

Jones Library: Listening Tour Preliminary Results – January 28, 2016

A Listening Tour was conducted by volunteers and staff of the Jones Library to assess the community's knowledge of the Library's plans to undergo a major construction project. An additional goal of the Tour was to inform the participants about known features of the project, and to collect feedback about which aspects appeal most, and about potential areas of concern.

Through January 10, 2016, 33 unique interviews have been conducted with a total of 43 people (some participants were interviewed together). A broad cross-section of individual opinions were sought, including local business leaders, community activists, school administrators, senior citizens, and others. Participants were presented a document illustrating "Key Facts about the New Library" as part of the interview session.

Statistics from the participant surveys:

- 23 of 33 participants (70%) are active library users.
- 22 of 33 participants (67%) have visited a modernized library facility.
- 30 of 33 participants (91%) were familiar with the Library's intention to build a new facility prior to the interview.
- 21 of 33 participants (63%) expressed support for the Library's plan to build a new facility. The remaining 12 participants (37%) said they "may" support the project, or support some aspects and not others.
- 16 of 33 participants (48%) said they would be interested in volunteering for the project.

Participants noted the following features as being the "most appealing" for a new library facility:

- Community meeting space (8)
- Increased access to computers / technology (8)
- Larger children's area (7)
- Collaborative work space (7)
- Reconfiguration of current space (5)
- Overall renovations (4)
- More space for ESOL program (4)
- A dedicated young adult area (4)
- Increased space for special collections (4)
- More overall space (3)
- Increased security / safety (3)
- More space for programs / services (2)
- Increased handicap accessibility (2)
- A modernized facility (2)
- More parking (2)

- Increase in use / circulation (2)
- Eliminating staircases
- Digital media lab
- No dripping water
- Safeguarding resources
- Positive economic impact on downtown
- Increased patronage
- Quiet study areas
- Sharon Sharry's expertise
- Better lighting
- Green building
- Maker space

Participants were asked to express their concerns about the project:

- Cost / potential override (22)
- Lack of adequate parking (6)
- Other capital projects in town (5)
- Aesthetics / design concerns (5)
- Opposed to café (4)
- Loss of "homey" feel (4)
- Potential need for override (2)
- Preserving memorial garden (2)
- Lack of mission clarity / "mission creep" (2)
- Preserving Strong House (2)
- Too many bells & whistles
- Over reliance on technology
- Elimination of books
- Access to bathrooms
- Adding parking will encourage use of single occupancy vehicles
- Insufficient outreach to minorities

Other Comments:

“Access to Children's Room shouldn't require an elevator.”

“Would it be cheaper to buy the bank building?”

“What will happen to the North Amherst Library?”

“This library may be very important, but other projects are critical for health and safety. Can it wait five years?”

“It's going to take a little bit to get used to the notion of wholesale changes.”

“Books are back in, people don't like eBooks.”

“We want it to stay the way it is -- we don't want someone to come in and modernize it.”

“You're going to have to go for an override.”

“We have been talking about a new fire station for 20 years”.

“When I walk through the Jones, I see a lot of unoccupied space.”

“We want to update the library, but that doesn't need to come in the form of glass and metal.”

““If we get a new fire station, the building next door would make a wonderful children's room.”

“The North Amherst library needs expansion -- they have no bathroom.”

“Why not wait ten years?”

“The Jones is a much needed resource.”

“Take people to modernized libraries to show them what is possible.”

“You should be able to raise \$2-3 million privately for this project.”

“The Jones is an important resource that should have the space it needs.”

“The ESL program needs more space.”

“In summer, the atrium is too hot and bright.”

“How much space can be gained by housing little-used materials offsite?”

“Have we asked schools and students how they will use more space?”

“Is the Jones the best place for community meeting space?”

“Why isn't the Jones thinking about the fire station or the first national bank building or the Strong House instead of new construction?”

“We should not count on much coming from town government.”

“The Jones should not have to have to meet all of the meeting space needs of the town.”

“Tweak the building as little as possible.”

“More public space should be very carefully reviewed in this era of cost control.”

“Collections should be properly housed, and they will only grow.”

“The Jones should have a sound building, particularly in an academic community such as Amherst.”

“Children love crowded chaos.”

“Idiosyncratic décor is good, don't make it look like a HoJo's.”

“The Jones could provide many more programs in the arts for small children.”

“I'm concerned about the other branches -- they need help.”

“The renovation should make the building as energy efficient as possible.”

“Make sure the design works for the town.”

“Do we need to expand?”

“Focus on library needs, not extras like a café.”

“Could the ESL program be located elsewhere?”

“Will all of the branches be renovated?”

“Why is there so much fuss over keeping the memorial garden?”

“The library should be a showcase for green energy.”

“The latches on the women's room stalls have been broken for a really long time, why have they never been fixed?”

“Jones can keep its homey feel and still be modern.”

“Put Adirondack chairs outside in the summer.”

“What is the strategic plan?”

“The Jones should be using Twitter and Instagram to promote whatever is going on.”

“Circulation is currently a complete logjam.”

“Don't touch the facades, the building needs to look the same in the front.”

“Have sessions for the public to show the current state of the library.”

Preliminary Concluding Thoughts

The Listening Tour concept is proving to be a good source of information from the community about the current sentiment toward the Jones Library renovation and expansion. Furthermore, it is a useful mechanism for library advocates to deploy in order to train themselves on how to discuss the project and to answer important questions that community members have about the project.

Clearly, the financial implications on the Town capital budget are a key concern of many interviewees. Developing the strongest case for the project, and fully explaining why the facility improvements need to be done following MBLC guidelines are going to be important factors in motivating the community to support the project at Town Meeting and through private funding.

At this point, it would seem prudent to reconvene the listeners to share the combined data in this report and to determine whether and how to continue the Tour.

It could also be useful to share this report with the project design team.