New York Public Library backs off 42nd Street reconstruction plans

Sandy English
6 October 2012

New York Public Library (NYPL) president Anthony W. Marx has announced major revisions in its plans to restructure the NYPL's flagship 42nd Street Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. The plan as originally envisioned would have moved more than 1.5 million books out of the building, the library's Central Branch, and across the Hudson River to New Jersey. The Schwarzman Building houses the second-largest public research library in the United States after the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

A member of the Library's Board of Trustees, Abby S. Milstein, and her banker husband, Howard S. Milstein, have given the library a gift of $8 million so that the Schwarzman Building can be reconfigured to accommodate many of these books.

The original proposal, presented in April, was to have consolidated the holdings of the nearby Mid-Manhattan and Science, Industry and Business libraries into the main 42nd Street building. These buildings would have been sold for approximately $200 million, and their collections moved to the Schwarzman Building, where they would have circulated to the public.

To make room for the two libraries' collections, 1.5 million books presently housed in the Schwarzman Building, which do not circulate and can only be used on the premises for research purposes, would have been moved to New Jersey. While they would no longer be available within a few minutes of request to researchers, Marx claimed that they could arrive at the Central Library in less than 24 hours.

The original plan evoked a storm of opposition from writers and scholars who claimed that New York would effectively lose its premier research institution under the plan, and one of the few public research libraries in the United States.

Library officials acknowledged that the main reason for the plan to sell off the nearby buildings and consolidate their holdings into the research library was the increasing financial difficulties facing New York's public libraries. New York City has three library systems, one in Brooklyn, one in Queens, and one for the boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island. The Queens system is the largest in the United States.

For the past several years, the city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, has proposed tens of millions of dollars in cuts, threatening the three library systems with reductions in hours, layoffs and smaller budgets for materials acquisition. While the bulk of the funding has been restored, usually at the last minute before the City Council votes on the budgets, the city's libraries have sustained millions of dollars in cuts and have hemorrhaged jobs and services. Public libraries are on the decline in New York.

The research institutions of the city, four altogether including the Central Library, have annual operating expenses of $113.9 million. Thirty percent of this comes from a relatively small endowment of $830 million, 22 percent comes from donations and 19 percent comes from income the libraries generate themselves. The city provides 21 percent. According to Robert Darnton, one of the trustees of the library, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, the city "cut its contribution severely in the middle of last year, and it has reduced its support by 28 percent over the last four years. While the city contributes less, the library needs more, owing to the increasing costs of books, periodicals, and digital data. The result has been retrenchment. In 2008 the research libraries spent $15.2 million on acquisitions; in 2011 they spent $10.8 million."

The Bloomberg administration and a political

© World Socialist Web Site

establishment dominated by the Democratic Party has sought to resolve the crisis of the library system by cutting facilities for the working class and bolstering the more visible civic features of the institution, especially in Manhattan, by infusions of cash from the super-rich. The Central Library's 42nd Street building was renamed after private equity billionaire Stephen A Schwarzman after he donated $100 million several years ago.

The current expansion of the research facilities on 42nd Street is only being made possible by a large donation from the Milsteins. Howard S. Milstein is a billionaire banker from one of the dominant families in New York real estate in recent decades.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site