

July 17, 2020

[FCL's phased reopening](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

Why did the board decide to furlough staff?

When Michigan was asked to shelter in place, our buildings closed and people were not able to come in. The library necessarily moved to a stripped-down model of service, and at least some staff had less work that they could do. This was especially true in April and May when staff could not go into the buildings under the conditions of the pertinent Executive Orders. (Physical libraries were not deemed "essential" while Michigan was sheltering; libraries could provide online and teleservice, but no more. FCL did this. Libraries were only allowed to reopen any type of in-person service including circulation of books and media beginning on June 8.)

FCL closed its buildings on March 14. The board supported a digital version of FCL - with staff offering virtual programming and outreach and digital resources - and had committed to keeping staff on payroll. By April 23, some board members felt that a furlough might be wise, given that there were some major facilities expenses looming. At the April 23 meeting, the board voted 5-2 (with a board member absent) to furlough staff who were not directly involved in keeping the digital FCL running. Furloughing implies temporary layoff, and the board preserved the benefits of all furloughed staff. But, per legal counsel the board was not allowed to assure staff that they were guaranteed employment. Very naturally, a lack of a guarantee has caused concern.

Where is the money for salaries going now?

Because of ongoing uncertainty, the Board has taken a fiscally conservative approach and is saving money that would typically be paid to furloughed staff. The library's budget depends almost entirely on property taxes. A drop in property tax revenue is a strong possibility due to the impact of the coronavirus on the economy.

The Board is preserving funds in part to assure we can address critical infrastructure repairs that were identified in our facility assessment carried out in 2019. The library requires major repairs to infrastructure such as:

- roofs
- HVAC systems
- elevators
- parking lots / sidewalks

These repairs are needed to ensure accessibility, safety, and the long-term health of FCL buildings, and they will require the use of significant funds.

We estimate that these repairs and upgrades may cost between \$1.2 and 2 million dollars. It is true that we will be able to spread repairs out over more than a year, but some repairs are more urgent than others. Although these funds have been budgeted, the risk to future library revenue is driving our cautious approach. Ideally, repairs would be carried out without hampering library services in any way. Meaning, there would be no impact on funds available for library materials and programming, and no impact to salary and benefits. Of course, the furlough has impacted salary. The money saved during furlough will help ensure we can meet these critical needs, even if revenue is impacted. It could also be used to adopt recommendations that may stem from the surveys now being sent out to staff and community.

What consequences have there been of the furlough?

While the library has saved money, the board acknowledges that the furlough has carried its own costs, among staff and among library patrons. We hear the concerns being expressed. We are aware that some neighboring libraries have added or will soon add grab-and-go service. We, too, will get there (grab-and-go is in our Phase 3), provided we can keep staff and patrons safe. In the meantime, we certainly support expanding the kinds of services we are providing in Phase 2.

During the July 9 board meeting, other consequences of the furlough were described, especially the inability to offer specific programming at this moment because of reduced staff and because the library cannot tap into the skills of staff still on furlough. We acknowledge that we did not anticipate the full impact of the furlough on specific aspects of either library service for the public or on work behind the scenes.

Why would the board do something that has generated such controversy?

Controversy has arisen over the furlough. Staff members have pointed out that more work *could* have been done, even with buildings closed. It has been stated that the board should not be so concerned about revenue in coming years, since property tax rates are set. It has been pointed out that the library was able to weather the 2008 crisis without a furlough. It has been stated that services at FCL have been re-opened more slowly than at other libraries.

All of these are valid points of views. No one can know for sure what the possible impact to library revenue might be in the next few years. The board members who supported the furlough took a cautious view. Facing the possibility that actual collected property tax revenue - even though rates are set, will people be able to continue to pay taxes in a struggling economy? - may drop, those board members saw a reason to try to preserve budget dollars now.

In choosing to furlough, we acknowledge that we took away options for staff members to get work done while we were sheltering in place, and we acknowledge that Farmington was not able to act as nimbly as other libraries when libraries were finally allowed to reopen beginning June 8. We realize that these were consequences of the furlough decision.

It is true that no furlough occurred in the downturn after 2008. When the library budget did shrink due to less tax revenue coming in, other ways to save were chosen, such as cutting library hours (and thus cutting staff pay). The library board of that time did not face the extent of infrastructure repairs and upgrades that we now must carry out.

