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Fairfax library board suspends strategic plan pending input from public, employees



At the George Mason Regional Library in Annandale, more than 200 people turned out Wednesday night to hear the Fairfax County Public Library Board of Trustees decide to suspend consideration of a controversial "strategic plan" for the library system. (Tom Jackman/The Washington Post)

WRITTEN BY

Tom Jackman

September 12
[E-mail the writer](#)

As an overflow crowd of more than 200 watched, the Fairfax County library's Board of Trustees on Wednesday night voted to suspend implementing the proposed **"Strategic Plan"** for the library system, pending more outreach to patrons and employees who felt left out of the process of preparing for the library's future.

Library Board Chair Willard O. Jasper read a resolution **passed the previous night** by the Fairfax Board of Supervisors, asking the library board to seek more community and staff input before **implementing a plan** which would eliminate the requirement for master of library science degrees for branch managers, reduce staff and reduce the presence of children's librarians in the branches. Board members noted that they had never voted on or approved the strategic plan, as I erroneously noted in last night's item, and now will not do so until at least Nov. 15. The audience, including a group watching outside the George Mason Regional Library in Annandale's meeting room on a hallway video monitor, applauded as the board approved Jasper's motion to suspend consideration of the plan, which was submitted by library Director Sam Clay. Clay said he worked with branch managers and staff to devise the plan, though some disagreed with that, and Clay acknowledged he perhaps had not gotten enough public input.



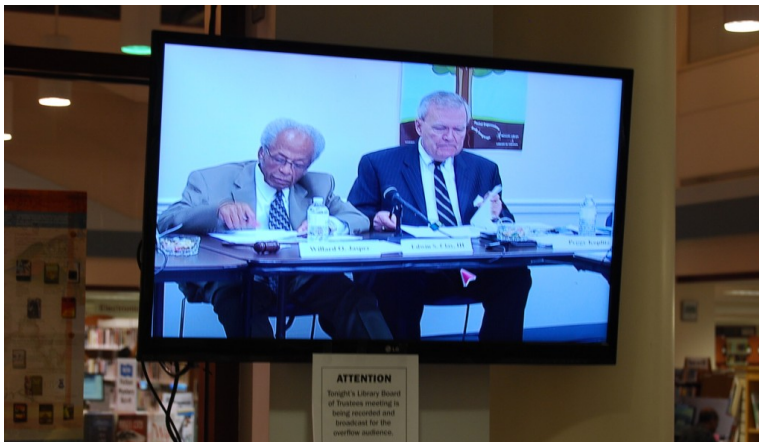
The overflow crowd in the lobby of the George Mason Regional Library in Annandale Wednesday night, watching the proceedings of the library board of trustees on a video monitor. (Tom Jackman/The Washington Post)

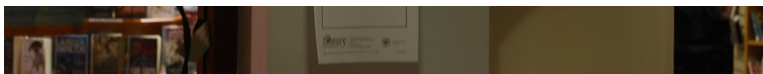
The Board of Supervisors also asked the board to review the library's policy for discarding books, "to ensure that every usable book is either resold or redistributed," which also drew applause when Jasper read it. The issue arose because volunteer Friends of the Library, and Supervisor Linda Smyth (D-Providence), **had photographed Dumpsters full** of seemingly reusable books for months behind the library's technical operations center in Chantilly, while the Friends were pleading for

books. The library suspended the sharing of books with Friends groups beginning last October when it shifted to a "floating collection" system, and has only supplied 3,000 books to the Friends since May, while discarding 20,000 per month. After Smyth removed a pile of usable books from the Dumpster on Aug. 29, the county ordered an immediate stop to the discarding. About 250,000 books have been thrown out since October, officials said.

But the discard issue is not part of the strategic plan, and the **mass trashing of books** was not discussed by the library board Wednesday night. Jasper said he was going to launch an "evaluation and communications committee, that now will determine where we are right now and where we want to go." He said David C.F. Ray would head the committee and that Susan C. Thorniley and Mary Petersen would also be on it, along with members of the public and library staff.

Five members of the public spoke to the board before their vote, all urging them to put the proposed plan on hold. Kathy Kaplan of the Fairfax County Federation of Citizens Associations told the board, "Libraries are sacred space. Books are sacred vehicles that transmit our culture. You are the trustees of the library. You have a sacred trust to protect the libraries for the people of Fairfax County." Mary Zimmerman, president of the Friends of the George Mason library and head of the group's huge book sale for 34 years, said, "I really urge you strongly to reconsider the [strategic] plan because it will not serve the citizens of Fairfax County."





