

Appendix B.  
**Initial Discussion Paper**

May 26, 2005

To: John Jermain Memorial Library  
Community Library Committee  
From: Jerry Nichols, Committee Consultant  
Re: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Libraries

At our first meeting I was asked to prepare a brief discussion paper about the “future of public library buildings”. Though a rather grand idea that might appear to be overly ambitious and speculative, the fact is that we need only look around our region and our nation to observe the realities of today’s public libraries and how communities throughout the United States are responding.

To assist you in this process we’ve set aside a few articles for your review and consideration at the Library and might suggest you stop in at any of the new public library buildings in our area. There are literally dozens to choose from. That’s because Suffolk County libraries are, like libraries throughout the United States, engaged in a marvelous and far-reaching renaissance of buildings and services unparalleled in American history.

From an academic perspective a survey of recent research on libraries in the U.S., U.K. and Australia, (as reported in *Information Research Watch International*, February 2005, p. 4.), indicated that public libraries demonstrated positive impact on society in the following ways:

- Individual personal development;
- Social cohesion, by providing a meeting place and center of community development;
- Community empowerment, by supporting community groups and developing a sense of equity and access;
- Local culture and identity
- Health and well-being, by contributing to the quality of life and how well people feel;
- Local economy, by providing business information and supporting skills development.

Though such peer reviewed research is important it’s still important to remember that public libraries are built by and for the public they serve. They are to whom we should turn when planning for the future. The commitment of individual citizen volunteers to the ideals of public libraries in our society continues to be the primary driving force in their growth and development to this day.

The current resurgence in public library building is based on four fundamental aspects of service that should be considered by this Committee in its deliberations. They may seem obvious but that makes them all the more compelling.

**Respect for Tradition:** The modern public library understands that traditional services are its core business and that the public library’s success is based on the provision of these services.

High quality information and a wide variety of reading materials in a variety of formats is a most basic service requirement. Professional, courteous service by a well-trained staff is essential. Customer service designed to serve as a catalyst for knowledge between the patron and the information they seek is what the Library is all about.

The Library's role as a part of community history cannot be overstated. As a repository for local history and, in many communities, a living part of local history, the modern library recognizes and honors its role as an institution rooted in the past while looking to the future.

**Investing in our Future: Youth Services:** Every single successful building program clearly recognizes the importance of library service to the children and young adults of the community. Statistics indicate that three of every five patrons entering the Library are children and their caregiver or young adults. Public libraries themselves are an investment in the future of our society and this is nowhere better seen than in the incredible range of services to our communities' youth. Programs and services from pre-natal care to teen spaces are to be found in the modern library. The importance of space, services and materials for our children must be a critical component of any plan.

**The Technology Place:** It is ironic that the very thing that many supposed would be the death of libraries has, in fact, provided the impetus for their renewed growth. Personal computers, the Internet, digitization and online databases have all been a significant factor in the development of public library services over the past decade. The public recognition of information as a valuable commodity (a basic premise of libraries) has increased the respect of the library as an institution. The rapid change of technology and the fact that libraries not only adopt these technologies but also teach them to mainstream Americans has made the public library the place to go for many citizens when they want to learn and utilize these technologies. Of course library facilities must adapt to provide these services and the irony is that computers take up more space than books in such a setting, not less.

**The Library as a Place:** Every discussion of public libraries today refers to their importance as a community center and as an important civic space. The concept of community in a democracy requires places for citizens to gather to exchange ideas, to organize, to plan and to participate in communal activities. Such civic space is also valued as a cultural resource, as much today as in the time of Mrs. Sage. Learning is not done in a vacuum but is a social process as well. Public libraries in America continue to provide their communities with a central place for learning, for culture, for recreation and for civic endeavor. They fill an essential role in this manner that transcends the traditional function of the Library and provides a solid foundation for a community's continued well-being.

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No doubt the Committee will have much to add to these basic observations but I suggest that any discussion of the future of the John Jermain Memorial Library include these fundamental building blocks of this century's American public libraries. I look forward to our discussion on these issues.

## **Meeting Standards**

It is interesting to note that Margaret Olivia Sage began her philanthropy in the Sag Harbor community in response to a crisis facing the local schools. The New York State Education Department had previously declared that the school facility was inadequate to the task of educating the community's children. The withdrawal of state aid was threatened unless a new facility was built. Her response was to subsidize, in part, the construction of a new school building. Not long after, in 1909, she built and gave to the community the beautiful John Jermain Memorial Library. This is the same building in use today.

Ironically the Library is now faced with the same problem as the school was nearly a century ago. In no way can it be argued that the Library building complies with the minimum standards for public library service under Commissioner's Regulations 90.2. To wit:

*CR90.2 (8) maintains a facility to meet community needs, including adequate space, lighting, shelving, seating, and restroom;*

On this point both the Library Board and the independent consultants hired by the John Jermain Future Fund agree. (Informal conversations with the New York State Division of Library Development confirm this opinion.) The critical aspect of the New York State standard is the inclusion of "community needs" in addition to generally accepted standards for space and, of course ADA compliance. Though not a crisis at the moment, the Library must work toward meeting these standards to maintain its charter from the Regents. Ultimately, for the Library to maintain its charter as an educational corporation in the State of New York, the Library service program must be housed in a facility meeting these standards and accessible to all.

