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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

## Residents, officials brainstorm how to keep Faneuil library afloat

Posted by Matt Rocheleau December 10, 2010 10:46 AM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Meeting participants brainstorm about the Faneuil branch's fate.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Residents and local officials gathered in the Faneuil library Thursday night to brainstorm about how to save the building in Oak Square that is slated to close, as are three other Boston branches, if enough funding is not available by spring.

The crowd split into four groups to develop and list ideas related to fundraising, budgetary matters, branch services and relationships with partners and stakeholders.

"It's our brainstorming tonight that may save the branch. We don't know yet," said Shelley Bialka, president of the branch's friends group.

The 50-person turnout Thursday for the second "working session" on the Faneuil branch's fate was significantly smaller than the [first meeting held in October](#), when over 450 attendees packed into – and some listened through

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loudspeakers set up outside – the Brighton building.

Organizers suspected the freezing weather outside along with families being busy during the holiday season accounted for the smaller crowd.

After dividing into groups for about one hour, the meeting reunified to share summaries of the ideas each contingent had come up with on their respective topics.

Potential fundraising opportunities for the library system included establishing small stores or kiosks for supplies in each of the 26 branches along with a larger store in the Central Branch with a greater focus on library-related collectibles. Selling advertisements in the BPL's newsletter, exploring ways to allow residents to make donations when filing taxes, allowing for various resources – from books to shelves to rooms – to be donated in honor of someone, and hosting more branch exhibits in which the library collects a portion of proceeds were also suggested.

Regarding ways to aid the library's budget, meeting participants said advocacy and outreach to elected officials – including the governor, state House and Senate Ways and Means Committee members, the mayor, library administration and board members and city councilors – needs to begin now. It was also suggested that the branch develop a budget of its own – likely higher than realistically possible – to demonstrate the library's potential if it received stronger funding.

Acknowledging that there is still much more to be done in the coming months as well as long-term efforts, officials said the meeting was constructive and remained optimistic on the branch's future.

"We are reservedly hopeful," Bialka said. "Beneath everything, we think we will be able to find a way to keep the branch open."

About a week prior to the October meeting, library officials announced that if enough money is raised to keep the four 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.

"We're optimistic that, we, as a city and a community, can find the resources to keep the branches open," said mayor's office representative Justin Holmes, who described the meeting as "not really to focus on our challenges [like he said the last meeting did], but to focus on our possibilities."

Beside news that interviews will soon begin to fill a vacant children's librarian position at Faneuil, few updates were given to questions or ideas related to the branch's future that were posed at the October meeting.

Getting area colleges, universities, hospitals and similar tax-exempt institutions to pitch-in to keep the branch afloat was among the more popular ideas residents discussed at the prior meeting.

The city already solicits voluntary payment-in-lieu-of taxes from such land-owning, tax-exempt organizations, but not all pitch in a proportionally equal amount. Disparity between how much these institutions give to the city prompted the mayor to create a task force last January to review the current PILOT system and make recommendations for improvement.

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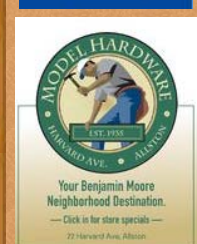
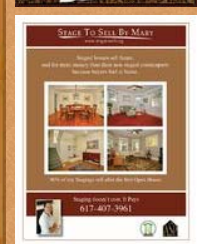
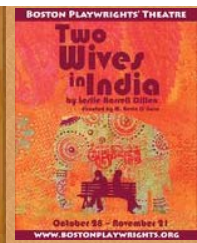


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"This is a city-wide problem," Holmes said, citing that 53 percent of property in Boston is tax exempt. "The city in many ways is challenged to get these organizations to make payments."

However, in regards to how the city's library and its branches can attempt to connect further with such institutions as a financial resource, "My update is there will be more of an update next time," he said.

There was also no update on efforts by the Boston Public Library to search internally for additional funds and resources to keep the four branches slated to shut down in April operating past the end of this fiscal year.

Officials said the search continues: "We're looking anywhere we can," said Holmes, who noted "the library has already gone through a very difficult budget period."

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 earlier this fall. Of the four branches slated for closure, Faneuil has the second-highest operating costs of around \$35,000 each month, he said.

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 have said, adding that it costs \$1.5 million to operate all four branches annually.

Library officials have said donations can be made to its foundation, and that donors can designate the funds to specific branches. Since July 2009, the library's foundation has received \$315 designated to the four branches and an additional \$902 in support of branches in general, said library spokeswoman Gina Perille in an e-mail.

"Much of the community discussion around raising additional funds to keep the Washington Village, Orient Heights, Lower Mills, and Faneuil branches open is happening at the grassroots level with the branch friends groups," she said.

Friends groups also accept donations. To date, the city-wide friends group has raised about \$20,000 this year, according to the group's president David Vieira. However, he said some of that money has already been spent, and that because the friends group was created to assist with things that directly impact customers, much of the funds go toward paying for essential library needs – "the bread and butter stuff."

He mentioned how one branch librarian told him she had to stop running a preschool program because budget cuts left her without enough money to buy glue sticks.

"It's something as basic as that that makes a preschool program work," he said referring to the glue sticks.

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, 31 employees were laid off in October, though the staff cuts were **less than expected**.

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 has caused significant cuts to state, city and local aid, which has impacted

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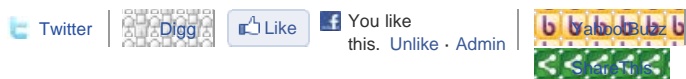
government services like Boston's 162-year-old library, the country's first publicly supported municipal library.

At the meeting's close, Vieira presented a gift thanking Bialka and fellow friends group leader Maria Rodrigues who is a board member.

"What a wonderful inspiration this branch has been to everyone in the city," Vieira said, before holding up a copy of "The Little Engine That Could."

The children's tale chronicles a train engine's efforts to chug its way up and over a long, steep hill. The train's persistence and positive spirits allow it to prevail in the seemingly impossible task – supporters of Faneuil and the other three ill-fated branches their story will have a similar ending.

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