

Library Board Minutes

June 8, 2020

Bethlehem Area Public Library

Meeting conducted virtually via Zoom

President Anne Felker called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

ATTENDING: City – Anne Felker, Jane Gill, Joyce Hinnefeld, Olga Negrón, Emil Signes, Sharon Yoshida, Julie Zumas

Bethlehem Township – Randi Blauth, John Merhottein

Fountain Hill – Annamarie Jordan

Hanover Township – Jay Finnigan

Staff – Josh Berk, Elizabeth Burch, Dawn Fritz, Brenda Grow, Erin Poore, Janine Santoro, Liz Saraceno

Other – Terence Faul (King, Spry, Herman, Freund & Faul)

Public – Cathi Alloway (Strategic Planning Consultant), Michael Prendeville (Hanover Township Alternate)

COURTESY OF THE FLOOR: None

APPROVAL OF MINUTES: A motion to approve the May minutes was made by Sharon Yoshida, seconded by Jane Gill; motion approved.

APPROVAL OF OPERATING FUNDS: A motion to approve the April operating funds subject to audit made by Annamarie Jordan, seconded by Olga Negrón; motion approved.

DIRECTOR'S ORAL REPORT:

1. More zeros than typical in Circulation reports, etc. for April, of course, due to the COVID-19 closure, but staff members are still interacting with users, and patrons are taking advantage of online resources. BAPL is still offering new library cards for those who have applied via the website. Many active patrons participated in things like yoga from home, memoir writing program, etc. It has been challenging to celebrate National Poetry Month, but there were successes with people submitting their own poems online; it was disappointing not to be able to have an event like last year's Walt Whitman birthday celebration.
2. Today was the first day staff were back in the building, getting ready for the next (yellow) phase of the State lockdown.
3. A question was raised about how numbers (i.e. numbers of participants) were gathered for the report. Director Berk says the staff followed State guidelines in taking attendance at virtual events. Sharon Yoshida reports hearing about lots of interest in and use of Kanopy.

REPORTS:

1. City of Bethlehem – none
2. Bethlehem Township – none
3. Fountain Hill – none
4. Hanover Township – none
5. Friends of the Bethlehem Area Public Library – The Friends Board meeting was held this afternoon. There could be no annual fundraising event this spring, so the Friends are looking at other ways to raise money. Will be working on membership in the fall; did brainstorming on this. Talked about welcoming library staff back to the library--perhaps providing lunch. Kate Racculia will discuss ideas with Director Berk. Also discussed anti-racism programming, emphasis on the library's archive of relevant texts, interviews, etc. Agreed to \$750 donation to South Side Branch. Sharon Yoshida also asked, on behalf of the Friends, about how the library currently addresses, or plans to address, issues of racism, particularly in financial/staffing ways.

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

1. Finance Committee (Merhottein) – none
2. Governance Committee (Felker) – none
3. Human Resources Committee (Gill) – none
4. Marketing and Advocacy Committee (Jordan) – none
5. Strategic Planning Committee (Zumas) – Director Berk and Julie Zumas had a brief meeting with consultant Cathi Alloway. Trying to envision a shorter, simpler approach for now. Talked about specific needs of the library.

OLD BUSINESS:

1. Julie Zumas, Director Berk, and President Felker worked on language for an email to be sent to Hanover Township residents/library patrons. A motion to approve this email was made by Julie Zumas and seconded by Olga Negrón. (Full text of this proposed email message appears at the end of these minutes.)

In subsequent discussion, Jay Finnigan said that the library should “check their records;” he also said there was a meeting with members of the City of Bethlehem mayor’s staff and that Mayor Donchez wants to avoid a “political situation” like this. Olga Negrón (a member of Bethlehem City Council) said

that nothing of this sort was brought to City Council. Director Berk noted that he did meet with the mayor last month, and got him “up to speed” on library issues. They did discuss this issue (the Hanover Township funding issue), and Director Berk does not recall resistance from the mayor to reaching out to Hanover Township residents in this way. Sharon Yoshida asked who was present at the meeting. Jay Finnigan reported that it was staff members from Hanover Township and members of the mayor’s staff (not the mayor himself). No Board members were invited to this meeting. Olga Negrón noted no concerns from the mayor’s Business Administrator Eric Evans, who agreed it was important to reach out to Hanover Township residents when she spoke to him following a recent City Council meeting.

President Felker noted that this is not about “publicity;” it is a message to Hanover Township residents only, about this issue with library funding.

Jay Finnigan then said that the Township had paid “in full” (the library’s assessed amount) through May. He said to “check the mail,” and that the library “seems not to get our checks.” Sharon Yoshida expressed her hope that included with the May check (not yet received) will be a letter, noting Hanover Township’s plan to pay the full assessed amount.

Board members agreed to approve the email to Hanover Township residents as written by Director Berk, President Felker, and Julie Zumas, but to refrain from sending it until we see if the promised check (for the full assessed amount) arrives. We will wait two weeks for the check. President Felker proposed a new motion to this effect. Joyce Hinnefeld made this motion; seconded by Jane Gill. The motion passed.

In a follow-up discussion, Randi Blauth asked for clarification from the mayor’s office. President Felker asked that Director Berk or Olga Negrón reach out to the mayor’s office about this. But she stressed that this plan (for the email) is workable, regardless. Olga Negrón expressed her concern that seeking clarification from the mayor would seem to be “walking backwards”-- not acknowledging past conversations on this topic, or her exchange with Business Administrator Eric Evans. She reiterated Sharon Yoshida’s call for a letter clarifying payment plans from Hanover Township. Jay Finnigan responded by saying that he is “appointed, not elected,” and he takes instructions/orders from the Township Board of Supervisors. He said communication about the Township’s budget contribution is the responsibility of the Township board, but President Felker noted in response that he (Finnigan) also has responsibilities as a member of the Library Board.

2. On re-opening steps: Following instructions from the Office of Commonwealth Libraries, or OCL (organization within State Department of Education that oversees libraries), BAPL plans to break the State-mandated yellow phase into three stages. Stage 1 began today, with staff back in the building, preparing to focus on the return of materials (15,000 items that are

out). Many people are anxious to return things. Tomorrow (June 9) is the first day to accept returns of items.

All library locations are to be open on June 9, but for returns only. Staff will then follow State guidelines for the quarantining of materials (quarantining items for 72 hours). Director Berk is uncertain, at this point, about how this will go, and how long this process will take, but he expects it to take at least two weeks.

Then stage 2: allowing for circulation of physical items again (assuming no changes in the progression of the virus). Summer Reading is important for kids particularly, which is why this timeline is important to Director Berk. He assumes the library will offer a curbside pick-up model (rather than a browse-the-shelves model).

No in-person events will be planned any time soon. The library will continue with virtual programming (book groups, writing group, language classes, etc.). Director Berk and the staff have been able to draw on other Pennsylvania libraries, which entered the yellow phase earlier, as models. He said he and the staff are excited, though nervous, about the beginning of returns tomorrow. He noted that Lehigh Valley Reads will be present to support this first day of returns, with their mascot present on West Church Street to wave to kids, etc.

Most patrons have been understanding and appreciative. There will inevitably be people who will want to come in when they see activity in the library, but no one will be allowed in at this time. Director Berk noted many requests about when people can donate books. That will have to wait until after the bulk of the library items have been returned. Jane Gill asked if short-term volunteer help will be needed, with returns and shelving. Director Berk is unsure, but wants to wait with volunteers; staff have received training in the requirements for this process (and signed waivers), so it is better to start with them.

John Merhottein asked if all staff are returning, and Director Berk reported that they are. Board members expressed approval and appreciation.

