

**15 Horseguard Lane
Scarsdale, New York 10583**

December 13, 2016

Dear Mayor Mark, Trustees Callaghan, Finger, Pekarek, Samwick, Stern, and Veron:

Thank you for all that you do on behalf of the Village of Scarsdale and, most recently, for the many hours that you have invested considering the proposed renovation of the library.

On Tuesday night, November 29, I listened, for over three and a half hours, to the presentations of various professionals, as well as the speeches of many Scarsdale residents, most of whom had come to the Village Board meeting with prepared remarks and stickers tacked to their clothing to show their support of "SPL." Those in favor of renovating the library are organized and determined, and while many believe that this \$17.5 million renovation is, as one speaker put it, "a need and not a want," I do not believe that you, the Trustees, the fiduciaries of the residents of this Village, should assume that these vocal and devoted speakers represent the vast (and silent) majority of Village residents or, more importantly, that this plan serves the best interests of the Village. It is logical that those who want this project would come out in full force, rallying their troops and planning in advance how to lobby the trustees effectively. But the views of those who are not part of an organized movement (and who are not as vociferous) are, I believe, important for you to consider. I also believe that you must read between the lines and ask the hard questions that seem to have been glossed over by supporters of this plan about whether the \$17.5 million dollar proposed renovation is in the best interests of the community.

I do not pretend to speak for the silent majority, as my sample size is too small, but I certainly have heard people express concerns about this project. Most with whom I have spoken regard this project, in its current form, as an extravagance, as excessive. I have my own concerns about this massive investment. Not only does it strike me as somewhat over the top, but I am also concerned because, even with the proposed renovation of the physical plant, this plan ignores the very real problems that exist, problems that, if not addressed, will continue to hamper the library's ability to fulfill its mission as a center of intellectual capital in the community. The plan also creates new issues that have not been properly considered. I believe that the trustees are not only getting a skewed view of the support in the community for this project, but you are also receiving a skewed vision of the result of this proposed plan, which, if carried out, will, based on my experience at the library, fail to address the library's most significant flaws or the challenges that the library faces.

Given my own involvement with the library, one might expect that I would staunchly support the proposed renovation. I have been an active volunteer at the library over the past year.

With a minimal amount of help from the library staff, I have brought six speakers to the library: Delia Ephron, Martha Hodes (whose book, *Mourning Lincoln*, was longlisted for the National Book Award last year), the Scarsdale firefighters, the baker Seth Greenberg, the highly-acclaimed vegan author and speaker, Victoria Moran, and Indian cookbook author, Renku Bhattacharya. I also arranged for Max Krohn, the founder of OKCupid to come to the library (although I did not do the publicity for the event, as I did for the events that I have organized). I have already scheduled renowned NY Times food writer and cookbook author Melissa Clark to come to the library in the spring. And I have been in touch with other accomplished authors about coming here. So, one would expect that I would be on board with a project that purports to improve the library.

In fact, I love the idea of creating a phenomenal library. Moreover, like many (perhaps most, including opponents of the plan), I believe that some physical renovations (such as ADA compliance) are imperative and others are desirable. Yet this grandiose \$17.5 million project ignores certain realities, and I am afraid that the trustees, who have sat through presentation after presentation, read study after study, and pored over plan after plan are not fully cognizant of the problems with this massive undertaking. Some of the problems are staring you in the face. Others require a better understanding of the way in which the library operates than a guided field trip to the physical plant or the perusal of studies can provide.

