

John Jermain Attempts to Balance Expansion With the Economy

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The John Jermain Memorial Library (JJML) Board of Trustees has scheduled a public referendum in June to ask district residents for a second time to approve a multi-million dollar renovation and expansion plan. But with the reality of a troubled economy on the

board's mind, it appears they will float a scaled back expansion plan at the existing library, and may offer voters a choice on whether they would like a second library near Mashashimuet Park.

"There really is broad support for the library right now," said JJML director Catherine Creedon on Tuesday. "We are being used extensively, but in the community interaction we have had, it has become clear people are concerned about the economy and the board would not want to risk a referendum that would fail."

Five years ago the library failed to gain voter approval for an \$8 million expansion plan that included a new library at a triangle shaped property owned by the library near Mashashimuet Park. Since then, the library and its board has undergone a series of changes, with Creedon stepping in as the new director a year-and-a-half ago — around the same time the board abandoned a local architecture firm it had been working with and started again from scratch. A new round of community meetings was held, first to select Newman Architects of New Haven, Conn. to design the project, and secondly to discern what the community wants and needs in a library.

On Monday, April 20, the board gathered in the rotunda at JJML to offer a "progress report" on draft concepts they will use in coming weeks to construct a final plan and cost analysis. The board was expected to meet in executive session on Wednesday night to discuss the community's reaction to the presentation. On Wednesday, May 6, the final proposal and price tag will be unveiled and the referendum has been scheduled for June 29.

Draft plans unveiled on Monday show an expansion on the rear of JJML, which according to Creedon would accommodate program space, offices and space for the library's collection. By law, the library would also need to be brought up to code, American with Disabilities Act compliance and meet New York State standards for libraries, which involves repairs and maintenance on the historic structure, addressing an antiquated heating and air system and the addition of a second staircase and elevator.

Victor Conseco, of Sandpebble Builders, which is developing the cost analysis of the plan, showed slides of the existing library which painted a grim portrait of a building in need of a new roof, plaster, masonry, windows, as well as space for collections, new media and offices. According to Conseco, the ventilation in the library is so poor that half way through his presentation a portable carbon dioxide monitor showed levels exceeding what would be considered a healthy standard.

A three-story expansion at the existing library, according to Creedon, could range anywhere from 2,000 square feet to 6,000 square feet of additional space depending on the direction the board chooses to take.

Creedon also showed preliminary plans for a second building at Mashashimuet Park. If approved by voters, this building would house a state-of-the-art archival facility to protect what the director noted are historic documents at risk in the existing library due to humidity and temperature control issues. The park library would also boast rooms which Creedon said could be used for both library and community programs, as well as reading spaces and a computer lab. Periodicals would also be housed at the Mashashimuet Park site. Thirty to 36 parking spaces would be created to accommodate visitors.

The concept of separating services at the library revolves around the idea that JJML currently brings in families, and keeping children and adult collections together is a way to ensure that multi-generational activity continues.

According to Conseco, who declined to throw out estimated figures on the cost of either project, if the referendum is approved in June the design and planning phase of the project would run through much of 2010, with construction beginning that fall. The library project is not estimated to be complete until mid-2012.

Creedon said on Tuesday that despite the board's commitment to the long-term master plan that called for a large expansion in order to accommodate current services, she believes they will move forward with either a conditional referendum or a phased referendum.

In a conditional referendum, residents would be asked to vote on whether the library should move forward with the necessary repairs at the existing library as well as an expansion to that facility. Residents could select a second option where they could elect

to have the second library at the park built in addition to the work at the existing library. The third choice would be to do nothing at all.

A phased referendum would only seek to have work done at JJML with a modest expansion.

