

Watchung Ad Hoc Committee Update to Borough Council

October 20, 2022

Status Summary

- There are few details to report as it relates to any developer plans, ideas or alternatives around the Exempt Hall.
 - The Mayor has been waiting on developer responses.
 - No discussion or collective thoughts can be provided without details and an appropriate analysis
- Most of the Ad-Hoc Committee discussion has, as a result, turned to activities performed around the Library:
 - Limited participation achieved in county survey under aggressive timeline
 - Creation of a detailed Watchung Library survey completed that will provide more explicit resident input
 - It appears that renovating the Watchung Library is the current direction without any information as to a viable alternative.

Ad Hoc Committee

- Committee was provided an initial walkthrough of the Library and Arts Center
 - Committee as a whole did not see Exempt Hall; assumption that it would be torn down in any proposal inclusive of this area.
- Mayor introduced Committee to three potential directions the Borough could go:
 - Renovate the existing library and eventually decide what to do with Exempt Hall
 - Rebuild from scratch the Exempt Hall, incorporating in this area an unfinished library, residential housing units, and parking.
 - Do nothing (not really an option, given the current expressed need by Council for accessibility at the library)
- Committee was accompanied by a developer once, at second meeting in late spring
 - Since the summer, committee has been waiting on rendering(s) and any assumptions and financial details, with which to better understand opportunities. To date, there are no verifiable details available upon which any kind of robust discussion can occur.
 - Most of recent discussions during last 4 meetings have been focused around library, in part because developer plans/materials have not been developed/made available to committee.

Aspiring Watchung Library “Value(s)” Remain

- Access to “free” books, materials, programs
- Programs for all ages
- Safe place for everyone
- Open spaces for individual and varied group sizes
- Spectacular views
- A destination for meetings, tutoring, clubs, and more
- ADA compliant for all to have access to facilities
- Can “define” our town... and what our community values
- Reach-out programs to the schools, sick and elderly
- Programs that meets High School activities
- Group functions that bring our community together

Library-Related Activities Performed on Ad Hoc Committee

- Worked with Somerset County Library to understand their current survey process efforts. Discussion initiated in August; we tried to attach ourselves to the County survey process
 - County survey understandably is very county-centric in feel
 - Their release date (September 19) made it difficult to significantly latch on to their survey
 - Additional questions were added to county survey for Watchung; they were generated by the County in response to our submitted questions. Given the County's time constraints, there was very little time to negotiate questions. The questions they recommended, while helpful, still have a very county, cross-community, cross branch feel.

Library-Related Activities Performed on Ad Hoc Committee

- A more detailed survey has been created, which attempts to solicit specific needs of, and desires for, the Watchung Library Branch (see attached survey)
 - Survey is two-sided, one-pager. It provides more opportunity for resident comments, thoughts and ideas.
 - Survey will be made available at Harvest Festival and on-going at Watchung Library.

Current State – Some Thoughts

- It appears that a rendering of a potential new building (where Exempt Hall exists) won't likely be available until December. There is no word on financial details.
- Without any additional information regarding how the Exempt Hall area could be used, it is the opinion of some on the committee that the Watchung Council could proceed on renovations to the library where it is today.
- It is believed that architect Lovino's submission of plan "C", provided in 2015, continues to be an appropriate response to the issues faced by the borough as it relates to the library facility.
- Accessibility footprint (for elevator, approved staircase, updated lavatory facilities) should be established outside of current library footprint; there would otherwise be significant loss of functional library space.