, the City's inadequate support of one of its best institutions and work and vote to substantially raise its per capita spending on library services. Also since libraries are an essential part of its educational system of this city, I hope you will consider using bonding to help underwrite the costs of repairing and bringing to code, the library buildings. I feel confident that the staff and administration of PCL are most capable of offering the City a great library system. It is now up to you, your colleagues and the Mayor to make sure that it has the funds to do this.

Thank you for your help in the past.

All the best,



Linda Kushner
Council Representative

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