1. The Actual Use of the Library

First, I urge you to visit the library on your own from time-to-time. You will notice that there are three categories of typical users: teenagers after school, young children in the children's room, most frequently when there's a program, and older residents. Given that seniors are among the biggest users of the library, I believe that it behooves you to consider whether the same people who still read physical books and who happily attend live lectures are interested in paying more in taxes. Keep in mind, they will not simply pay the additional taxes that are associated with this massive renovation, but their higher cost of living in Scarsdale will be in conjunction with significantly higher water bills and the higher taxes that accrue over time. (Taxes and other costs, as you know, tend to go up, not down over time.) If you want this community to be diverse, not simply to consist of families with school-aged children, I believe that you must not take an action that will compel the very population that consistently uses the library to consider leaving the Village.

a. Complementing, not Competing with Other Resources

I recommend that, on your own visits to the library, you note the way in which the space is used. Take a look at the programs that are and have been offered, for example, and peak into one when you have a chance. Note the makeup of the audience, note how crowded (or not) the room is, and note the other programs that are on the calendar. Draw your own conclusions about both the deficiencies and also the wonderful features of our library before you vote for or against this proposal, but don't do so in a vacuum; do so by considering the way in which the library is actually

used and also the many other resources that are in our backyard, including our incredible schools, the Scarsdale Teen Center, the new Barnes and Noble event space in Eastchester, nearby public libraries that are just ten minutes away, the Starbucks café with Wi-Fi that so many use to meet and work in small groups, and the resources that most have in our own homes due to our near universal access to the internet.

Our library has a certain feel to it, Greenburgh has a different feel, and White Plains still another feel. We are fortunate to be able to take advantage of the different offerings of each easily and for free as the libraries within minutes of Scarsdale are open to the public. We don't need to compete with the other libraries. We are close enough that we can and should complement them. As an aside, with respect to the plans for a café, while the idea sounds lovely, before approving the plan, you might want to be certain that any such café would be able to operate without losing money, given that there are multiple Starbucks within minutes of the library. Again, I don't think that you want the library to compete with the coffee bars that are already a stone's throw from the library. With no firm plan for the café's operation, no company bidding to build out or operate the café, it sounds like a dream, or a "want," not a "need," to use the words of the speaker on November 29. A firm business operating plan should accompany this "want" in order to have a fiscally responsible plan.

2. The Scarsdale Real Estate Market

While many of the features of the proposed plan sound impressive on paper, I am not sure that the Scarsdale real estate market is robust enough to support the grandiose library plan. If you spent any time in Scarsdale during the spring, you could not help but notice a greater abundance of "For Sale" signs than is typical. Houses in the \$3 million plus range were not selling. Houses under that amount were selling for less than the listing price. I had one friend who had difficulty selling her home for the same price that she had paid just two years earlier. She had one potential buyer, and the buyer was concerned about the taxes that he or she would pay annually. One real estate broker told me that while the market has picked up, it has picked up because sellers have had to settle for lower prices. In other words, those moving to Scarsdale at present are concerned about cost. For many of those who move here with families, Scarsdale not only offers good schools and greenery, but it also offers an economically more affordable place to live than New York City. (While you pay higher taxes for good schools, you do not have to think about paying private-school tuition, which, if you have more than one child, you may regard as an economic advantage.) Moreover, quite frankly, our library is not a deterrent to people with young children who are looking to move here. To the contrary, I believe that it impresses those considering a move to Scarsdale. In fact, it is nicer than many of the branch libraries in Manhattan. It is quite usable for those with young children, for teenagers after school, and for seniors, the three groups that spend the most time in the library. When I brought Delia Ephron to Scarsdale, one of the first things she said to me was how beautiful the library was. In fact, she said, "I want to live here." (I understood her to mean that she wanted to live in the library itself.) You must ask yourselves whether, given the data about the current

real estate market, this major renovation addresses the financial concerns of those who live here and those who are looking to move here.

3. \$4.5 Million is a Substantial Contribution of Capital

When speakers on November 29 complained that the library had not improved over the years, I was surprised that they did not acknowledge that \$4.5 million had already been allotted to the library's renovation. Do you know how much you can do with \$4.5 million? I don't accept that \$4.5 million simply provides a band-aid. If \$4.5 million is a band-aid, it's a pretty wonderful one. When others complained that the \$4.5 million budget was limiting, I wondered about how responsibly they had researched the options. I also wondered how we got from \$4.5 million to \$17.5 million. Was there no middle ground? What about a six or seven or even eight-million-dollar renovation? I get daily emails about philanthropic investments designed to turn entire communities around, and I must say that \$17.5 million is a number that is in the stratosphere. We could save a village with that amount.

a. Why Hasn't the Village Investigated How the Library Would Scale Back the Plans?

