

Detroit residents protest plans to close local library

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Scores of Detroit residents picketed outside the Jessie Chase branch of the Detroit Public Library in northwest Detroit at an all-day protest against the plan announced by the city to close Chase, along with five other libraries. “We are not going to stand for this place being closed,” G. Peggy Noble told the WSW. “We are not going to stand for a building like this being boarded up. This library is small, but it is vital. They should put more money in to expand it.”

Library administrators announced their intention to close six library branches last month, after budget cuts forced the layoffs of a significant portion of library staff earlier this year. In addition to the Chase branch, the libraries slated for closure are the Chandler Park, Lincoln, Mark Twain Annex, Monteith and Richard branches.

Noble, who is president of the Fenmore Block Association, spoke on its involvement with the campaign to keep the Chase library open. “We just reconstituted our block club. On August 4 we found out that the Chase branch was scheduled to be closed. We encouraged all our members to get out here and protest.

“This branch has been here for over 50 years. Not only do we hold our block club meetings here, our concern is the children who come here to use computers, to do research. On the one side they tell children to get a good education, but on the other hand they are taking away.

“My problem is with the people at the top. The only thing they are doing is sitting on their plush furniture.

“We are fed up. Everyone in the neighborhood keeps the block up. They are going to hear from us. This is not the end of it.”

A delegation of Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) members and supporters joined the demonstration and distributed a leaflet titled “Oppose

all library cuts!” The flyer made the point that “The location of these cuts is not an accident, and it is not because these branches are not needed. These cuts are in line with the decision of the Bing administration to close whole areas of the city that are determined to be ‘unviable.’ This is despite the fact that libraries are more in demand today than ever before, and that many branches like the Chase branch are constantly full.”

While the Fenmore neighborhood (the area immediately surrounding the Chase Library) is a vibrant community and not on the city’s “unviable” list, which would mean it would face the prospect of losing city services (see “Democratic mayor rolls out Detroit downsizing plan”), the reasoning cited in the media for closing the local library was “building condition, usage and neighborhood population.”

The Chase Library is full during virtually all of its hours of operation. A block club member told the WSW that the visit by Detroit Public Library Commissioner Jonathan Kinloch earlier that day, in response to the protest, was the first time library administrators bothered to come.

Darryell Blackmon, a retired city worker, told the WSW, “We were just talking about the ripple effect closing this library would have.

“All kinds of people in the neighborhood as far as Lahser, up to Eight Mile and over to Greenfield come here. Not only that, some kids use this as safety after school before their parents get home from work. My kids came here to study because of the Internet. Not everybody can afford to have the Internet in their home.

“Until I came to the block club meeting, I didn’t even know they were planning to close this place down. They keep it so low-key.”

The block club was circulating a petition to keep the library open. Passers-by greeted the demonstration with

enthusiasm and many stopped to sign.

Pat, the vice president of the Fenmore Block Club, said “You have no idea how important this library is to our community. This city is in crisis because of jobs. People come here to learn how to write a resume. It is a safe environment for our kids. A lot of schools don’t have libraries anymore. Kids are encouraged to be in reading programs. But kids need libraries. I have never been in this library when it was not crowded.

“We’re not Rosedale Park, but we are an honest, working class group of people who want our kids to be educated. We have 200 signatures on our list and we have only been out here since 1:30.”

Ron, who works at a garage across the street from the library, joined the picket. He said, “I think closing this library is a bad idea for the community. There are a lot of kids around here who want to learn. If they don’t have the opportunity to come here and read a book, not telling what they could be subjected to. I am going to do my best to get as many of our customers to sign as I can. We definitely want our kids to have something positive.

“There are so many schools being shut down. I have seen hundreds and hundreds of kids come to use this place. The kids who are coming here come because they want to learn. I think that is a great thing. By closing this library they will be depriving children who want to learn.

“We have a small community but we all stick together. I have a petition in my garage and I am going to have customers sign it even if they come to just get air.”

Michelle Kelsey, who currently attends the University of Michigan, said, “My family has lived on Kenmore for four generations. Several of the families that live on the street have been here longer. There are a lot of kids in the neighborhood who come here. It is always filled. Adults are here searching for jobs. There is the Partnership for Reading program and different activities for the community. There are senior activity programs here. It would be devastating for the community if it closed. They are also going to close the library at Grand River and Seven Mile.”

Diante Montgomery, a student at University Preparatory Science and Math High School, spoke to the WSWs. He said, “Its terrible. I am here all the time. People use this library for a lot of things. I see young

people here all the time.”

Donald Bailey from John R King Middle School said, “This is our closest library. We can get on the computer and help each other with homework. If this library closes I will not be able to see my friends. This is the one library where we can come to print and to get books to read. You are talking about people being on the street if it closes.

“Sometimes we aren’t able to do our work at school. Some of us don’t have computers. They have tutors to help us with our homework. If this library closes some of the kids may get into crime.”



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