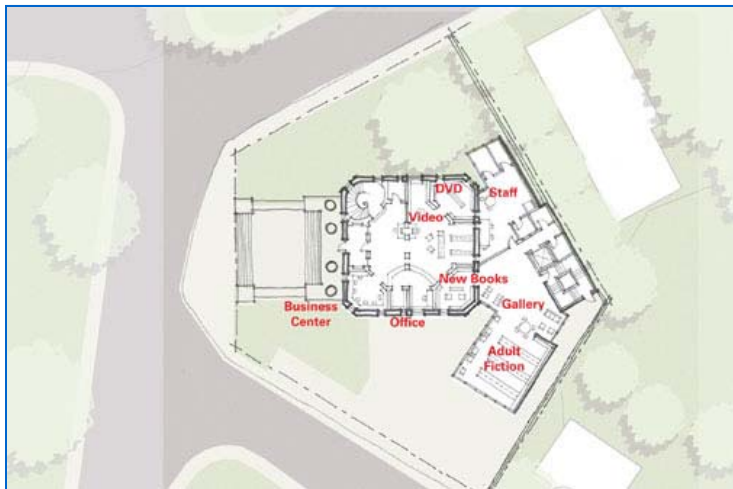
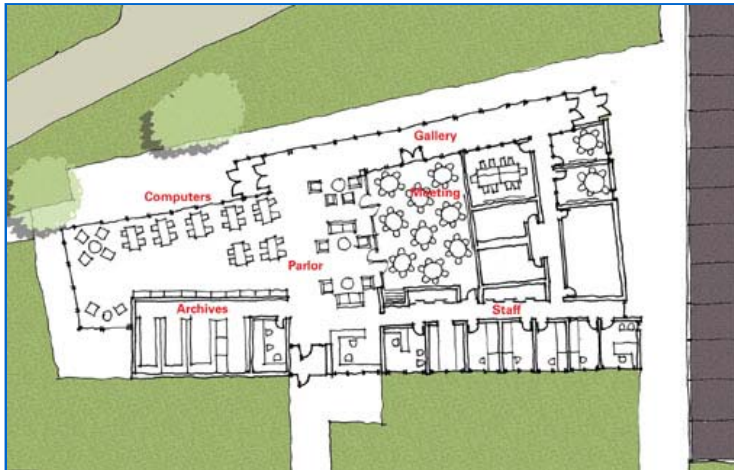
“To bring this building up to code and to put an addition on would allow myself and my colleagues to run an amazing library for the community,” said Creedon on Tuesday. “We wouldn’t have everything we have at 425 Main Street [the Mashashimuet site], but maybe this is not the era for everything.”

According to Creedon, the board will take the public comments and questions from Monday’s session and a final cost analysis from Conesco into consideration before settling on a final plan to bring to district residents on May 6.

If Monday night’s crowd is any indication, residents are pleased with the direction the board has taken. Rob Calvert thanked the board for delivering a successful range of options for the community to consider.

“I voted no the last time,” said Jackie Brody. “That was a bad plan. This is a good plan. I think a lot of people who voted no on the last one will vote yes on this one.”

Image below shows draft layout of library building as it could appear on lot adjacent to Mashashimuet Park. Image at bottom shows draft layout of main floor of historic building at 201 Main Street with 3-story expansion at the rear of the building.



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So Far, So Good

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It's been five years since the John Jermain Memorial Library's referendum for an \$8 million building plan was voted down — by a resounding majority — and it seems that after a serious period of regrouping, the library is finally close to zeroing in on at least one plan for its future. Ultimately, it will be the public that decides that future.

Five years ago, the library's proposal included both a new building on the property by Mashashimuet Park and a renovation of the old structure. We recall that there were several reasons why the proposal went down in defeat. Some people weren't convinced of the need for two libraries, others feared the hefty price tag or felt that the library hadn't reached out to the community in order to reach consensus. Then there were those who simply believed the library board lacked a clear vision of how the beloved old building would be used.

The irony, of course, is the drastic way in which the economy has changed in the intervening years. We feel that this new reality has taught everyone to re-evaluate priorities, and now, with the 20-20 vision of hindsight and a prudent hand on the tiller, the library can finally find a happy medium.

In June, a new referendum will be on the ballot. What type of referendum it will be, the library has yet to decide, but if it's a conditional referendum, residents will be asked to vote on one of three options —moving forward with repairs and a good size expansion to the current structure, building a second building at the park and expanding and making repairs to the old structure, or doing nothing at all. Should the board opt to put forth a phased referendum, residents would vote only on whether repair work should be done at the library along with a modest expansion.

Regardless of the referendum put forth and the final outcome of a public vote, we like the library's approach this time around, and are happy to see that a great deal of thought and effort has gone into thinking through the process of how the current building can not only be repaired and upgraded, but even expanded. Yes, a lot has changed in five years — including attitudes. While we often got the sense back then that there could never be enough space found at the current location to satisfy the facility's burgeoning needs, the library's new director, Cathy Creedon, has given her assurances that an expansion on site would give her enough room to run a fantastic library. Design is something we'll comment on later.

