

## NORWALK LIBRARY

# New board president eyes update for Belden Avenue building

By Robert Koch

NORWALK — The Norwalk Public Library Board of Directors is looking to tackle a parking shortage and modernization at the historic Main Library on Belden Avenue.

Board President Alex Knopp said the library's role in the community has changed and expanded over time.

"Now is the time to start addressing the improvements we need to make to



Knopp

ensure that the library will be able to play an even more vital and relevant role in servicing the public's needs in the future," Knopp said. "In my view, the two biggest challenges facing the Norwalk Library's main branch are to address the atrocious on-site parking limitations and to put in place a planning and renovation process to modernize and expand the library facility for the first time in almost 40 years."

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Knopp, who served two terms as Norwalk mayor from 2001 until 2005, was appointed to the nine-member library board last April and elected president several months later. The former Norwalk mayor described the library system as "one of the keystones in the arch of Norwalk's quality of life."

"The indisputable fact is that there has been very significant growth in the utilization of the library's services over the past several years," Knopp said.

Between 2014 and 2016, the number of patrons passing through the doors of the Main Library on Belden Avenue and South Norwalk Branch Library on Washington Street, has grown from 391,671 to 666,530 with the majority — 552,540 persons — visiting the Belden Avenue facility. Downloads of library materials have grown from 14,475 to 29,375 in 2016, according to Knopp.

"Yet in the face of this astounding growth, the on-site parking capacity has barely expanded at all, and there is no doubt that program usage at the main branch would be

far greater if there were more convenient and available on-site parking," Knopp said. "I want to assure all library's patrons that we will leave no stone unturned in order to seek improvements for on-site parking in the future both for the short term and the long term."

In September 2015, First Taxing District and library representatives announced the availability of a number of parking spaces at the district-owned property at 3 Belden Ave. The 11 spaces nearest People's Bank were made available to library patrons at all hours and the remaining 22 spaces after 5 p.m. and on weekends.

But parking pressures again increased after the Norwalk Zoning Commission approved plans for a five-story, 60-unit apartment at the southernmost portion of the parcel at 11 Belden Ave. Library patrons have used the parcel — a surface parking lot.

Chris Bradley, Norwalk Public Library system director, said the Yankee Doodle Garage, which lies within walking distance of the Main Library, might offer some help.

"We would pay for it, but would people would bring

their tickets for validation," Bradley said. "I know other libraries that do it and have parking garages nearby. That's something we're looking at with the Parking Authority."

The Belden Avenue and South Norwalk Branch libraries — both built in the early 20th century — are among more than 2,000 libraries constructed nationwide with money donated by businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.

While the branch library underwent major renovation during the Knopp administration, the Main Library is in need of work. Bradley said the library board hopes to have a consultant on board by July to prepare a \$35,000 master plan for that work. The plan will lay out how to better utilize the historic building.

"The building we're in now is 47,000 square feet, which is not bad for a city of our size. It's just the way it's used," Bradley said. "We need to take this space and redesign it."

Bradley said the redesign could create, among other things, a new study area and space for art galleries and concerts.

Knopp said the library

board's goal for the redesign will be to ensure that Main Library better serves the expanded range of programs offered at it "rather than continuing to force the programs to fit into the constraints of the facility."

That will entail reconfiguring single-purpose spaces within the library for multiple uses by putting bookshelves and other structures on coasters or wheels for easy movement. An individual space might serve as meeting room, a Maker's Space, a lecture room or hands-on technology teen space on any given day, according to Knopp.

"This modular and multi-purpose usage design strategy is the major common theme I've observed in visiting other libraries in Fairfield County that have undergone modernization and expansion construction projects over the last decade and it seems the right model for Norwalk to follow," Knopp said.

Knopp said the library board will hold a series of community conversations to engage the Norwalk public on how the libraries can better serve the community in future decades.

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