

Westchester Library System Board of Trustees Meeting

March 28, 2017

Good evening. My name is Gary Newman. I am the Union President at the Mount Vernon Public Library, where I have served as the Head of the Reference Department since 1982.

While Mount Vernon is a working class community, and the only black majority city in New York State, PLDA is mostly made up of white and largely affluent communities. I became aware early on of how much the perceptions of Mount Vernon as Central Library were shaped by racial apprehensions. Mount Vernon is a great Central Library, with a great staff, and great resources, but I have been told hundreds of times, by librarians throughout the county, that their patrons don't like to go down *there*. They assume that I will understand and appreciate exactly what they are talking about, an assumption that is part of the implicit racism. I will never forget when I was on the WLS database committee, and I was advocating a database that I thought would be particularly useful in Mount Vernon. The chair of the committee, who was a library director, rejected the idea because it was "counterintuitive" to get a database that might help the people of Mount Vernon, because the people of Mount Vernon did not own computers. Nobody else on the committee disagreed.

The rumbling to find another Central Library is nothing new, and neither are the underlining reasons. There has always been a desire for a Central Library where most of the people on the streets are white, and most of the people in the building are white, and this has increased as Mount Vernon City and Library have become increasingly black. If you look closely at the reasons that have been put forward to justify the current push to change the Central Library, you will find little more than a thin veneer masking the underlying racism.

But it gets uglier. Why is this issue coming to a head now, after all these years, at this particular time? Behind that is a disturbing story of deception, betrayal, and lies.

The professional staff has been aware for some time that our former director, Carolyn Karwoski, did not want Mount Vernon to be the Central Library. She regarded our Central Library status as

an impediment to her goal to dumb down the library and turn it into a fantasy imitation of a Connecticut suburban library, against the expressed wishes of the Trustees, the staff, and the community. She would frequently say that our Central Library status did not do the people of Mount Vernon any good, a window, perhaps, to her own racial attitudes. We now know that she went rogue, and had been denigrating her own library and governing board to PLDA and the State Library for years. Her maligning of her own library, combined with the existing predisposition against us in much of PLDA, has led directly to the current demands before the WLS Board.

We discovered her most shocking action recently, and in the very nick of time. At its January meeting, the WLS Board ratified the five-year Central Library plan, which had been prepared by the WLS Central Library Committee, chaired by Mrs. Karwoski. Before it could go to WLS, however, it had to first be ratified by the Mount Vernon Board of Trustees. You will see in the PLDA minutes that Mrs. Karwoski reported to PLDA that our Board refused to ratify, and that Mr. Kirshner duly reported our Board's refusal to the State Library. You will also see that no one doubted our mostly black Board's abrogation of its responsibilities, even though its refusal would, by itself, effectively be the end for us as the Central Library. Now look in the minutes and director's reports of the Mount Vernon Public Library. Mrs. Karwoski never informed her own trustees of the need to sign the Central Library Plan, or even of its very existence. When our trustees learned about the plan, they ratified it at their next meeting, even though they had been cheated out of the opportunity to have any input.

Racism is the pretext, but there is also the subtext that robbing Mount Vernon of its Central Library status advances Terry Kirshner's goal of getting all Central Library monies into his own hands. What did Mr. Kirshner know about Mrs. Karwoski's deception, and when did he know it? There are five things that I would like to point out to you. First, I was the person who first discovered Mrs. Karwoski's betrayal, and alerted our Board, and I was the person who first informed Mr. Kirshner about it, at the December PLDA meeting. I had been wondering what kind of response I would get from Mr. Kirshner. Shock? Concern? Disbelief? Relief that our Board was taking the necessary action? The response I did get completely surprised me: glowering silence. Second, in the past when WLS directors were concerned that the Mount

Vernon Board was not acting as it should, they reached out to our Board and helped guide it in the right direction. I've seen Mr. Kirshner do this, and also his predecessor, Mitch Freedman. Now, with our very status as Central Library at stake, Mr. Kirshner failed in this basic responsibility, and did nothing. Third, it was incumbent upon Mr. Kirshner to inform the WLS Board as soon as possible of, at the minimum, the fact that very serious allegations had been made against Mrs. Karwoski. If the allegations are true—which they are—then everything Mrs. Karwoski has said to everyone is suspect, and the WLS Board would need to know that it could be making irreparable decisions based on a web of lies spun by a disgruntled employee. Has Mr. Kirshner informed you? Fourth, it was incumbent upon Mr. Kirshner to inform the State Library, as soon as possible, about Mrs. Karwoski's deception. Did he do that? I happen to know that the State Librarian, Bernard Margolis, talked to Mrs. Karwoski about Mount Vernon after she was fired. I cannot imagine he would have done that if he had known that Mrs. Karwoski was so compromised. If Mr. Kirshner failed in what was clearly his duty, he also compromised Mr. Margolis. And finally, even now, Mr. Kirshner is still citing to us the firing of Mrs. Karwoski as one of the reasons to wrest away from Mount Vernon its Central Library status. I put to you that Mr. Kirshner himself is compromised, and everything about this business is rotten.

Mount Vernon has been the Central Library for almost sixty years, and has been a source of honor and pride for us and the entire City. We have worked our hearts out for it, and we will continue to do so if we are allowed. Thank you for your attention.



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March 28, 2017

Board of Trustees
Westchester Library System
570 Taxter Road, Suite 400
Elmsford, NY 10523

c/o Terry L. Kirchner, Executive Director

Re: Retaining Central Library Status of Mount Vernon Public Library

Dear Trustees:

As the Westchester Library System (WLS) reconsiders the status and services provided by the Central Library, the City Council hereby writes in support of retaining the Mount Vernon Public Library as the Central Library of the Westchester Library System.

The Mount Vernon Public Library (MVPL) is one of the original Carnegie libraries and has served as the WLS Central Library since 1958. Retaining the MVPL as the Central Library is not a maintenance of the status quo; it is actually a raising of the bar. Since taking the helm, MVPL's dynamic and highly responsive board of trustees have made significant and immediate changes to the infrastructure, programs and services offered to our constituents.

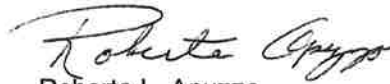
For example, inter-library loans have increased; technology upgrades now provide cost effective, high speed internet and wifi to staffers and patrons; the size and circulation of foreign language materials have expanded and includes resources in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese and Mandarin; movie viewings, author talks, and other cultural programs are on the rise; improvements to security and aesthetics make for a welcoming and comfortable experience; and digital and electronic resources allow patrons and students to stream and download music, movies, and other audiovisual materials.

In addition, the recent appointment of professional librarian and attorney, Evania Anne Thompson, speaks to the caliber of personnel MVPL is attracting. (See attached article.) Moreover, the Friends of MVPL and the Mount Vernon Public Library Foundation provide strong, ongoing philanthropic support for the library. The City Council also hosts a monthly radio show on WVOX and is exploring ways to partner with MVPL to further publicize the fantastic programs and offerings of Westchester's Central Library.

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In short, the Mount Vernon Public Library has done a commendable job as the WLS Central Library. Under the new taxing structure, MVPL now receives direct support from taxpayers. Compounded with fresh leadership and support from the Friends, the Foundation, the City Council and the community at-large, with your input and partnership, MVPL will continue to provide superior service to the Westchester Library System and its member libraries.

Respectfully,



Roberta L. Apuzzo
City Council President

Attachment

cc: MVPL Board of Trustees