

## **Informal communication between FCL President White, FCL Vice President Bill Largent and staff**

During each of the board meetings being conducted on Zoom, participants have expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with the board's evident unwillingness to answer questions. The board acknowledges that communication has been less than satisfactory and has agreed to allow Jim White and Bill Largent to speak for the board in general, non-binding terms.

The above disclaimer is required because the board speaks only during public board meetings and only by a vote on a specific motion.

The following comments are designed to address the broad issues and concerns and are not intended to address individual comments or questions.

After reviewing chat notes from most recent meetings, we (Jim and Bill) have consolidated the concerns into two broad categories of *communication* and *trust* and three specific questions; ***Why was staff furloughed? Why are not more staff being called back? How much is Pepper Consulting being paid?***

### ***Why was staff furloughed?***

When the library first closed, the board made the decision to continue to pay staff in part due to the belief the closure would be for a short duration and in part because we were told staff could continue to perform useful functions from home.

At the April 23, 2020 board meeting the board was informed by the branch managers that there was no means of stating with certainty that staff was doing work.

As the message on the board page explains, we then made the difficult decision to furlough, both to preserve capital and try to determine what impact we may experience on future funding.

While there have been numerous comments to suggest that since homeowners tax values will not reset for the balance of the year, our income should be uninterrupted and therefore staff should continue to be paid, the board considered the following before the vote.

1. We do not actually know what our income for the coming year will be. At this time, approximately 8% of home loans are in forbearance, meaning that in addition to principal, interest, insurance and taxes may not be paid.

Should the economy fail to bounce back due to the continuing impact of the pandemic, this figure is certain to rise.

In addition, property taxes on businesses may be reduced as failing companies leave vacant space that no longer generates income for property owners.

2. Some board members, including Mr. Largent do not agree that even if we have the money, people should continue to be paid.

This attitude is extremely insensitive to the families of our community that fund the library. With unemployment in Michigan current running at 22%, it is highly probable that many of our residents are among the unemployed, are tightening their belts and worrying about their future.

And for small business owners, many of whom are now failing and employ 48% of America's workforce (<https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/advocacy/2018-Small-Business-Profiles-US.pdf>), they have lost not only an income, but in some cases their life's savings.

Continuing to pay staff when we have no physical customers is a decision a majority of board decided against and remains committed to.

3. Capital preservation is critical to address current building needs as had been discussed and is simply good, practical action in times of uncertainty. The saving generated through reduced operations will be available not only for capital projects such as much needed new roofs, HVAC systems and controls, parking lots and concrete repair, new elevators, doors, etc. but also for new programs, services and offerings that will be prompted from requests from the community, our customers, the people funding our operations.

Despite suggestions that no one can plan during times of uncertainty, a recent McKinsey Paper entitled **Innovation in a crisis: Why it is more critical than ever** stated, *“Pausing innovation efforts until the world has stabilized is a shortsighted view—and one that may have lasting consequences for companies’ ability to grow in the years to come. The essential practices of distinctive innovation have not changed in this time of crisis, but the relative emphasis and urgency of where businesses should focus has.”*

Therefore the board has made a decision to review all aspects of library operations. This review is timely as we approach the bond renewal. The board is concerned that decreased utilization along with rising operating cost is the wrong message to send to the community at the same time we will be asking them to continue to fund us.

Director Riti Grover was hired in part because she brings a fresh set of eyes and ideas to the FCL.

In concert with Riti, the Strategic Planning Committee is reaching out to the community, including each of you, to provide input on what works, what can be improved, what might be eliminated.

We look forward to sharing the results of this outreach with everyone as it will inform decisions moving forward.

You may be asking how the board can undertake such an initiative without the staff who perform all the functions that make the library operate. This will be addressed later in the communication.

***Communication:***

We acknowledge that communication is always important, especially crucial now and that there is substantial room for improvement. It is our intent that this document will be the start of a two-way conversation between staff and the board.

To explain the lack of direct communication we must first acknowledge the workings of any board and specifically a board of a public institution, subject to the Open Meetings Act.

