

Lack Of State Funds For Libraries Frustrates Orleans Efforts

by Ed Maroney

ORLEANS — The goalposts for scoring a state contribution toward a Snow Library building project have been moved again.

Estimates are that it will be fiscal year 2027 or 2028 before the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners has the funds to initiate a new round of design grants, Snow Library facilities advisory committee chair Steve Gass told his colleagues March 3.

“When I first joined the trustees over four years ago,” he said, “I was estimating the new library was 10 years out at that point. It’s a bit depressing to see that 10 years has just kind of moved forward as a constant. It does make me wonder whether there are alternative strategies we ought to be pursuing, other synergies within the town that we could work with.”

Studies commissioned by the library documented the need to expand space and services and address the deterioration of the current building.

“Since people haven’t been in the library (during the pandemic), I don’t think they know how seriously we need a new building,” said member Pam Ritchie. “They just think of it as the sweet little library in Orleans. I don’t think they’re really aware of the structural problems, never mind the lack of space.”

“I think most of them have forgotten when pieces of the ceiling fell down in front of the circulation desk,” member Cheryl Bryan said. But the hope that the state would eventually help with the cost of a new library has made town leaders cautious about going forward with an expensive roof repair for the existing building.

“We are going to have to resolve the replacement of the roof,” said Select Board Chair Kevin Galligan, his group’s liaison to the committee. “I would really want to have some certainty that we want to push forward this new library project before we invest \$350,000, probably \$400,000 on a new roof, but all of a sudden say, here’s your grant.” He called the lack of state funds for library projects “so disappointing.”

“Kevin, you’re absolutely right. It’s a frightfully low amount of money,” said member Elia Marnik, who served



Snow Library “looks like a nice building,” said Kevin Galligan, but staff are “overcoming challenges every single day.” ED MARONEY PHOTO

on the MLBC for 14 years. “We were at the Statehouse constantly. I don’t like to use the word lobby, but we lobbied. We really built a lot of new libraries. The reason we had the money was that we had the support of the legislators.”

Gass said he’d brought up an idea of Galligan’s with state Rep. David Vieira of Falmouth after a virtual legislative luncheon for librarians and trustees. The select board member had asked why library grant programs had to wait for bond funding rather than be supported through a funding formula like the one used by the Massachusetts School Building Authority, which is assured one penny of the 6.25 percent sales tax. Vieira told Gass that for that to happen, the MLBC would really have to be on board. When Gass shared that response with Lauren Stara, library building specialist with the MLBC, she said, “We’d love for that to happen.”

Bryan was concerned that “so many towns have already built new libraries. I’m not sure legislators are as interested in continuing library construction as they were when a lot of towns were clamoring for it. Provincetown, Truro, Wellfleet, Harwich, Mashpee, Falmouth, and Dennis have already participated in this program. Our legislators are 100 percent behind asking for it (but) when you get into the larger Legislature, their taxpayers are not bugging them so much because so many already have it.”

Noting the public interest around a community center,

Gass said “there does seem to be some overlap” and asked if pursuing some “synergy” with that effort was a good idea.

“Combining a community center and our library is very worth considering,” Marnik said. “We have a lot of stuff going on, and people are not looking to pay for a couple of new buildings.” In 2019, the projected cost of implementing the new library building program was about \$25 million.

“I’ve seen some combined in the state,” Bryan said. “I’ve never seen anyone happy. If it meant getting a new library, they were happy when they opened. When they started to run it and disagreed over policy and space, they were less and less happy. Most towns end up separating them.” Nevertheless, she said, “there seems to be quite a political will in town for a community center right now. Maybe that’s what you have to work with.”

“Depending on what aspects of dual use would be involved, I would be concerned about having enough space to have our programs,” member Tavi Prugno, the library’s director, said. “I would be nervous about too much of a combination between a community center and the library.”

Member Mary Beth Fincke said a combined facility would have to be staffed properly. “You don’t want to get into the position where library staff are responsible for the community center monitoring,” she said.

Galligan noted that the recent Orleans Citizens Forum on a community center underscored the importance of meeting the community’s diverse needs. “I think it will not be one single building,” he said. “We don’t have the acreage to say, let’s go buy this site.” If a “skinnied-down” feasibility study is approved at town meeting in May, he said, he’d look to Gass “to help us with the scope so that it doesn’t conflict with but complements and supports where the library wants to go as well.”

The “entire community does not know the rich programming as well as limitations the library has,” said Galligan. “You go by, it looks like a nice building, people come and go, no problem, but you peel back the roof, you peel back the stairway, you go downstairs, you’re overcoming challenges every single day in that building.”