In the lobby of the George Mason Regional Library in Annandale, the overflow crowd watched on the monitor as library board chair Willard Jasper and library director Sam Clay oversaw the board meeting. (Tom Jackman/The Washington Post)



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No Stepping Back wrote:

9/13/2013 9:04 AM EDT

To be accurate, it was not Fairfax County Public Library's "Strategic Plan" which was suspended at the Library Board's Sept 11 meeting. It was the "Beta Plan" which the Board suspended. The Beta Plan was never approved by the Library Board. The Strategic Plan was approved by the Library Board in Sept 2012. You can see the Strategic Plan here : <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/library/news/strategi...> Some of the philosophy contained in the Strategic Plan was a consideration when the now suspended Beta Plan was created.

Many are now calling for a new Strategic Plan for our libraries. The Reston Citizens Association approved a resolution last month opposing BOTH the Beta Plan and the Strategic Plan <http://restoncitizensassociation.blogspot.com/2013...>
They said in part:

"Whereas, the Library Strategic Plan approved in September 2012 proposes a transition from print books to digital "e-books," and calls for a reduction in the proportion of library floor space devoted to books in favor of expanded space for computers, Internet access, and meeting rooms, and, Whereas, there has not been adequate time for community input on either the Beta Plan or the Library Strategic Plan approved last year, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT: The Reston Citizens Association – strongly opposes the proposed Beta Plan, and calls for it to be cancelled. Calls for a new Library Strategic Plan to be developed with full participation of all library stakeholders, including citizens, staff, volunteers, and members of library Friends groups, that includes metrics and standards for success that are agreed to by the community "

Another critique of the Strategic Plan is here : <http://restoncitizensassociation.blogspot.com/2013...>

As we go forward we need to address the issue of the Strategic Plan as well as assuring any plans replacing the "Beta" reflect the values and input of all library stakeholders

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harts66 wrote:

9/12/2013 9:30 PM EDT

Mr. Clay and his strategic plan will turn Fairfax County Library into a second-rate system. Shame on him and the supervisors and trustees that agreed with him.

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jkakaplan wrote:

9/12/2013 1:40 PM EDT

I'm happy to see all these concerned citizens writing about the library, but I think that many of them are missing

the point. The issue isn't where to give or sell all these books being taken from the libraries, its that they are being taken from the libraries period. This isn't happening because there isn't space. That's a lie being told by Clay and his friends. They are being gotten rid of to make space for "internet cafes" and teen meeting rooms, and banks of computers to be used to surf the Internet. All of this is to prepare Fairfax County to enter the "post literate society" that Clay and those who listen to him say is coming.

Then there is the position that we don't need those books, since we have cheap, e-books that don't take up space and are neat. And so the hard copy books are to be replaced by e-books, but most books are not published as e-books, and those that are cost libraries at least ten times as much as the hard copy versions. That leaves the question--exactly why is the county destroying its own library system, and don't think for a minute that all this stops with Clay. It goes all the way to the Supervisors who agreed to it in the first place.

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fysh4it wrote:

9/12/2013 1:20 PM EDT

People will need to speak up and soon. The Library Board said it will next take up this subject on November 15 and that was in accordance with a direction from the Board of Supervisors on September 10. That is about enough time for a sham show permitting public comment. Write your supervisors and demand public hearings in every district. The County needs trained librarians, not the untrained representatives Mr. Clay wants. The County's statistics indicate 20% of library users are school children, but the Clay plan calls for cutting back on librarians trained to assist children. Write, call, email your supervisor and tell her or him, that the Clay plan must be rejected.

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m5691 wrote:

9/12/2013 12:18 PM EDT

I work in a library and the MLS degree is considered a bit of a joke. Virtually all librarians say they don't use anything from their degree. Almost everything we learn, we learn at the library. The quality of services provided depends most on that person's attitude, intelligence and experience. Requiring an MLS degree for many jobs prevents some very high-quality people from moving up.

A coworker of mine who had nearly finished his online MLS degree asked the rest of us what the difference between fiction and nonfiction is. I'm not making that up!

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moneypenny responds:

9/12/2013 12:29 PM EDT

Lets see some proof on that "virtually all librarians" statement. I and many of my other colleagues value our professional identity and our shared degree is a large part of that. I learned a great deal in library school that I'm using daily at the reference desk. Just because some degree-mill online MLS programs are doing a poor job in educating their students does not mean that the degree itself is worthless.