Terri Simon said that if the library could not raise the private funds needed to meet the \$17.5million budget that has been set out, the library board would scale back the plans, although that would not, she said, be ideal. I would like to know how the library would scale back the plans in advance of supporting any allocation of funds to the library renovation. That should not be a secret that we find out about if the campaign to raise millions and millions of private dollars falls on its face. Moreover, if the plan could be scaled back somewhat, shouldn't we in the Village see what has been considered? Shouldn't we also be able to decide whether perhaps a scaled-back plan might be in the best interests of the Village in the first instance, especially in light of how controversial this project is?

b. Why Has Only a Small Fraction of the Necessary Private Funds Been Raised Thus Far?

I also found it quite curious, somewhat unsettling, that given how long the library has been developing this plan that depends for its successful completion upon private financing, the library board has not received commitments from private donors for even a quarter of the amount needed. Yet those who support the plan, including the League of Women Voters, want the plan approved immediately so that the renovation is not delayed. Is it financially responsible for you, the Trustees, to approve a plan notwithstanding that it is still not clear that the necessary funds will be contributed? I do not think so. Why should you and the rest of the community accept that the library is "confident," to use the words of proponents of the plan, that it can convince residents to donate the many, many millions of dollars of private funding on which this project depends? If the library board insists on coming to the Village with a grandiose plan like this one, it behooves the library board to have already resolved all of the issues that it raises.

c. An Example of the Reasoning that Accompanies Support for this Plan

When speakers complained at Tuesday's public meeting that the annual book fair caused a month and a half of dislocation of certain programs (due to an inability to use the Scott room), I had to wonder whether maybe it would be more economical not to hold the book fair at all. I say that tongue in cheek. I don't consider the month and a half displacement to be significant, but you, the Trustees, can do the math: consider how much the book fair raises each year for the Friends of the Scarsdale Library, and ask yourselves whether that amount justifies a \$17.5 million-dollar renovation so that we don't have to close the Scott room for a month and a half. Or perhaps a private donor could cover the amount raised so that the Scott Room remains usable in August and September. Again, I say that tongue in cheek, but you get my point. The dislocation that the book sale causes was described in extreme terms (with e.g., toddlers perched on shelves by their adults). It must also be emphasized that the book fair *reduces* the ability to hold programs for a month and a half, but it does not completely destroy that ability. The unavailability of the Scott room during August and September to raise funds through the library book sale is a silly justification for a \$17.5 million renovation.

4. The Plan Does Not Address One of the Biggest Issues: Intellectual Capital

Nonetheless, the bigger problem, one of the biggest problems with the plan, and one that has been largely ignored, as I see it, is that this plan does not address in any way, shape, or form the intellectual capital of the library. After all, a library's greatest value is in cultivating the intellectual capital of a community. One of the opponents of the plan at the November 29 meeting pointed out that the plan did not make allowances for more personnel or more parking, and he did not find the plan's assumptions that these allowances were unnecessary to be credible. This is an extremely important point. As one who has created numerous extremely well-received programs in the library, I know that he is correct. When the library surveyed residents about what they wanted from the library, many said that they were interested in more programming. Sadly, other than physical space, this plan does not address the desires of those surveyed. In conjunction with the push for the library plan, the Friends of the Library paid for one part-time person to bring special programs to the library for a period, during which she worked 15 hours per week; she now works only 5 hours per week as that push for increased programming seems to have ended, and she is, moreover, employed by the Friends of the Library, not by the library itself. I happened into the library with my programming ideas and a willingness to roll up my sleeves at a time when the library was looking to expand its programming in order to show that it was addressing the interests of residents, but from what I can see, a commitment to excellent programming is not factored into the budget once the library has been renovated. As you will learn, if you look into it, aside from whether the library staff is oriented towards creating new and innovative programming, the librarians are limited because they must, I have been told, "sit on the desk" for much of the day. Once we

have a gorgeous and bigger building, we will not have the staff to transform the library into the vibrant community center that it could be. This plan does not address human capital.

