

Norwalk Council approves \$460K library deal

By Nancy Chapman [3 : 29 am EDT July 12 2017](#)

NORWALK, Conn. – Former Norwalk Mayor Alex Knopp’s efforts came to fruition Tuesday as the Common Council unanimously approved the deal he negotiated with a Norwalk developer, to make expansion of the Norwalk Public Library possible years down the road.

“It’s not \$4.8 million to purchase 11 Belden Ave. ... What we are purchasing is the opportunity to put the city in the driver’s seat regarding the development of the whole area around the library,” Knopp said to the Council, advocating for the \$460,000 for a six-year purchase option on the lot next to the library.

Developer Jason Milligan won Zoning approval for a 69-apartment building on the lot, but the Knopp-led Library Board of Trustees appealed the Zoning decision. That led to the deal for a \$460,000 purchase option, with a locked-in purchase price of \$4.8 million.

Again, the vote was unanimous; even Council member Rich Bonenfant (R-At Large), who routinely votes no on issues regarding land use and public money, went for the deal.

“In the future, I hope that the city will do its own negotiating, not defer to third parties to bargain away either our money or our land, or things like that. I am torn on this one,” Bonenfant said.

“We didn’t bargain away anything, we did just the opposite,” Council Finance Committee Chairman Bruce Kimmel (D-At Large) said. “We took land that was not city land, adjacent to the library. We recognized that there were some serious issues regarding the future expansion of the library as well as the current issues regarding the parking. We did the best we could in a very complicated situation.”

The city had negotiated with Milligan for more than a year, and, “at one point we had a deal tentatively in place with the Redevelopment Agency,” Corporation Counsel Mario Coppola said. “When that deal fell apart former Mayor Knopp stepped in. Those interests were negotiated by the law department and we worked closely with former Mayor Knopp to strategize and negotiate the agreement itself, to the point of bringing in the big guns, Councilman (John) Igneri, to try to close the deal for us.”

“There have been many, many iterations (of a deal),” Mayor Harry Rilling said. “This was a very complex deal that took many, many hours of time, energy, thought – working through different deals.”

Bonenfant said he had supported the Library Board’s appeal because he agreed that the Zoning Commission’s decision was bad.

The Commission originally denied Milligan’s development on a 2-2 vote, but Planning and Zoning announced that a minimum four votes are necessary to approve or deny an application so the application was voted on again, winning with a 5-1 vote.

“Zoning is complicated, almost everything you do can be subject to litigation,” Kimmel said, in response to Bonenfant. “So, you have to do it right. If ... even some small details are amiss you have to be careful and perhaps come back and deliberate again. I am not surprised those kind of things happen with Zoning.”

More than 20 Norwalkers spoke passionately in favor of the proposal at the Council’s June 27 public hearing, with no one speaking against it.

“Although I am not happy that we have to make this deal ... when there is that many people that come out for a public hearing we need to listen to our constituents,” Minority Leader Shannon O’Toole Giandurco (R-District D) said.

Seven citizens spoke to the Council on Tuesday, all in favor of the deal.

“I understand that there is some reticence to take this step because of the possibility down the road of having to pay a lot of money to purchase this property,” Eric Chandler said. “I understand that some of this is because of what are considered in some circles to be votes gone wrong... The people out here should not be punished for that misstep. I feel that not going through with the option agreement would be punishing the people of Norwalk.”

Paul Retter called it, “a terrific opportunity that almost went through our hands like sand.”

“We need a library on the bus line,” he said.

The deal was tweaked a bit, with the Council unanimously approving an amendment to allow Coppola to add provisions to “provide additional protections to the city’s option to purchase the subject property.”



Reggae Culture performs as dusk falls Thursday in front of the Norwalk Public Library.



Former Norwalk Mayor Alex Knopp on Tuesday holds up a chain formerly used to block parking in the lot next to the Norwalk Public Library, as he speaks to Common Council members in City Hall.

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"The law department hasn't in the past drafted an option agreement so I will have to pull some forms from my law firm's database and spend some time tweaking the agreement to include some general options that would typically be included," Coppola said.

One example is a provision that the property owner has to maintain the property in good working order, he said.

While the \$4.8 million purchase price is more than the Council would like to pay, Milligan has invested in the property and "\$4.8 million is still within the range of today's value," Land Use and Building Management Committee Chairman Thomas Livingston (D-District E) said.

"Certainly it would have been a lot cheaper if it were purchased years ago but to walk away now would just compound our error," Livingston said.

"We coulda-shoulda-woulda a lot of years ago but that's all done and over with. It's a great thing that everybody banded together and we have the library now," Council member Steve Serasis (D-District A) said.

The \$460,000 option agreement is "financially reasonable," Council member Doug Hempstead (R-At Large) said.

"It avoids the cost of doing other things with this lot... You get a reprieve from a building that nobody wants. You've got to pay for that stuff," Hempstead said.

But while the "cost is fine" and "very cost effective," all the Norwalk bodies involved have an obligation to begin planning now to move forward in six years.

"We have a habit sometimes as a city, no matter who is in office, that... we'll worry about it tomorrow," Hempstead said, expressing a hope that money is allocated before the fall election to "get started in this whole process." Kimmel agreed.

"In a six years, I think we should be in fairly decent shape in relation to our debt service," Kimmel said. "If we begin to prepare now set aside reserve... funding, we'll be in good shape."

"We have to make sure Zoning is in place that we are comfortable with," Kimmel said. "Again, we have to have a vision for that part of the city with a library sitting right smack dab in the middle of it, with the appropriate kind of Zoning that dovetails with what's going on, on both sides, going on West Avenue or going down Wall Street."

"It's no secret that we are paying a premium for this property," Majority Leader John Kydes (D-District C) said. "I think it's mainly due to our capital budget constraints, to our school projects. But I think in the end game it will be the right decision. I know this wouldn't be here if not for former Mayor Knopp. ... We all know that the owner of the property is not the easiest person to deal with, either."

Knopp and Rilling have said that they hope the city never spends the \$4.8 million, even if the plan is to set aside \$800,000 of capital funds each year for the next six years to be able to buy the land.

On Tuesday, Knopp again said that Norwalk's neighbors have all expanded and modernized their libraries in the last 10 years.

"Often, except in one case, (they did it) at private expense without a large amount of public funds," Knopp said. "Because they understood that to keep their communities attractive, to keep their property values high, to attract business entrepreneurs, revising their libraries was a key part of going into the future."

Rilling praised the work that Knopp and Coppola put into the deal, and said, "This is a homerun for Norwalk because this library is poised to be the anchor for the Wall Street area."