

Boston cuts target community centers, libraries

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Boston residents face new threats to city services, as the Boston Public Library system, along with community centers and public swimming pools are targeted for cutbacks. The cuts, spearheaded by Democratic Mayor Thomas Menino with support from Democratic Governor Deval Patrick, will have a deep impact on both services and jobs.

Already earlier this month, the Massachusetts Department of Education released a list of 35 “underperforming” schools, where the jobs and contracts of teachers are directly threatened. The Boston Public Schools responded by ordering teachers at six of these schools to reapply for their jobs.

In a recent speech, Mayor Menino touted the new cuts as a “transformation.” Speaking to the Boston Municipal Research Bureau on March 4, Menino stated that “we have to face some hard truths...we will have a community center in every neighborhood. But as we look ahead, we may have to consolidate some under-utilized facilities.”

The city currently has 46 community centers and pools, many in working class neighborhoods like Dorchester, East Boston, Mattapan and Roxbury. Boston’s Human Services budget, under which the Boston Centers for Youth and Families are funded, represented only 1.9 percent of the city’s budget in fiscal year 2010, or \$1.83 million. The Centers for Youth and Families budget received a 2.4 percent cut in FY10.

While the extent of the planned community center cuts is not clear at present, proposed cuts to the Boston Public Library (BPL) system have been far more specific. At a series of recent public meetings, some billed euphemistically as “Community Conversations,” the system’s administration and trustees have proposed closing 10 of the system’s 29 branch libraries and eliminating as many as 100 jobs.

The *Boston Globe* reported that 400 people filled a lecture hall on March 9 at the main library to oppose the

cuts. In the course of the meeting, City Council President Michael P. Ross was shouted down with the phrase “let the people speak.”

According to a list of “First Facts” <http://www.bpl.org/general/firsts.htm> on the library’s website, the BPL was the first public library to let people borrow books and other materials, the first public library to open a children’s room (in 1895), and “a pioneer in establishing audiovisual services for libraries.” The architect of the main location in Copley Square referred to his building as a “palace for the people” when it was opened in 1895.

As with the recent attacks on public education in the city, the threatened library cuts are being blamed on the financial and budget crises. However, it is precisely because of the economic crisis that the libraries are crucial for workers and young people—both as gathering places and sources of learning.

The library’s website reports that during its most recent fiscal year more than 40,000 Boston residents signed up for new library cards—the highest number in its history—and more than 300,000 Boston residents used their library cards. The website notes that “in a year-over-year comparison” there has been “a 15% increase in visits to bpl.org, a 10% increase in Boston residents using cards, and a 21% increase in Boston residents newly registered for library cards.” System-wide, adult borrowers checked out more than 2.6 million books, DVDs, and CDs, while the number was more than 400,000 for juvenile borrowers.

In addition, the library system provides a crucial source of Internet access for unemployed workers and those who cannot afford a monthly bill for home access. In fiscal year 2009 the Web was accessed more than 680,000 times from library computers.

The immediate reason given for the planned closings is a \$3.6 million deficit in the library’s budget for the next

fiscal year. The city's budget problems are being driven by drastic cuts in local state aid, coupled with a 30-year-old law that caps yearly increases in property tax revenues.

At the state level, negotiations between Democratic Governor Deval Patrick and the Democratic Party-dominated state House and Senate have begun over the FY11 budget. While the governor's proposal, traditionally the first to be released, boasts about avoiding large cuts, it is built in part on an unrealistic estimate of a 3 percent increase in state revenues next year.

At the end of last week, two state legislators accused the governor of relying too much on one-time federal stimulus funding in his proposal, and pointed to the threat of \$200 million in cuts in local aid from the state. According to a press release from the Massachusetts Municipal Foundation, this cut would be on top of the \$724 million of local aid cuts in the current fiscal year.

When asked in a March 10 *Boston Phoenix* interview about the local aid cuts affecting Boston's libraries, Governor Patrick declared that "I'm not gunning for public libraries.... In the same way, I'm not gunning for state employees. Still, I've had to eliminate 2,200 positions already, and there'll be more. And impose furloughs, and get concessions from the public-employee unions, and pay freezes, and cuts, and all the rest of it to manage through this crisis."

In the same interview, however, he makes clear that while the economic crisis provides the impetus for school and library cuts, his attack on the schools has a permanent purpose. It "was a 10-year strategy. It wasn't a one-bill strategy," he stressed. "This is the first piece, and it's a big first step."

Patrick is also relying on the teachers unions for help with this "10-year strategy" in imposing cutbacks and attacks on teachers and students rights. In the interview, he calls the union's leadership "marvelous."



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