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m5691 responds:

9/12/2013 1:16 PM EDT

Let me clarify, all librarians I talked to about it, say they use nothing from their degree. The vast majority of what we do is tell people where to find, or put on request, books, DVDs, and music CDs. We also help people on the computer. The few reference questions we get are mostly from people with obsessive-compulsive disorders who call over and over again asking for information.

You value your professional identity? Well, I'm glad that makes you feel good. I bet you would be just as good at your job without that degree. Librarian is a dying position, especially in a world with Google. Many librarians are fearful of their future when their job has devolved into mostly menial work.

I work in reference too and we probably spend more time getting TV shows and wrestling DVDs for kids as we spend getting them books for them.

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RedLineHero responds:
9/12/2013 1:33 PM EDT

As a librarian myself, I have to disagree with the claim that a masters in library science is useless. MLS programs (now, most are called MLIS, to include "information" in there) now encompass digital curation and preservation, analytics, programming, multimedia, even instructional design. Even cataloging, the class everyone in my cohort griped about, has great value in the internet age; it's all related to classifying information and making it find-able to the everyday user. In this day and age of information overload, librarians (or more broadly, information professionals) are still needed to separate the wheat from the chaff, in terms of search results.

This is not to say that there aren't many talented and dedicated paraprofessionals out there working in libraries. Some of these individuals, I'm sure, could do just as good a job as a librarian. I sat at the reference desk as a paraprofessional and quickly realized that most of the questions were not beyond my skill to answer; as you say, most were directional questions ("where's the bathroom?" "how do I find a book?" etc.). But the questions from patrons who wanted in-depth research on a company or industry for their MBA program, assistance in deciphering old French manuscripts, or compiling a bibliography of military history—those complex questions are better left to seasoned information professionals, who can use their searching skills to compile quality research under deadlines.

In short.....librarianship isn't dying; it's just evolving to meet the needs of the digital age.

Like Liked by 7 readers · Report Abuse



nonsensical2001 responds:
9/12/2013 9:45 PM EDT

I work @ the big library behind the Capitol. Yes, its possible to "climb the ladder" w/o an MLS, but I still use what I studied in reference, cataloging, conservation & special collections almost 20 years ago every day. Look up the term "information literacy"; that's where most of the profession is headed.

Like Liked by 2 readers · Report Abuse



moneypenny responds:
9/13/2013 12:27 PM EDT

Public libraries are also not the only libraries in the world. I worked for several years in reference in an academic library, where database architecture, advanced citation and bibliography, and in-depth research were commonplace. I used my MLS and my 2nd master's in literature daily.

Paraprofessionals are amazing and do great work (I was one while I was in library school) but they cannot substitute for professional librarians across the board. I encourage you, m5691, to do some more reading via ALA and Library Journal. There are many, many librarians out there who are excited about the future of the profession and confident that we can continue to be an integral part of information services for years to come. That is, if we're able to sell ourselves over the sound of gloom-and-doom forecasters who mislead the public about the need for our expertise.

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Add your thoughts...



BobBruhns wrote:
9/12/2013 11:57 AM EDT

I think that any public official who pooh-poohed this when people began to speak out, should now answer for their actions.

Case in point. In retrospect, this statement was cleverly worded, but its thrust was clearly to play down the issue, and imply that whistleblowers were lying about this.

Hudgins: 'Grave' Concerns About Library Misinformation
Reston Patch, August 23, 2013
<http://reston.patch.com/groups/politics-and-electi...>

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chaos1 wrote:
9/12/2013 11:46 AM EDT

Meanwhile the Library of Congress is preparing a plan to get rid of almost all of the second copies of books that it has collected over the years because they 'take up too much space.'

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seamhed responds:
9/12/2013 12:57 PM EDT

You do realize there's a difference between a non-circulating research library and a circulating library that serves a community, right? What LOC does isn't necessarily a model for FCPL.

Like Liked by 6 readers · Report Abuse



chaos1 responds:
9/12/2013 11:05 PM EDT

Actually, the LOC is making a big mistake. And yes, its material "circulates," via interlibrary loan.

I was by no means defending the FCPL.

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Add your thoughts...



JackArmstrong wrote:
9/12/2013 11:01 AM EDT

Could we possibly see Fairfax County Public Library administrators, board members and supervisors pink-slipped over this incredible fiasco? Don't hold your breath - if there's one thing a bureaucrat can count on, it's job security, no matter how stupid their policies or actions.

