

Detroit library closings face angry opposition

Lawrence Porter
20 October 2011

Under intense pressure from the population and community organizations, the Detroit Public Library Board commission was deadlocked 3-3 in a vote Tuesday on the planned closure of four library branches.

Three east side branches, Mark Twain, Lincoln and Montith, and a Westside location, Richard, had expected to face the budget axe. The decision expressed divisions among the commissioners on how the cuts are to be carried out, and an effort to buy time to get around public opposition. The board will take up the issue again in two weeks.

Over the past month there has been a series of demonstrations against the announced closures. These demonstrations were initiated and organized in the teeth of opposition by both the Detroit political establishment—all Democrats—and trade union officials who explicitly endorsed the closings.

The Tuesday vote was the third attempt at library closings by the library board since April. The initial proposal was to shutter 18 out of 23 branches, a full three-quarters of the libraries in the city.

The board then backed off this plan, saying that it was the product of clerical error. However, it laid off 82 staff members during the summer to cut costs. In September the board announced plans to close six branches: the four branches currently slated for closure plus Chase and Chandler Park. Demonstrations were then held with the demand that commissioners attend meetings at the branches slated for closure. Following those meetings, the commissioners announced last week that four branches would be closed instead of six, with a final decision to be made at the meeting on Tuesday.

Approximately 80 people attended the standing-room only meeting, to the obvious dismay of the commissioners. Many workers took time off from work to attend the meeting, speaking out to defend their local libraries.

Commission member Gregory Hicks, who claimed to oppose the closings, called for a city-wide meeting before a vote to shut the libraries was taken. Commission President Judge Edward Thomas rejected the proposal, saying that meetings had already been held, and the commission was

delaying the inevitable. Commissioner Russell Bellant exploded at the crowd, declaring that those opposed to the cuts were indifferent to the workers who lost their jobs, even though it was the commissioners who made the job cuts.

A particularly despicable role has been played by the local unions who have endorsed the city's plan and have attempted to pit library workers against local residents. AFSCME Local 1259 President Todd Kelly, who represents the library employees, stated to the media, "This isn't about the buildings. This is about the bodies inside the buildings. The staff is entirely in favor [of closures]. People are stressed."

At the meeting, several people noted that many of the libraries slated for closure are located in the areas designated by Democratic Detroit Mayor David Bing as "unviable" and slated for the overall elimination of city services as part of his misnamed "Detroit Works" plan.

Harvey Turner attended the meeting to represent his block club. He spoke in opposition to the closure of Lincoln Library. "We need this library," he said. "We asked people if they were prepared to pay an extra millage for a library. Ninety-one percent said yes.

"We have a new influx of immigrants coming into our neighborhood," he continued. "They need the library. We have an instructor from Wayne State University who is teaching them English for free."

Describing the conditions in his neighborhood, Turner added: "We lost our recreation center. We lost our cultural center. We lost our neighborhood city hall. This is another way to push the population out and bring the population down in the city—cut off their resources. We don't need it."

Loretta Bunn, from the St. Cecilia Community Action Team, spoke about the Richard branch: "It's an icon, a place where everyone in the community goes. We go of course to read. On Saturday there are so many people lined up for the computers that it is an hour wait.

"They have quilting, crocheting and knitting," Bunn added. "Our area is coming back slowly. There are a lot of things that need to be built back up. This is one mainstay that we really want to keep."

Rev. Theodore Parker, Pastor of St. Cecilia and St. Leo

Parishes, spoke to the WSWWS about the threatened closing of the Richard branch. “This will be one more blow to a city that doesn’t need it. If you take the library away, it diminishes the neighborhood. You are taking a once great city down another notch.

“We have no university around us, no industry, just people who are poor. Now they want to take this away.”

Several speakers referred to a recent report that found that nearly 50 percent of Detroiters are functionally illiterate. The libraries are needed to improve the education skills of adults and children alike.

Dr. Jeffrey Robinson of the Missionary Baptist Church came to represent the Mark Twain Annex on the east side. “We know that the illiteracy rate is astronomical, and for that reason we ask that you not close the Mark Twain branch.”

Robinson pointed to the fact that use of the library had doubled, and that it is a meeting and cultural center used by the entire neighborhood. “We have to think of our children. We run deficits for everything else, but we will not run deficits when it comes to our children. I think this is a travesty.

“My fear is that if they close the library there will be nothing left on the east side. You cannot have a community without libraries.”

Lenora Collier of St. Cecilia Church said there are 12,000 students in the area of the Richard branch who will no longer have a library to go to. “Our church has 600 students who use that library. [Adult] men and women come to the library to apply for jobs.”

Awilia Brown explained that she is part of five generations that grew up in Detroit, and all proudly used the Montieth Library. “I have family members who used the library and went to college. For you to close this library would be a travesty,” said Brown.

“We do not need to close Montieth Library,” she added. “If you close Montieth, which is the only library left on the east side, the only thing left will be the prisons.”

Marlena Duren moved to Detroit three years ago and was astonished to hear that the libraries would close. “I came here because I am opposed to closing libraries. I have never seen so many people begging to keep their library open like this before. I thought we were moving forward not backward.”

“My daughter loves to read,” said Marlena. “It would be devastating for her to not have a library or books.”

Valerie, another Detroit resident, said, “The library is a symbol of society. When you start to close libraries it recalls the holocaust, the burning of books.”

Closing libraries, she said, “is like telling the people of Detroit you don’t care any more. We are preparing the

people of Detroit to go to prison.”

Elizabeth Williams, also from the Richard branch area, said, “Taking away the library would be like throwing someone into the English Channel who did not know how to swim. It’s an opportunity for children to learn how to read, how to do research, how to communicate with other people in the community.”

Members of the library commission indicated that the closing of libraries was inevitable given the understaffing and the supposed lack of resources. Several expressed impatience with the public testimony and a desire “to move on.”

Library commission president Thomas defended the closures of the libraries on economic grounds. “The harsh reality is that the money we had last year we don’t have this year, and the money we have this year we won’t have next year,” he said, referring to the decline in property tax revenues due to home foreclosures. “It is hard to see your branch library close. Over the years people have seen their libraries close—and they go down the street to another branch.”

Another commission member referred to Obama’s jobs bill, which contains money for school libraries but not for public libraries.

Another library commission member, expressing frustration with the public input, said, “We can’t keep going from meeting to meeting. We need to get this over with.”

Jo Anne Mondowney, executive director for the Detroit public library said, “In order to save this system we have to make difficult decisions.”

A proposal for the holding of a community meeting to discuss the future of the libraries failed for lack of a second, paving the way for what will likely be a new vote in two weeks.

The library commission is itself appointed by the Detroit Public Schools Board of Education, which has been carrying out mass firings of teachers and the closing of schools.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact