

Tucker Free Library Accessibility and Safety Project - Recap and Update

December 2021

It has been over four years now since the Tucker Free Library was informed that its 35-year-old Garaventa wheelchair lift could no longer be repaired: that the next breakdown would be its last and the library would be looking at losing its designation as “Handicap Accessible” in compliance with the American with Disabilities Act (ADA).

At that time, the Board of Trustees took the problem to the Henniker voters. TFL hosted a number of public meetings where options were discussed: they ranged from doing nothing (and losing Accessible status) to replacing the Garaventa (which would do nothing to address the restroom problem) to building an elevator and accessible restrooms that would bring the historic building into full ADA compliance. While vague price tags could be put on some of the options, no one knew the cost - or even the feasibility - of a building project.

In 2018 the voters chose to spend \$10,500.00 to determine whether it was even possible to undertake a building project to install an elevator and add handicap accessible restrooms to the existing building. Architects and engineers were engaged to provide some answers. TFL reported back to the town through meetings and in writing on results of the feasibility study. The study showed that it would, indeed, be possible to undertake such a project, but the price tag could not be determined without a design to cost out.

This option still had enough support to move forward with a tentative design, so in 2019 the voters chose to spend an additional \$70,000.00 to complete (with significant public input) a design for a project that would completely address the accessibility and safety issues that had been raised. The design also included plans to finish off the top floor of the library building (which would be accessed by the new elevator), turning it into usable space for library programs and other public meetings and events. The design plans were broken down in a way that various pieces of the project could be itemized and considered separately (i.e., elevator, restrooms, third floor space).

The 2019 plans have been shared with the public through open meetings and with library representatives bringing schematics to town events (e.g., Music on Main Street, Town Meeting) - with the aim of informing as many voters as possible about the composition and cost of a building project. All project related documents are also available for review at: [LIBRARY BUILDING SAFETY & ACCESSIBILITY PROJECT – Tucker Free Library](#)

The complete building project would have cost around \$2.2 million in 2019. Designers anticipated an increase of approximately 7-8% every year thereafter.

In 2020, with Covid-19 raging across the country; with frightening uncertainty about the economy; and with an extremely large number of very costly projects being considered by the Town, the TFL Board of Trustees believed it would not be a good time to ask voters to consider yet another multi-million-dollar project that likely did not rise to the level of priority of other needs. Trustees did, however, believe that the voters had made it clear that this was something the town should keep on the radar and plan for. All manner of fund raising should be considered.

A request to include the building project in the Town's Capital Improvement Plan was submitted to the CIP Committee, with no specific funding level or timeframe suggested. With no discussion with anyone associated with the library, and no questioning as to what specifically was proposed, the CIP Committee rejected the request to include TFL in the CIP long-term planning, stating that the project was "not consistent with community values." TFL leadership, Board and supporters were dismayed by the Committee's response.

2021 is, again, a difficult year for taxpayers and citizens of Henniker, with many competing priorities to be faced as budgets are being submitted, reviewed and revised. The Board, again, does not feel it would be appropriate to request a large appropriation toward a building project.

However, the Board believes strongly that the project is squarely in line with community values (as evidenced by investments already approved by the voters) and should be incorporated in the Capital Improvement Plan for the Town of Henniker. There may not be large sums of money that can be allocated to the project, but it belongs firmly in the Plan. Other forms of fund raising are also being explored (e.g., grants, capital campaigns).

As 2022 approaches, with the library again open for business (post pandemic shut-down), the risk of losing our accessibility designation increases. We continue to want open dialogue with the voters about the options to address these issues. We now know what a building project would cost and we believe it is important to continue to review and compare options. In the coming months, TFL will again host public meetings to discuss building designs and solicit ideas for other approaches. As always, the public is invited to attend Board of Trustee meetings that are always posted and often include a segment to discuss accessibility and safety. Meanwhile, we will continue to ask the CIP Committee to incorporate a TFL Accessibility and Safety Project in the long term financial plans for the Town.

We welcome input from all Town of Henniker residents and are always available to answer questions and provide information about the library. Email us at tuckerfree@comcast.net or attend a [board meeting](#) which are always open to the public.