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Teacher Lady wrote:
9/12/2013 10:40 AM EDT

November 15th? Sounds like the new plan will be to hold a couple of "stakeholder" meetings in the middle of the day or with no advance notice to insure failure, then serve up the same old garbage with a new title such as Single Desk model rather than One Desk model. There is no way that a thorough and thoughtful study can be undertaken and a new plan formulated in only two months. Teams of staffers should be visiting libraries across the country to see what works and what doesn't, then presenting various proposals to a community advisory committee representing all the vested stakeholders for input before writing up a serious proposal. Only after this has been published for public review should it be taken to the community for discussion. Only then should a new proposal be put to the Trustees for consideration. And, finally you need a true pilot program, possibly testing several options at different branches, rather than a Beta project which is a commitment to full implementation subject to minor revisions. This is a year long process and it cannot be rushed if it is to be done properly. Do it right or don't do it. Better yet, retire the existing management team members who have not actually worked in a real library for many, many years, and hire a dynamic new director and creative management team to replace them. An old horse is an old horse no matter how hard you kick it -- its time for them all to go.

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waxpool wrote:
9/12/2013 10:01 AM EDT

hey, it's not their money. that's always the problem with massive government.

Like Liked by 1 reader · Reply · Share · Report Abuse



JohnLease responds:
9/12/2013 10:29 AM EDT

Hey, it has nothing to do with the subject. That's always the problem with people who have knee jerk reactions.

Like Liked by 6 readers · Report Abuse



johnb5 responds:
9/12/2013 11:31 AM EDT

Budget cuts have pushed the administrators into making poor decisions. Check the previous article to see how much library funding has been cut.

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Add your thoughts...



Goodbye_Klugman wrote:
9/12/2013 9:59 AM EDT

Library administration did not work with branch managers and/or staff to "devise" this plan. I'm glad some people let their opinions be known.

How many employees would actually buy into this "beta project."

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No Stepping Back responds:
9/12/2013 11:00 AM EDT

You are absolutely right. Branch managers and frontline staff were completely shut out in the planning of the Beta. It was just dropped fully formed like a bombshell on library branch staff. This was NOT a partnership !

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Add your thoughts...



moneypenny wrote:
9/12/2013 9:32 AM EDT

This article repeats its error from yesterday. MLS degrees were to be removed as a requirement from all front line staff positions, not just branch managers.

Sam Clay is woefully out of touch with the day to day functions of the library branches. The Library Board should remove him immediately and replace him with someone who values and nurtures the relationship between the Library Director, the Library Staff, and the public.

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monkfish21 responds:
9/12/2013 10:30 AM EDT

... and who has some respect for the value of books. (And by "value," I mean both monetary and otherwise.)

Like Liked by 6 readers · Report Abuse



vabeach_voter responds:
9/12/2013 11:26 AM EDT

Correct, MLS degrees would not be required for ANY FCPL position under this plan. The expertise and professionalism long counted on by the public would not be valued.

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Add your thoughts...

**lilactyme** wrote:

9/12/2013 9:28 AM EDT

"Libraries are sacred space. Books are sacred vehicles that transmit our culture. You are the trustees of the library. You have a sacred trust to protect the libraries for the people of Fairfax County."

Truer words were never spoken.

Like Liked by 10 readers · Reply · Share · Report Abuse

**jkakaplan** wrote:

9/12/2013 9:11 AM EDT

This is encouraging, but what about the policy of getting rid of 250,000 perfectly good books per year and emptying out the libraries? Apparently the Library Board didn't discuss this. Will it still be allowed? Will Sam Clay continue as head of the Fairfax County libraries after this disaster? When will the Library Board accept that it is in charge and do what needs to be done?

Like Liked by 11 readers · Reply · Share · Report Abuse

**Black5jack** wrote:

9/12/2013 9:09 AM EDT

I really can't fathom why they would throw out these books. There are likely many non-profit or volunteer organizations that would come to the library and pick them up at no charge. Would it really be so hard or costly for the Fairfax County library system to arrange something like that? It's crazy that they are throwing out these books when so many poorer library systems or organizations could put them to good use.

Like Liked by 9 readers · Reply · Share · Report Abuse

**DCBetsy** responds:

9/12/2013 10:24 AM EDT

I love books and I like the idea of putting things to good use, but honestly, I don't think that it's cheap or easy to find good homes for all used things - distribution takes time and effort and money.

If there are groups out there that can take on thousands of used books and will come to pick them up, that's great! Otherwise, let's not pretend that re-homing all of those books isn't going to cost something - Goodwill and salvation army have entire distribution centers set up to take care of used materials, and used books aren't any different.