President Felker asked about timing for the subsequent stages; any sense of when the library will move to green? Director Berk says he does not know; he has speculated that this could happen in around a month. He says that even in stage 3 of yellow, and then in green, the library may not operate as it did before. At this point he envisions about two weeks for processing returns, two weeks for curbside pick-up, and then perhaps people allowed in the building, with social distancing restrictions and adjustments in place. Of course this is all dependent on what happens with the virus in the weeks ahead. Director Berk noted that with so many unknowns, he is reluctant to

make predictions about timing now. He hopes he will know at least a bit more in a week or so.

Jay Finnigan agreed that caution is needed; citing a report he saw that among those who have recently tested positive, many went to the New Jersey Shore over Memorial Day weekend. He also noted that Florida and other states that opened beaches have now closed them, due to spikes in infection.

Director Berk noted that Erin Poore had joined the meeting, and thanked her for her help in reopening plans and work.

3. President Felker asked if we wanted to change our Board meeting time. At our last meeting, we talked about doing this. We agreed to stick with 6 p.m.

NEW BUSINESS:

1. President Felker received a letter that she will share with us via email, from Mary Foltz, Associate Professor at Lehigh University, speaking highly of Rayah Levy and her work at the library. Terry Faul asked that this also be shared with Keely Collins (at King, Spry, Herman, Freund & Faul).
2. South Side Branch Manager Brenda Grow reported that the Branch will be an open food site this summer, with food provided by the Bethlehem Area School District for grab-and-go, beginning on June 22. Also, kudos to all the staff who have provided so much valuable online programming, social media, etc.

Director Berk, also, offered kudos to Brenda, who had ankle replacement surgery, but is still running the Branch (remotely)! Her leadership and hard work are appreciated.

Randi Blauth expressed gratitude to all staff present.

Janine Santoro noted that while it has been a challenge, the pandemic has brought out the best in the staff in many ways, and united staff from all BAPL locations. Staff members have gone above and beyond. Many patrons wrote to express their appreciation for all the online efforts. She also thanked the Friends of the Library and Sharon Yoshida, for helping to keep things going. Randi Blauth added that Janine is co-facilitator of a valuable "Courageous Conversations" group in which Randi participates at the library.

3. President Felker noted that when she goes by the library, there are lots of people there, outside the building, probably accessing Wi-Fi. It is a reminder of how crucial the library's services are. Sharon Yoshida noted a recent newspaper cartoon expressing the sentiment that "a book takes you places when you can't go anywhere."

A motion was made to adjourn by Sharon Yoshida at 7:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Joyce Hinnefeld, Secretary

Addendum: Email to Hanover Township Residents/Library Patrons

Dear Hanover Township Library Patron,

We are contacting you as a regular library patron regarding your Township's funding of the Bethlehem Area Public Library (BAPL). Bethlehem Area Public Library is funded by four municipalities: the City of Bethlehem, Bethlehem Township, Borough of Fountain Hill, and Hanover Township. Under a decades-old arrangement, each municipality pays the same per capita rate for library services. The Library Board proposed, and the City of Bethlehem approved, a per capita rate of \$18.50 for 2020. This rate, determined by the Library Board and the City, becomes the binding per capita rate for all the participating municipalities. At the end of 2019, your Township budgeted \$5,000 less than its required contribution of \$205,239. Hanover Township paid the required amounts for the first two months of this year, the same as all of the municipalities, and began underpaying in March.

On a per capita basis, Hanover Township is the heaviest user of the BAPL and thus we think that you and your fellow residents value the services of the BAPL. We ask that you express your support of the BAPL to your Township officials and get involved, in whatever ways you are able, to support the BAPL.

While \$5,000 out of the overall budget of the BAPL may seem a small issue, especially during these last few months of dealing with the COVID-19 shutdown and the hardships faced by all of our community, the principle at stake is significant. Your Township's refusal to pay the required amount, unlike the other municipalities, threatens the stability of BAPL. As we move forward to face very uncertain funding, the full cooperation and support of your Township is crucial to ensuring the role of the BAPL in the civic life of our wider community. If you need further information or would like to find other ways you can support the library, please contact Executive Director Josh Berk at 610-867-3761 x215 or jberk@bapl.org.