Regardless of whether a new building at the park is something that might become a reality in the coming months or years, we like the fact that the expansion and repair of the existing space appears to be the primary priority and feel it is one that is appropriate

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for the economic climate. Not only does it address the library's immediate demands for comfort and safety, but also demonstrates to the community that the library board is truly concerned about protecting the historic structure.

For us, doing nothing at all is not an option and there is no question that the 201 Main Street location is in dire need of repair. As builder Victor Conesco demonstrated with his carbon dioxide meter, if nothing is done the building would not only be cramped, but more importantly, unsafe.

The library board has learned a lot while on this five year journey and has approached this process in a measured and thoughtful way – clueing in and including the public at every step. After years of dreaming big, many of us realize that focusing on the task at hand is a better way to proceed. Hunkering down to protect what we have instead of whining about what we do not have is a wise course of action in troubled times and one that served both pioneers and puritans well. In this case anyway, we can learn a lot from our forbearers.

And when it comes to libraries, one that's "fantastic" is certainly good enough for us.

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Sag Harbor library expansion, take two

By Michael Wright



Officials at the John Jermain Library in Sag Harbor are planning to once again ask residents to approve a multimillion-dollar expansion plan, this time in a public referendum early this summer.

The plan has the bulk of the expansion taking place at the existing library, rather than constructing a completely new building, as was proposed in 2004. That \$8 million bond proposal was defeated at the polls, but library officials hope that with the help of a series of community forums held over the last year, some creative architectural designs and a concerted get-out-the-vote campaign over the next two months, the result will be different the second time around.

The library referendum will be held on June 29 and while a final cost estimate is two weeks off, the

project is rumored to be about \$7 million.

Library Director Catherine Creedon said the library's board has taken into account the economic hardships throughout the country right now. "Libraries keep pace with the past, but we're also responsible for the future," Ms. Creedon said. "The board has taken very, very seriously the changes in the economy since we started this process."

"Strong libraries make for strong communities, no matter what financial times we're in," she later added.

The new plans for the expansion were unveiled to a crowd of several dozen residents and board members at the library on Monday night, though Ms. Creedon emphasized repeatedly that they are still a "work in progress." The design sketches show nearly 6,000 square feet of additions to the century-old library building on Main Street just outside the village's business district—nearly doubling its internal space.

A second facility, on two properties near Mashashimuet Park that the library had targeted for the new building in 2004, would house state-of-the-art historical document storage facilities, community meeting rooms and study areas. The library already owns a parcel adjacent to the park and has an agreement to purchase a neighboring parcel when and if plans for the property are approved by residents.

Ms. Creedon said the referendum in June may ask voters for a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down on the overall project or may be broken into two or three propositions, asking voters to approve extensive renovations and expansion of the existing building and, if they support that, then to approve the new facility near the park.

The bulk of the work will be focused on the aging but regal library building: new roofing and windows, repairs to leaking basement walls, replacement of malfunctioning boilers, and upgrades to meet modern health and safety codes, including the addition of an elevator. Ms. Creedon told the crowd on Monday that the building suffers from a variety of woes, including frigid temperatures in winter due to the dysfunctional heating system, lack of space for proper computer areas and poor storage facilities for the library's extensive historical documents archive.

"I do know that we don't have heat. I know that we have electrical problems. I know that anyone who has difficulty climbing stairs can't get to our third floor," said Ms. Creedon, who took over as director last year. "I know that there seems to me to be a lot of difficult problems that make it worthwhile to go forward with repairs to this building."

Renovating the existing building presents a number of challenges, including finding space for structures on the cramped property, crowding of neighbors and continued parking problems in the busy summer season.

The cost analysis of the plan is being developed by Sandpebble Builders. Sandpebble President Victor Conseco said if the referendum is approved, planning would take a year or more, and construction would begin in the fall of 2010 and end by mid-2012.

Mr. Conseco said that low interest rates and falling construction costs due to the struggling national economy make the next two years an optimal time to take on such a project.

Ms. Creedon said that the library would have to move its programming and services to another site during portions of the major renovations to the building, which might not be all bad in the eyes of the chipper library director.

"I'd love to get a bookmobile," she said.

The library will hold another public meeting to discuss the expansion plans on May 6.

"If you think we could be doing this better, I would be real interested to know," Ms. Creedon said. "The vote should reflect not only the needs of the community, but the opinions of the community."

One member of the audience on Monday let her feelings be known right then.

"I voted no last time. That was a bad plan," Jackie Brody said. "This is a good plan."