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**alrob8** responds:

9/12/2013 10:28 AM EDT

But why are they throwing out 1/4 million perfectly good books per year to begin with? It sounds like they have too large a budget and need to find something to spend it on, so they need to throw away stuff so they can spend all their money buying more stuff. Maybe if their budget was slashed they could figure out how to not throw away perfectly good stuff.

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**DCBetsy** responds:

9/12/2013 10:35 AM EDT

1. it sounds like a lot of the books were donated.
2. most libraries are going to buy extra copies of the latest best-seller since that's what the patrons want to read. However, they don't need to keep a gazillion copies of those books once the first wave of readers are done with them. It does seem a bit wasteful, but it also meets library patron demand, so I think that it makes sense.
3. some books just wear out.

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fairfaxvoter1 responds:
9/12/2013 10:39 AM EDT

I think a lot of this ignores that in the past, discarded books were routinely handled by very active volunteer groups at every library branch. Part of the recent fiasco is that these groups were quite specifically shut out and not allowed to touch the books, sell them, or distribute them. Some of these groups and their leaders (these are "friends of the Such-and-Such Library" groups) have been in existence for decades.

Given the quality and passion of Fairfax County volunteers, who are often degreed professionals including engineers and lawyers, my guess is that this was also probably an effort to get rid of the "outside" voices of volunteers. This whole process of various changes seems to have been very closed and unwelcoming, and I think the volunteer shut-out from their traditional work with discarded books was part of that "circling the wagons" mentality.

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floof responds:
9/12/2013 10:41 AM EDT

DcBetsy, I don't think you have been following this story from the beginning. The Friends of the Library groups WANT these books. They make huge amounts of money selling them, which then reverts to the libraries. But Clay has refused to let the Friends groups even have a look at the overwhelming majority of these books... they've been sent straight to the dumpsters.

Read the interview with Linda Smyth, or check out the local fairfax county Patch blogs, in which she talks about what she found in the dumpsters. Near-new books, some Newberry honor books, Art books in excellent condition.

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DCBetsy responds:
9/12/2013 10:47 AM EDT

I think that having active volunteer groups is the right answer. I just have a problem with overly emotional statements that it's awful to throw away a book, any book - for example, "every usable book is either resold or redistributed." I'm ok with the idea of purging and being selective. It might be a perfectly good book, but if no one is going to take it home, then recycle it.

I did read some of the interviews and some of the examples were out of date travel guides - that would be an example of a book where it's probably not worthwhile to spend too much time trying to rehome.

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fairfaxvoter1 responds:
9/12/2013 11:14 AM EDT

This matters to our community. It's not a generic "fake" news story, where somebody discovers that all libraries get rid of worn-out or outdated books and makes a big fuss about it. Not this time. This one is a real story and, frankly, a scandal, in which good-quality, current books were thrown out on a large scale because of poor management and apparent disinterest in books by a library executive. This is not normal library practice.

On top of that, the book dumping is just one of two big stories. The other, more lasting, disaster is the de-staffing of the libraries to reduce or eliminate most professional library services to kids and other patrons, who depend on them, all of which was supposed to be conducted under the radar. The book dumping, because it's so obviously stupid, and so visual, got our attention. The attempt to gut the library staffs is getting still more.


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vabeach_voter responds:
9/12/2013 11:29 AM EDT


Agree. The de-staffing that is part of this ridiculous plan has not happened yet, but if it did, the public would again be shocked at the immediate lack of services at the libraries that this would cause. For instance the Reston branch is scheduled to lose staff first with a reduction from 23 to 13. I cannot imagine how the busiest branch in the system could run with any effectiveness with that few staff.

Like Liked by 3 readers · Report Abuse

 **mhs74** responds:
9/12/2013 4:32 PM EDT

New school teachers would LOVE to have discarded public library books in good condition for their classroom libraries. When I was a volunteer at a large regional library a few years ago, I was told I could take some discarded children's library books (because I was a volunteer). I removed ALL traces that they ever belonged to Fairfax County Library and then gave them to a few new school teachers and they were so grateful. This would be a great solution if it could be arranged.

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 **jmcgovern_99** responds:
9/13/2013 10:27 AM EDT

How many people that are outraged at the "de-staffing" and the decreased hours of operation at County libraries are out there banging the drum for higher taxes? Everyone wants all the services, advantages and benefits of a huge library system, but nobody really wants to pay for it. To do anything with 250,000 books takes huge amounts of staff time that the County libraries have increasingly less of.

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