The [COVID-19 outbreak](#) and the economic downturn it engendered swelled the ranks of unemployed Americans by more than 14 million, from 6.2 million in February to 20.5 million in May 2020. As a result, the U.S. [unemployment rate](#) shot up from 3.8% in February – [among the lowest on record](#) in the post-World War II era – to 13.0% in May. That rate was the era's second highest, trailing only the level reached in April (14.4%).

The rise in the number of unemployed workers due to COVID-19 is substantially greater than the increase due to the Great Recession, when the number unemployed increased by 8.8 million from the end of 2007 to the beginning of 2010. The Great Recession, which [officially lasted from](#) December 2007 to June 2009, pushed the unemployment rate to a peak of 10.6% in January 2010, considerably less than the rate currently, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of government data.

The board members who voted for the furlough put a priority on capturing budget dollars that we believe we will need to keep the buildings functioning and safe. Certainly, anyone has the right to disagree over how much to focus on that priority, but the decision to furlough was made in a sincere effort to help the library in the long run.

What happens to furloughed staff when the extra \$600 weekly payment runs out?

Staff on furlough have collected unemployment, and have been eligible for the extra \$600 a week payment from the federal government under the CARES Act. That extra payment did factor into the decision to furlough in the first place (it provided the closest thing to a silver lining for a tough decision). Now it is due to stop at the end of July, unless Congress extends it. The board is aware that the loss of this payment would mean that a furloughed staff member is facing an even greater impact than the board originally considered.

The furlough was intended to save the library money while library staff could not work their normal full schedule. As the library re-opens service, more staff are needed, and more staff can be doing a version of their work, even from home.

We do anticipate calling more and more staff back in the coming weeks.

Why are the two branch heads still on furlough?

In Phase 2 of our reopening protocol, the branches are still closed. The first wave of staff members were called back to fulfill specific tasks related to curbside pickup and programming. As the library gradually expands service, more supervisory roles will be needed once again.

Why are FCL hours now so limited?

Keeping the safety of staff and patrons foremost in mind, FCL took a cautious, phased approach to reinstating and adding services. We are currently working to expand hours of curbside pickup, and look forward to expanding beyond curbside in phase 3.

It is true that some neighboring libraries have started (in the week of July 6 and in the week of July 13) to allow patrons to come inside their doors for very short visits. FCL has been more conservative, and we understand this might cause frustration for patrons. The library director, in concert with staff, is continually evaluating the timeline to ensure a return to services is both expedient and most importantly safe.

Why are you spending money on a consulting firm?

- ❏ *In normal times, staff members perform a variety of outreach activities. Could they benefit from having someone on staff whose full time job is marketing?*
- ❏ *Do patrons find our website easy to use? Are resources or library information easily findable?*
- ❏ *Library staff have priorities, both spoken and unspoken. Do they match the priorities of people who use the library? How do they align with those of people who don't use the library yet?*
- ❏ *What programming might reach a segment of the community that we are not reaching now?*

All of these and thousands more questions like them are ways of thinking about how staff could serve community more efficiently and effectively. Library staff members ask these questions all the time because of how much they care about the library and the community it serves. It is the nature of their job. But, they don't always have the time to investigate them thoroughly.

Like other organizations that have furloughed staff, the FCL Board made the decision to take this time of reduced staff and services to begin the process of reviewing certain activities:

1. Evaluate the organizational structure, job descriptions, roles and responsibilities, and how those match up with community expectations and services—also known as a Service Module Assessment.
 - a. Currently the FCL has 70+ job descriptions for about 130 staff. One goal of hiring a new director was to review the organizational structure and create roles and responsibilities that are job-specific, rather than person-specific. The assessment is one input for undertaking this effort. Of course, understanding community and stakeholder needs is essential in marrying library activities with the needs of the community. Again, the results of surveys, focus groups, etc. provide one avenue to collect information that will be used in concert with other inputs.

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2. Better understand and market to our community through the use of a new tool, Gale Engage. This tool marries publicly available data with data from the library catalogue in a way that protects privacy but also allows staff a better view into who is using services and equally important who is not. Outreach efforts can be targeted and measured, and data can be obtained and assessed more quickly than through open source tools.