

Library Advisory Board Minutes: September 8, 2020For Multnomah County Library Advisory Board

The Multnomah County Library Advisory Board (LAB) met on Tuesday, September 8, 2020 virtually. The meeting began at 8:05 am.

Board members present were: Brendan Gallagher, Gabby Shaffer, Jacqueline Martinez De Jesus, Lizzie Martinez, Lois Leveen, Quinn MacNichol, and Svetlana Karpe.

Clare Wilkinson, Erin Cooper, Rob Edmiston, and Salma Sheikh were not available.

Staff members present were: Cindy Gibbon, director of policy and special projects; Dave Ratliff, neighborhood libraries director; Johnette Easter, human resources manager; Jon Worona, director of content strategy; Katie O'Dell, programming and outreach director; Rita Jimenez, neighborhood libraries director; Shawn Cunningham, director of communications and strategic initiatives; Sonja Ervin, equity and inclusion manager; Terrilyn Chun, deputy director; Vailey Oehlke, director of libraries; and Maddelyn High, director's assistant.

Also in attendance were: Commissioner Lori Stegmann, District 4, Multnomah County; Jeff Renfro, Office of County Management, Multnomah County; Jackie Starr, Friends of the Library; and Merris Sumrall, The Library Foundation.

CHECK-IN

Meeting attendees joined the virtual meeting either via video conference or phone. Chair Quinn MacNichol welcomed everyone, including the Library Advisory's Boards new members. Attendees introduced themselves and shared their favorite way to use the library.

CHAIR'S REPORT

Meeting minutes for the July 14, 2020 meeting were approved.

MacNichol shared that the schedule and duration for LAB meetings may change to better accommodate a virtual format and school schedules for student board members. MacNichol sent a survey to LAB members to gauge availability, and will follow up this month. Currently, the plan is for LAB to meet monthly through the end of the calendar year. Anticipated agenda items for October include a discussion about group norms and establishing community agreements for how LAB wants to work together for the remainder of the fiscal year; setting goals for this fiscal year; and determining how to best utilize LAB's committee structure while meeting virtually. LAB members should send other proposed agenda items for October to MacNichol for consideration this month.

MacNichol also reminded that if LAB members know in advance they are unable to attend a particular meeting to please let them and LAB Liaison Maddelyn High know so we can assess whether or not there is a quorum for any matters that may require a vote.

LIBRARY DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Director of Libraries Vailey Oehlke welcomed new LAB members, and shared some words of appreciation for several library staff members, including Facilities Supervisor Lisa Canavan, who cut their Labor Day holiday short to tend to the tents used for outdoor computer labs at Gresham, Midland, and Rockwood libraries during difficult high wind conditions.

LIBRARY WORKFORCE REDUCTION

Oehlke opened by sharing that the library is now at a point in its workforce reduction process in which leadership has a better sense of what staffing at the library is going to look like going forward (see [Oehlke's public blog post on this topic](#)). Oehlke expressed regret that communication to LAB throughout this complex process came later than was ideal and may not have been as thorough as it could have been.

Oehlke emphasized that staffing changes are in direct response to the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting closure of all library buildings to the public as of March 14, 2020. Buildings will continue to be closed to the public under the library is able to safely reopen them at the direction of Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury, under guidance from public health officials.

Oehlke provided a brief timeline of events starting in mid-March. When buildings first closed, staff were asked to go home and those who were not able to telework for various reasons were asked to report their time as "administrative leave," (which means staff were paid and benefits were active). During this time, some library staff supported the county's emergency response in temporary shelters; collected, made, and transported supplies; and provided communications and translation support. Some library staff are still engaged in this work. As this crisis unfolded into a longer-term event, the library created a Reopening Team with 38 members, charged with determining what it might look like to safely offer some in-person library services and to reimagine how to provide other services virtually. Due to limitations created by COVID, and as a result of this planning, leadership knew the library would not have work for some staff members in the near term.

Now, nearing the conclusion of the library's layoff process (which is dictated by its contract with its union, AFSCME Local 88), the initial projection of impacted library employees has been reduced from 128 down to 26 filled positions for which the library does not have work. This reduction was achieved in a number of different ways, including the elimination of 43 vacant positions that the library normally would have filled; some staff choosing voluntary retirement or layoff; and creating 27 new roles aligned with the library's [new priorities](#). However, through an effort with the county, these 26 employees will have the option to fill one of 80 limited-duration roles related to the county's ongoing COVID-19 response. No library employees will be involuntarily separated from employment with the county. Oehlke acknowledged that these efforts do not diminish how difficult these changes are for library staff, some of whom are faced with demotions or FTE cuts, and having to move into new roles within different work teams.

Oehlke closed by reiterating that library directors across the country are dealing with similar constraints and unknowns, and while library systems are handling these challenges in different ways, no system is operating under normal circumstances. Oehlke expressed enthusiasm about the new services the library will offer going forward to directly address the needs of folks in our community during and in the aftermath of this pandemic.

Commissioner Lori Stegmann provided additional comments and perspective, acknowledging that we're in a place we've never been before, all of us having to make difficult decisions. Stegmann reiterated that the library and the county have worked collaboratively with the union to reduce the impacts of this situation as much as possible at a time when demand for traditional library services has dropped dramatically. Library and county leadership have listened to and implemented staff and patron ideas for how to safely offer services, and are open to all ideas for how to better serve the public during the pandemic.

Time for discussion and LAB member questions was cut short, but some discussion ensued about the response of some library staff to the decision to reduce staffing and modify roles; and some suggestions were offered for how to communicate internal decision making at the library. Oehlke responded by sharing some factors that may have contributed to a negative response by staff, including early notification about layoffs, which caused anxiety, and the inability to share some information while the layoff process was still happening and new services and roles were still being determined.

Both Oehlke and Stegmann reiterated their willingness to talk more about these decisions with LAB members and with the members of the public.

Some LAB members expressed frustration with the feeling that LAB meetings are not currently structured to solicit input or to generate two-way conversation. MacNichol shared appreciation for candid comments, noting that LAB is still very much in the process of shifting how it does its work, which is challenged by the current need to hold meetings virtually; and expressed hope that moving to longer meetings that are structured differently may address some of this frustration. A suggestion was made for library leadership to share some options for how LAB members, who are committed to supporting the library, can help get the facts out during a challenging time.

The meeting adjourned at 9:38 am.

Respectfully submitted by:
Maddelyn High, director's assistant
Multnomah County Library, Oregon