## **Cherishing a Community Landmark**

The John Jermain Memorial Library building is one of the region's most distinct public buildings. A remarkable and distinctive facility a century ago, the Library continues to inspire today. In addition to presenting the Library Board with a magnificent building, well furnished and stocked with books, Mrs. Sage determined that the Trustees provide "for such lectures, exhibitions, instruction or amusement in connection with the institution as they may deem from time to time desirable." This acknowledgement of the Library as a place of "more than just books" was evident in 1917 when the Library purchased a Victrola and records. By 1920, 1853 records were borrowed by Library patrons. Of course both the community and public library services have come a long way from the days of the Victrola. While the population in the Library's charter area has grown fivefold and new services abound, the Library remains in the same facility so generously donated by Mrs. Sage to the community nearly one hundred years ago.

It is critical to note that the Library as an institution is not a building, but a vibrant, responsive and contemporary educational service program intended to enrich the lives of our citizens and strengthen our American democracy.

Ample time and effort has been spent detailing the inadequacies of the current facility for the provision of modern-day library services. All reasonable parties agree that significant issues exist in the need for greater space, seating, computer equipment, program areas and accessibility. However, as inadequate and challenging as the library building may be, it is a deeply cherished local landmark and, as far as many residents of the community are concerned, will always be “the Library”.

The future of the John Jermain Memorial Library building is as important to many residents (and more important to some) as the future of the public library itself. Though these may indeed be two issues, their resolution is inextricably entwined.

### **Community Expectations**

Beneath all the swirl of controversy surrounding the recent building proposal it would seem reasonable to believe that the residents of the Sag Harbor School District served by the John Jermain Memorial Library have every right to expect the same quality of public library services enjoyed by their neighboring communities. The renaissance in public library building experienced throughout our region and nation cannot go unnoticed. The rediscovery of the public library as the community’s information and technology center, fueled to a great extent by the Internet, is an almost universal trend. The suggestion that the Library’s patrons take advantage of other communities’ support of their libraries so as to avoid the necessity of dealing with these expectations locally is irresponsible.

Every Library patron has the right to expect a facility with ample materials displayed on reachable shelving; with today’s research tools readily available and a comfortable place to sit and read or study. They should also expect, in Mrs. Sage’s words “such lectures, exhibitions, instruction or amusement” as is found in public libraries throughout our region and nation.

Meeting these expectations is the responsibility of the Library Board of Trustees. Their efforts in recent years to hire a professional, highly trained staff and support them in their mission to provide top-flight services to every member of the community should be acknowledged. The results, by any statistical measurement, have been remarkable.

There is yet another expectation of our society today for all public institutions, and especially of public libraries whose mission is to enrich the lives of all, and that is accessibility. The present facility only permits access for those with mobility difficulties to the basement level. Even there the area is not in any way ADA compliant. The first and second floors are simply out of reach. Even with the installation of an elevator significant renovation would be required to meet the most basic building codes for disability access.

For a public institution in the twenty-first century such a situation is simply unacceptable. And, of course, accessibility also means sufficient parking for all patrons. The Library district extends well beyond Sag Harbor’s Main Street and includes the residents of Bay

Point, North Haven, Noyac and Mount Misery. Adequate and safe parking is a reasonable expectation for any public service.

## **Conflicting Solutions**

Any future discussion of the Library and its future must acknowledge the concepts already brought forward and re-evaluate each of them in a reasonable and rational manner. The Library Board's proposal to construct a new facility near Mashashimuet Park clearly addresses the Library's service and programmatic responsibilities but does not satisfactorily (at least in the public's opinion) integrate the original building into the ongoing mission of the Library. The several suggestions to add onto the existing facility within the restrictions of the current lot are intriguing to say the least, but do not adequately address the service program needs of today's public library, let alone tomorrow's.

The concept of purchasing the property behind the Library (as once attempted by Mrs. Sage) may offer an acceptable compromise but would require creative architecture and significant cooperation from nearby neighbors and Sag Harbor Village officials. However, until a lasting solution to the legal issues surrounding the property is in place, this remains a moot point.

It would be most appropriate for these, and other reasonable approaches to be re-examined by the community. The one alternative that is not acceptable is to do nothing.

## **Timeliness**

The fact that the Library Board's proposal to build a new Library facility was defeated by the voters last fall does not release them from their obligation to continue to seek solutions and to bring the Library up to minimum standards at the very least. At some point in the foreseeable future the Board must develop a proposal to address these needs and seek community support once again. Waiting for Mrs. Sage to solve the problem will not work this time around and meanwhile, the rising costs of construction are far outpacing inflation in today's economy.

## **Summary**

In conclusion there are five core issues that must be acknowledged in any further discussions of the future of the John Jermain Memorial Library:

- ❖ The present Library facility does not meet generally accepted standards of the library field and is not in compliance with the Minimum Standards for Public Library Service of the New York State Education Department.
- ❖ The Library building given to the Sag Harbor community nearly one hundred years ago by Mrs. Russell Sage is an irreplaceable landmark that must be treasured and remain an integral part of library service in the community.

- ❖ The Library must strive to meet the expectations of its community for modern, high quality public library service that is fully accessible to all residents.
- ❖ All reasonable suggestions to meet the challenges noted above should be thoroughly explored once again and new ones considered.
- ❖ Ultimately it is the Library Board's responsibility to develop a proposal that is both acceptable to the community and that will address these issues in a timely manner.