As noted in the disclaimer at the top of the document, until the board expressly gave President White and Vice-President Largent the authority to communicate directly with staff, there was no mechanism for the board to speak directly with library employees.

While each board member has the right to say what they wish, when members speak independently, it does not carry the force of a board decision and often creates confusion and conflict.

Therefore, it is a standard protocol for boards to speak with one voice, and this during public board meetings via a vote on a specific motion.

While a board meeting might seem the place where a back and forth with community members and staff would be a perfect opportunity to address questions and issues, each item would first have to be added to the agenda, a motion made, followed by discussion and then a vote.

Meetings are now running close to 3 hours. Attempting this action would only lengthen meeting time.

And open sessions often lead to chaos rather than constructive conversation.

In addition, the first 6 months of the year have been extremely hectic with board and subcommittee activity taking place weekly and, in many cases, daily.

Since January 1, we've witnessed the hire of a new director; went live with new payroll system; kept the operations running seamlessly despite the departure and retirement of the key staff members responsible for payroll, accounting and HR by hiring interim accounting manager and promoting existing staff, continued to provide digital library services along with uninterrupted essential operations in accounting, payroll, IT and facilities etc. during Governor's Stay-at-Home orders, facilitated onboarding of a new accounting platform and transitioned to new service provider, instituted corrective measures for the errors discovered in the wage reporting for Q4 2019 and Q1 2020; voted

on the policy changes to continue benefits for furloughed staff, brought HR and payroll comprehensive services to FCL, procured the latest data gathering/analytics tool; for the first time in our organization we have put processes in place to get real time financial reports and instituted the best business practice of separating payroll and accounting; brought the second wave of staff on board with the phased reopening; created a reopening protocol between the ever changing health landscape, state and local directives; infrastructure repairs such as generator, elevators and doors; created and voted on the amended budget FY 2019 and approved the budget for FY 2020; implemented sanitation and safety guidelines; executed IT infrastructure upgrades that were due for more than a decade; partnered with Unique to create curbside communicator; initiated the process to accept credit card payments ensuring least contact service during the next phase of reopening; brought Pepper consulting to create a service module assessment to help us serve our patron's current and future needs; lost two trustees with vacancies to be filled on our board and a global pandemic that seems to be on upswing once again after disrupting every aspect of life for everyone on the planet.

It must also be noted, Trustees are not paid and like you have many other obligations.

The commitment to serve the community whether on the school board, city council, one of the many city commissions or the library board is a time consuming and often thankless job. But it is what makes our republic work and what allows communities to flourish.

As you know, the board of trustees often disagrees on issues, but no one would suggest for a moment that each trustee does not generally loves the library and wants what is best for the institution and the community.

Finally, in normal times almost all staff and operational communication would flow through the Director. However, we did not have the luxury of the 'normalcy' as we moved through the maze of uncertainties and rapidly changing scenarios in the past few months!

Predominant reason for not receiving answers to some of your valid questions such as; "When will the library open? When will we be called back to work? Will we all be called back?" is that we were working on them with personnel safety and organizational health in mind. During a global pandemic that could permanently alter how we shop, work, commute and consume entertainment, recreation and information, we simply don't know the answer to any of these questions.

By attending board meetings, you hear discussion in real time and learn answers to questions at the same time we do. So, we encourage you to continue to attend, participate in public comment and to the extent we can answer during a meeting we will. If not, we will follow up with a communication like this one contingent on board approval.

### ***Why are not more staff being called back?***

As noted above, we believe current staff is sufficient to deal with the planning and execution of the limited services we are offering. We monitor events daily and the HR committee is in regular contact with Riti. On Wednesday, July 8<sup>th</sup>, the Strategic Planning Committee will take up the issue of partial reopening as neighboring libraries are beginning to do.

But you ask, couldn't more be done to be ready if more of the staff were onsite? This will be addressed later in the communication.

### ***How Much is Pepper Consulting Receiving?***

The original contract called for Pepper Consulting to receive \$8,800. We believe with expanded services at the request of the HR and Strategic Planning Committees, total contract costs may rise to \$12,000.

Like most organizations and businesses, we understand now is the exact time to make plans for the future. Making plans requires knowing where you want to go, where you have been and where you currently are.

