

## **Latest Non-fiction Release on Library Board's Progress in Building Project.....**

If someone had told me in 2005 when I took the office of president of the library board that we still wouldn't have a library built by the end of my presidency in 2006, I would have laughed at their foolishness. However, I am not laughing and I am very frustrated that circumstances have thwarted honest efforts by this board to complete the task before them.

When the Mayor and Common Council refused to consider rezoning property on Superior Street across from Foster Park for library construction in September, 2004, we were forced to start a very thorough process all over again. We began a complicated matrix of 9 different sites in the downtown area. We consulted construction firms, city engineers, appraisers, the planning commission, utility companies, assessment figures, environmental agencies and constructed a very detailed and fact based matrix to help us analyze the viability of each of the sites. We contacted the state office for Brownfield grants and began investigating on our own what kind of assistance we might expect. Later on the city joined us in this process. From this we narrowed the research process more specifically to the two-blocks commonly referred to as the Button Motors site which appeared to offer the most prospect. It was at this point we began to run into significant obstacles such as homeowners who refused to sell, a realtor grabbing up properties to represent and attaching unrealistic price tags, environmental studies that had significant findings, the YMCA that did not want to sell their parking lot (understandably) unless we could provide comparable space near their building for parking (doubling our cost), and the Mayor who continued to insist that in order to get city cooperation we had to guarantee that Button Motors would be our choice. We were challenged repeatedly that the facts we had gathered were false and exaggerated although we had consulted the most respectable sources we could get. Meeting after meeting with the Mayor and city officials gave us a lot of half promises, but no guaranteed answers to questions concerning sewer lines, costs of relocating overhead utilities, help in securing properties from unwilling owners, on-going concerns for future costs of environmental issues, and a laundry list of other concerns. We also expressed our deep concern for the ethical issues of having a developer who controlled much of the Button site as a consultant for the city on downtown development. We asked that he not attend meetings we were involved with, but were told if he couldn't attend, the Mayor wouldn't either.

I have to say during these months that many city councilmen expressed frustration that there was so much other "stuff" going on that they could not give sufficient time and energy to assisting us. However, they expressed their support of the library and offered what help they could give which we appreciated. Often we would get letters or calls from the Mayor saying the Council agreed with him on something only to find the Council knew nothing of the letter or its contents – such as the last one we received saying the Mayor was forming a citizen's commission and the Council would abide by its decision.

We, therefore, could not trust that what was being agreed to by the Mayor would also be approved by the Council. Often it was just the opposite. Meeting after meeting we were told that answers we needed would be sent in 30 days so we could move on – sometimes we would get them in 2 months and, in one case, it was 5 months. And all the

time this was going on, the Mayor was publicly expressing how he wanted to work with the library and didn't understand the delay.

We had our last meeting with the Mayor and other city officials on September 26, 2006 at which we gave our bottom line for our needs in considering the two-block Button site. The only new response we received (November 6, 2006) as a result of this meeting was that, 1) We should promptly proceed with contingent offers to purchase all properties on the Button site and 2) We should relinquish to the city all our confidential reports of Phase 2 environmental issues (which we have held in confidence per each owner's request). The letter closed with a statement that once again took us back to square one: "As a reminder, all funding and assistance offered above (many points were listed that were acceptable to the library) will be contingent on the availability of funding as well as any necessary approvals by required bodies, such as pertinent commissions, departments, agencies, or the full Common Council." Signed Matt McKillip.

Now, I ask you if you were responsible for making a decision based on the assurances offered, would you eagerly agree to buy an expensive parcel of downtown property not knowing how much help you would have in this endeavor? Instead, our board has chosen to step down and review our whole library system – all 3 branches. (The last review was in 2002, and we now have new data concerning our branches and total library circulation and traffic.) We will have the results of this review by the end of January. Perhaps there is a way to meet our space needs with property we already own and still have a fine facility in the downtown with a lower price tag to the taxpayers. At least, this is the goal that the board is moving toward. Also as a part of our long range planning, the board has annually set aside funds in our Library Improvement Fund for future building needs. We currently have \$4,357,444 in this fund dedicated to our building project.

It is my hope that the library's building needs will not be made a "political football" in the upcoming elections. It is to the advantage of the whole community that the board be allowed to make decisions as the law dictates without strings attached. After all, it is this same board that has built 2 prior facilities, Russiaville Branch (1998), and the South Branch (2001), without any debt and no extra burden on taxpayers.

And finally pertaining to the proposed development by Steve Alexander, we felt if there was any chance that an outside third party could entice private funding for revitalizing downtown Kokomo that it would in no way hamper our planning or progress to allow them 6 months to get it off the ground. Why 6 months? Believe it or not, we asked if 3 months would be long enough and Mr. Alexander said 6 months would be more realistic. And we agreed. Nothing to do with politics! We hope Mr. Alexander will be successful. It makes good sense to us to have private parties funding development that could generate businesses and services that could realistically generate tax revenues which certainly would be welcomed. This could be a "win-win" solution for our community. In any case, it will not have thwarted the planning progress of the board.

Here's hoping that 2007 will prove to be a rewarding and peaceful year for the citizens of Kokomo and a productive one for our public library.

Susan Luttrell  
Recent Past President, Current Vice-President  
Kokomo-Howard County Public Library Board