How are we bringing the library into the 21st century, as this plan purports to do, with no plans to add personnel, specifically personnel who can spearhead the innovative use of a bigger and better library? Have you spoken with the librarians who currently deal with technology at the library and who will, presumably, be expected to make better use of the better space? What is their expertise? How will they do this? And given the current staffing constraints, how will the same number of staff be able to help the community to take advantage of the new space? The point is that a beautiful building will not serve to create a center for intellectual exchange without an adequate and appropriate staff, an adequate budget for innovative programming, and assuming that the library becomes more attractive to the community with this proposed renovation, more parking. If you cannot address these issues in advance, then you are wasting taxpayer and donor funds. Among the catchphrases for promoting this project is that the \$17.5 million renovation will bring the library into the 21st century, but indeed, saying this does not make it so. The plan does not address the core of the library's mission, its intellectual capital in the 21st century, which, in my opinion, should be at the heart of a transformation of the library into a more vibrant center of this community.

5. Are the Higher Costs of an Environmentally-Friendly Facility a Legitimate Excuse for Overriding Environmental Concerns?

On another note, with respect to another aspect of this plan's stated goal of bringing the library into the 21st century, given that it is 2016, it seems irresponsible and, indeed, selfish, to have a \$17.5 million renovation that is not a green one. I know that green construction costs more, but addressing the so-called needs of the proponents of this massive undertaking without considering the needs of future generations for a significantly greener community seems ill-advised. I am, in fact, shocked that we give such lip service to sustainability in this community, and yet a massive public project is not, in significant part, a green one. Ironically, the plan calls for a generator, but it does not make note of the fact that generators are increasingly used largely as a result of climate change. A non-green library will contribute to that climate change. We must ask ourselves whether this massive non-green project is a need or a want.

6. The Scope of the Renovation

The Village Trustees have already allotted \$4.5 million to renovating the library. There is, a consensus among Trustees, that some renovation is necessary. The question for me is not simply the scope, but also the hidden problems with this grandiose plan that does not address the way in which our library functions and is used, the actual problems with library, and the future of our community. In my opinion, an improvement in the intellectual capital of the library should be first and foremost, right up there with making the building ADA-compliant and addressing and minimizing the project's environmental impact. I am not opposed to renovation.

I do, however, have serious questions about this proposed renovation and the push to rush into it without even a significant commitment of the private funds on which the plan depends.

7. The Voices in Favor are Organized; They May Not be Representative of the Views of Most

In conclusion, I think you should take note of the fact that opposition to the project is not organized, rather it is a matter of many separate individuals and households raising their eyebrows skeptically. In contrast, the vocal minority, those who want this project, are members of a devoted, well-organized, and determined group. I commend them for their devotion to this project, but I do not necessarily agree that the project, in its current iteration, represents the collective will of the Village or that it is in the best interests of the community. For some seniors who use the library, this project may provide the tipping point in a decision about whether to stay in a community whose schools they already generously fund, even though they no longer use them. From the perspective of those who are considering the ways in which we bring the Village into the twenty-first century, the fact that this project is not a green one is irresponsible. From my own perch, as one who has spent a lot of time at the library over the past year, it seems foolhardy to overlook the absence of any attention to the intellectual capital of our beloved library in this plan. All of the beautiful meeting rooms in the world cannot improve the library without a plan to provide adequate and appropriate personnel. As drawn, this project creates another architecturally beautiful edifice, which is meaningless if the library cannot offer the intellectual experience which is at the heart of its mission. This plan does not adequately address that mission.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Ann R. Starer