All conclusions or decisions should be made on factual and actionable information, information that was difficult or impossible to secure under previous systems.

We know that many of you and many in our community believe the library was great the way it was. We also know many people who wonder why communities continue to support libraries.

A very well received book from 2001, "Good to Great" by Jim Collins sought to understand what separates good organizations from Great organizations.

Through analysis of myriad data, the short answer is "Good is the enemy of Great."

When an organization gets complacent, thinks it is as good as it can be, it will never achieve greatness. The goal of the board of trustees, and hopefully all of you is to make FCL the finest library in the state, if not the country.

To accomplish this, we need input from the broadest cross section of stakeholders we can reach.

To that end we encourage each of you to participate in the survey that will be forwarded from Pepper Consulting.

***Trust:***

***Trust:***

There can be no question that trust has broken down. On both sides.

When this began, what events triggered it and who is responsible are conversations that are unlikely to rebuild trust between the board and the staff.

Having said that, Bill believes he should express some broad perceptions.

For those that attended the interview sessions of the three candidates for Executive Director, you may recall an interesting exchange. I asked the question; “How would you respond to a directive from the board with which you disagreed?”

Two of the candidates said in essence, “...I believe the board has an important role to play in directing finances and the business aspects of the library, but as a person with a degree in library science and (x) number of years working in libraries, I would approach the board and explain to them why they were wrong.”

This matches exactly the response I received when I contacted libraries around the state when conducting research on staffing and compensation levels more than two years ago.

At the conclusion of each conversation, I would ask, “Is there anything else you can tell me about libraries?” To a person they said, “...you should remember that librarians run libraries.”

I have an entirely different view.

While each staff member plays a role in delivering services to the community, it the board that has been entrusted with managing the finances and providing strategic directions for the institution by hearing and listening to the voices of the entire community.

Library staff can and should add their voice, but recognize they are but one voice among many.

It may be because this trust relationship is so tattered on both sides, this has precluded the board or committees from including some staff in meetings and conversations on the questions of staffing levels, reopening, strategic planning and other topics of interest.

If members of the board feel their initiatives are going to be sabotaged, then there is no desire to include staff.

You may feel this opinion to be unfair, wrong or insensitive but the recent actions directed at the board and Director appear to validate these beliefs.

I also perceive despite the actions of some, that many staff members feel they are fighting to preserve something they love. That the board, not being librarians (with the exception of the board President) can't possibly know how libraries work. And with Riti being new to the area, she could not possibly understand the needs of our patrons, the staff and the broader community.

If this is the case, it is well intentioned, but misguided.

Community assets are funded by residents and managed by individuals elected or appointed to oversee them. This oversight includes not only fiscal management but strategic direction.

There is no organization, be it business, government, association or not-for-profit that has not seen their operating model disrupted by rapid advancements in technology. And the pandemic is further intensifying that.

Yet, during my term on the board as we have witnessed continual declines in utilization while incurring higher costs, any suggestions for change were met with fierce resistance. This is not sustainable. Not for any organization.

So it is the goal of the board to use the dollars entrusted to us to build a library that appeals a broader cross section of the community by continuously reaching out and listening to their ideas in a constantly changing world. The recent acquisition of a data analytics tool will allow us to cater services to residents who rarely or never visit the library.

I understand your frustration. For years, the board provided the most limited oversight and staff was given broad latitude on all aspects of library operations. But as you can see from the list of accomplishments itemized above, many critical portions of the library were neglected.

The current board is composed of professionals with combined scores of years of experience, each expert in their field. And because many of us have run organizations or businesses or law practices or accounting practices, collectively we have the knowledge and experience to know which questions to ask, which areas to examine to improve efficiency. And what we lack in the intricacies of libraries operations is more than accounted for by our Director, for whom we have the utmost respect and highest confidence, and by the board President, a librarian himself.

The board understands and anticipates that from time to time there will be different points of view. It is our expectation that when issue do arise, that they will be presented honestly and professionally.

I believe I speak for the entire board when I say we would like you to be part of the future library. But first, you must accept that staff reports to the Director, who reports to the board.