



Phillipsburg Free Public Library

908-454-3712 voice ❖ 908-859-4667 fax ❖ www.pburglib.org

200 Broubalow Way, Phillipsburg, NJ 08865

April 15, 2021

Dear Members of Phillipsburg Town Council,

The Phillipsburg Library Board of Trustees writes this letter to all members of the Phillipsburg Town Council regarding the proposed 2021 library budget. We are dismayed by the budget number arrived at by Council at the March 27, 2021 budget hearing. The \$550,000 budget represents an increase over the original \$337,473 that was laid out to the Phillipsburg Public Library at a meeting between Board President Ed Bullock, Library Director Dave Krolak, Mayor Tersigni, Councilman Piazza, CFO Bob Merlo, and Business Administrator Rob Bengivenga. We believe that the \$550,000 budget allocation for the Library does not allow adequate funding for the Library to provide even the basic services that are needed by the Library patrons and the residents of Phillipsburg.

We understand that times are difficult for thousands of people in Phillipsburg, however we would argue that the Library is a service that the town provides that would garner widespread support for funding. The library has operated since 1923, and in its present location since 1969. It is an institution that has become a part of the very fabric of the local community. Generations of Phillipsburg residents have used the town's library and passed on their usage habits to their children, and grandchildren. The Library Board members have long-standing ties to this community and have invested a great deal of hours in volunteer work into trying to make this a better community for all who live here. The Business Administrator has stated that the library needs to make sacrifices and engage in shared pain. What about the pain of the residents who will watch services of their proud library disappear? What about the pain of library staff members who have dedicated large parts of their lives to the library, only to live with the uncertainty of not knowing whether their jobs are safe for any long period of time? What about the value of a service to the town that goes beyond pure numbers? What about the value of a service that tries to provide something to everyone who walks through the doors or uses online services?

The library has more than shared its portion of the burden. Contrary to publicly made statements that the library has been closed since the start of the pandemic, the library has been partially open to the public since the end of July 2020. During that time, we have provided in-house computer use by appointment twice a day. We have provided curbside pickup for physical library materials since June 22, 2020. We have worked hard to maintain digital content for library patrons to access from the comfort and safety of their own homes, but some of the digital content has gone away due to the uncertainties in 2021 year library funding. We have continued providing library programming in a virtual environment from award-winning Children's Librarian Christina

Crandall's storytime sessions, take-home crafts, reading contests, to adult book clubs, telephone and email reference services, adult programming, and many more services. If this is what a closed library looks like, we strongly dispute that characterization. Full-time staff, in spite of having no obligation to do so, continued working from home during the 3 months of forced closure due to state guidelines. That speaks volumes to the professionalism and constant desire to continue maintaining services. Imagine how demoralizing it must be to find out that the library funding continues to decrease each year no matter how hard they work to provide services for the community. At the start of 2020, the library had 15 employees, 9 full-time, and 6 part-time (roughly 10.5 FTE). With an upcoming retirement, the library will be down to 4 full-time employees and 4 part-time employees (roughly 6.5 FTE). Staffing is down nearly 50% and the library is not only being given less money for essential services/staffing, the library is being told that it must furlough employees to meet the \$550,000 budget? The consequences to public services will be catastrophic. We recognize the town is willing to cover the building maintenance, but building maintenance costs do not give us the ability to purchase new library materials, or to provide adequate levels of staffing to reopen completely in a non-pandemic environment. The residents of this town will suffer from all of this. We cannot help but feel that no one is considering what this will do to the community who rely on the library for internet/computer access, books, magazines, newspapers, movies, reference assistance, children's programming, and adult programming among many other things.

During the Budget Hearing on March 27, the presentation about the Library budget included staggered furloughs for Library staff, which were reported to save the Library \$120,000. The Business Administrator stated that, with State unemployment benefits and additional federal unemployment benefits, the Library staff would make more money than they make from their current employment. An analysis by the Library union determined that some staff would actually lose money (one staff member would lose 20.8%). At the April 1 Library Board of Trustees meeting, the union President related to the Board a list of demands the union would require before considering possible furloughs. The Board requested that the union provide these in writing to the Board and to the Town Council. It is unclear at this time whether the union will approve the suggested furloughs. It is important to note that the Board cannot force them to accept furloughs. We do not want to see the future of the staff impacted in the manner it is currently being impacted.

As part of the budget discussion, the Library was asked to use some of its non-dedicated surplus to fund the Library's budget. The Board is willing to consider this option. However, before we do that, we are requesting information about Federal aid that is coming to Phillipsburg from the American Rescue Plan. We have heard and read that the Town is expected to receive almost \$1.4 million from this Federal relief plan. Should not some of this relief aid be used to fund the Library, to bring the Library budget up to the \$765,900 requested by the previous Library Director in the original budget request?

We are at a loss for words. Why is it that those who came before you on Town Council across the generations understood the need for the Phillipsburg Public Library, and why it was a vital aspect of the community for so long, but suddenly it does not seem to matter any longer? We were blindsided last year by the introduction of a library closure referendum that at Council meetings, all members of the community who spoke supported the Library and opposed the

referendum. We now find ourselves less than a year later being told through action alone that the library is not an important part of the community.

We have heard Town Council openly talk about trying to bring new businesses into the town in order to create new economic opportunities for the town collectively, and to help raise the status and profile of Phillipsburg. But given everything that has transpired since the start of 2020 relating to the library, why would people move to this town? Taking away or severely limiting the services of the town department that has one of the most positive public images in town, does not uplift the status or profile of the town. It will serve to chase people away from Phillipsburg. The Board is left wondering what it will take for the Council to collectively understand that the Phillipsburg Library is and needs to remain a vital part of the community. We believe that the public will make their voices known.

Sincerely,

Phillipsburg Free Public Library Board of Trustees

Edward Bullock, President
James DeBosh, Vice President
Ralph Jiorle, Treasurer
Emil Brisson
Aimee Meissner