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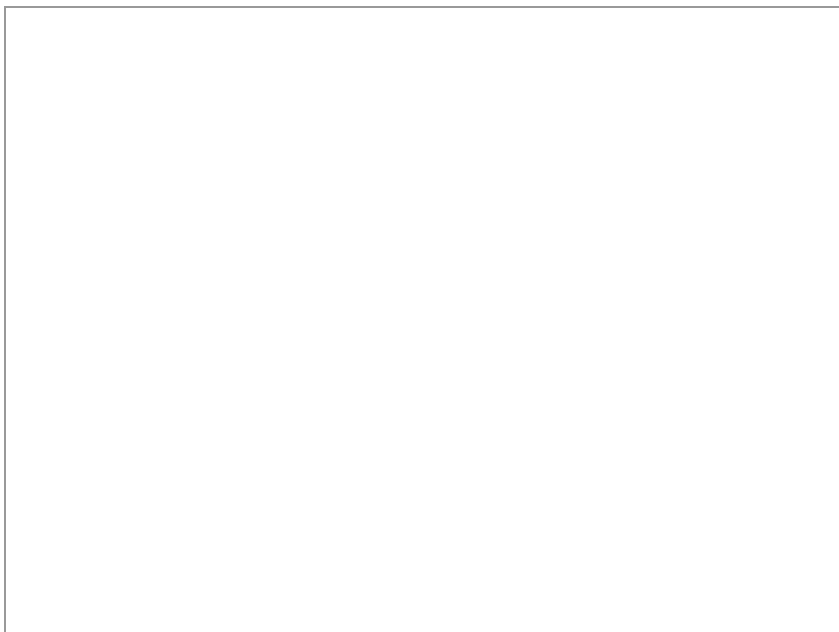
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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

At packed Faneuil meeting, library reiterates desire to avoid closures

Posted by Matt Rocheleau October 29, 2010 10:05 AM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Many could only hear, not see, the speakers at Thursday's meeting. Multiple spillover rooms filled forcing others outside who listened to the discussion via loudspeakers and occasionally peaked in through windows.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

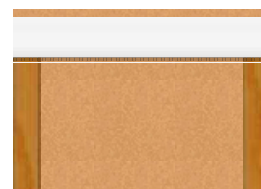
More than 450 area residents, flanked by city and state politicians, packed into and outside an "anchor" of Oak Square in an overwhelming show of support Thursday evening for the Faneuil library branch – one of four Boston branches slated to close in the spring.

Library officials reiterated a promise announced earlier this week that if enough money is raised to keep the branches open through the fiscal year's final three months – from April through the end of June – they will recommend that trustees push closure discussions into next year's budget.

"I strongly support keeping all four branches open," library head Amy Ryan told the Brighton and Allston residents at the meeting addressing the branch's future.

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"I'm very hopeful that it will happen," she said later, adding that she also expects trustees would approve keeping the branches open should enough money be collected.

With loudspeakers set up outside and in spillover rooms, library and city representatives addressed the gathering from the branch's children's room where hundreds wearing "Save Our Library" T-shirts and stickers asked what can be done to keep Faneuil afloat.

Suggestions proposed included fundraising through the library's foundation and on a grassroots level, increased allocation from the city, hours and staff reductions, reaching out for support from neighboring higher education institutions and sliding operating budget funds from the Brighton branch, which is scheduled to reopen in December when renovations there are expected to be finished.

"I think everything needs to be on the table," said councilor Mark Ciommo, adding that he was "encouraged" by the community's efforts as well as the library officials' willingness to keep their options open.

Others echoed the sentiment.

"This happened because the community made demands ... and the library leaders listened," said councilor Felix Arroyo.

Getting area colleges and universities to pitch-in to keep the branch afloat, including requests that elected officials publicly call out for the institutions' support, was among the more popular ideas residents discussed. The library does partner with area colleges, said the system's director of partnerships Koren Stenbridge, and further outreach to such institutions "is certainly an idea we noted and will take into consideration," said Justin Holmes, representing the mayor's office.

It would take \$106,000 to keep the Faneuil branch operating through the fiscal year's final three months, or \$372,000 to save all four branches over that span, said library CFO Sean Nelson. Of the four branches slated for closure, Faneuil has the second-highest operating costs of around \$35,000 each month, he said.

Library officials said donations can be made to its foundation, and that donors can designate the funds to specific branches – a fact that many in the audience said they were not aware of and said should be communicated better to the public. The branch's 100-member friends group also accepts donations.

If funds are raised and branch closure talks are pushed forward another year, the long-term outlook for keeping all branch doors open would depend on the library system's budget, officials said, adding that it costs \$1.5 million to operate all four branches annually.

"We don't know what the next year is going to be," said Ryan.

Plans emerged in the spring to close four of the 26 neighborhood branches. State lawmakers have threatened to cut off funding to the library if even a single branch was closed. In June, the library system said it would hold off on closing branches through the winter. Additionally, 40 library jobs were cut recently.

The system's funding has been slashed in recent years – including a budget drop from \$8.9 to \$2.4 million in the last two years – as the downed economy

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has caused significant cuts to state, city and local aid. And, city and library officials said if ballot measures to reduce Massachusetts' sales and alcohol taxes pass in next week's election, the impact to government services like Boston's 162-year-old library, the country's first publicly supported municipal library, could worsen.

If voters approve Question 3 on Tuesday, state finance officials have estimated it would come at the expense of \$2.5-billion in tax income.

"There would be huge cuts in local aid," State Sen. Steve Tolman said in an impassioned speech.

Though he expressed thanks for library leaders' willingness to reconsider the closures and listen to alternative ideas, of which he offered several, Brighton resident Neal Klinman expressed his frustration with the process acknowledged by applause from fellow residents.

"I keep coming to meeting and meeting and meeting ... I shouldn't be brainstorming how to keep libraries open," he said.

Talks swayed at times to dissatisfaction over why Faneuil was chosen for closure among the city's 26 neighborhood branches. Officials explained that 14 criteria, listed online here, were used and none of the criteria had a higher weight over the others.

However, the majority of attendees focused on ways to save the building around them.

"We're now being asked to work with [library officials], and I think that is a very big gain in this campaign," said Shelley Bialka, president of the friends group.

Maria Rodrigues, a board member of the branch's friends group, said she had expected less than half the number of people who attended.

"It was heartwarming – just the numbers the community's outpouring of support," she said of the meeting that ran for two hours, instead of just the one it had been scheduled for.

A second meeting on Faneuil's future will be held at the branch on Dec. 9 at 6:30 p.m. The first meeting on branches facing closure was held at the Lower Mills branch in Dorchester Monday, while the other two branches – Washington Village in South Boston and Orient Heights in East Boston – will meet in the coming weeks.

In an interview earlier this month, Ryan said the focus of the four meetings would be to focus on determining which services each neighborhood values most and then developing "creative partnerships" to keep services - for example, a place for students to study and do homework after school - available in those communities. But this week, library officials offered renewed hope in keeping the branch buildings, not just services, intact.

Seven other meetings in the second phase of three on the library system's overall strategic framework are also ongoing.

Brighton resident and two-time city council candidate Alex Selvig told the crowd Thursday night how he often brings his two-year-old son Max to Faneuil for "Lapsit Storytime."

"'Storytime' was one of the first words he learned," Selvig said. "When we drive by he points and says 'storytime.'"

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