

Minutes of the Kent Library Commission meeting – October 10, 2023

I Roll Call - Austin Roberts opened the meeting at 7:01 p.m.

Present were members Corbin Adzigiroy, Michael Alexopoulos, Sam Coatti, Claire Kawalec, Austin Roberts, Christine Sinopoli, Despina Tartsinis, and Robert White. Also in attendance were KML Associate Director Kate Jarest, Selectman Jerry Mahoney, and about 50 members of the public.

II Public Comment

Melissa Silva thanked the Commission and said that it was vital that the Commission be the body to select the Interim Director.

Dr. Kristina Hallett asked if we could have future meetings at a place with better acoustics and Zoom capability, such as at the Police Station meeting room.

Nina Kendrick said that many Commission members said we should let the Director do her job, but if the tables were turned and we had a highly conservative Library Director, things might be different. If the Director and Commission work without accountability, it will breed corruption and cause our library to be a center of left-wing propaganda. Nina cautioned that certain books were harmful to children. These books have a veneer of kindness and love, but under the surface there is a darker agenda.

Tess McCool stated that The Library Bill of Rights has been in force since 1939. This is a First Amendment right. It's been held up in court time and time again. We can share whatever books we want with our children.

Sandra Janik said that moving a challenged book to a less prominent place was telling part of our community that they don't belong. She said that we need the library to be a place of culture in this town, and that for some marginalized people this is the only safe space and a place to learn about themselves.

Jill Adams said that we can debate the ALA system, but we cannot debate bigotry – it creates bullies.

Steve Dunn said that it is not bigotry to talk about what KML puts on display. The library should not have an agenda.

Linda Cunningham stated that she works in a university library that offers degrees in Library Science. She stressed the need for intellectual freedom, and added that putting books in the back means "you're not good enough" and "you're not welcome".

Shannon Watson said that there was a lot of emotion being expressed, but that the cornerstone of the First Amendment is simple, and includes the fact that you can't decide what I can see or read.

Cy said that he does his studying at the library and would like to see books that reflect his existence. He said that the library is his space and a place for him. His existence is not a threat or an agenda.

III Approval of Past Minutes

Corbin asked why sometimes the minutes showed detailed public comments, and sometimes just a quick summary. Austin answered that the secretary tries hard to capture the gist of what is said, but if several people make similar comments, it may be a summary of that point.

Christine said that the meetings should be recorded. Austin asked Christine to look into how to do this. She agreed, and will report at the next meeting.

Despina moved and Corbin seconded a motion to accept the minutes of the September 12th meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

IV Communications Received

No new communications were received.

V Report of the Director

Statistics on library circulation and programs for September showed a large increase over the previous September.

Kate reported that the position for a new Director was posted on several sites on October 5th. Recruitment for Reference Librarian and Page are not active yet.

Retesting for PCBs will be done on October 19. Water from the heavy rain got into the vents downstairs and Chris Matejek took care of that. A patron was very pleased about being able to use the free sessions with Pat Beeman, a social worker from Suffield Community Aid. Another patron was helped with paperwork to expedite an emergency passport.

Christine asked why we're not recruiting for the other two positions. Kate responded that the H.R. Department advised waiting to hire those positions until we have a new Director.

Sam said we need them posted sooner; Austin volunteered to talk with Town H.R. to find out what the hold-up is – and to try to get those positions posted and filled soon.

VI Standing Committee Reports

Finance Committee report: Claire reported that KML owes the Town \$59,282.80 to cover our obligation to the Town budget for the previous fiscal year. We will pay that this week.

Austin moved and Mike seconded a motion to add the search committee report to the agenda as item VIa. The motion passed unanimously.

Search Committee report: Claire said that the Director position was posted on several free sites. After two weeks they will try to select any viable candidates for an interview. If there are none, they would like to consider using sites that charge a fee. Sam moved and Austin seconded a motion for the Commission to look into funding postings on sites that charge a fee. The motion passed unanimously. Austin and Claire will present their findings at the next meeting.

Christine asked what criteria are used to designate a “special” meeting. Someone said there is a Town document that specifies that the list of KMLC meetings posted in January for the year are considered regular meetings. All other meetings of the KMLC or its subcommittees are either special or emergency meetings. For these meetings, all Commission members and the Town must be notified 24 hours in advance. Search Committee meetings are not public meetings; they are exempt from these rules.

VII Filing KMLC Status Update

The KMLC would like to clarify whether it is a “governing” or “advisory” Commission. The Connecticut State Library oversees municipal and public libraries throughout the state. When the Kent Memorial Library Commission was formed, the Town registered the Commission as a “regulatory board”. Suffield Town records show that it is now an “advisory board”, but that change was never recorded to the State Library.

Much discussion followed regarding the powers and duties of the Library Commission. Despina said that we have dual powers (governing and advisory) as stated in the Suffield Town Ordinances. Austin clarified that the Town must submit paperwork showing that a change in the Library Board status happened. Then the State Library works with the office of the Attorney General to create an opinion on those documents.

Then that opinion is used to either update or not update the record. This then establishes a legal opinion as to what the status of the Commission is.

Jerry Mahoney said that it's not clear that our Town attorney's opinion letter regarding our Commission being "advisory" is of the same nature as the State Library's use of the terms "advisory" or "governing". The State Library identifies powers to adopt budgets, supervise the Library Director, and adopt policies. In Suffield, we have different groups handling those tasks. There was discussion of the Town Ordinances and the Town Charter disagreeing on some aspects of the Commission's powers.

Bob stated that the yearly performance evaluation and goal-setting of the recent Director were done by KMLC and were not done by the Town. Jerry stated that the First Selectman and H.R. Dept. are the boss of the Director. Jerry stated that the opinion of the Town Attorney is binding for all Boards and Commissions. Despina said "It's only in regard to one point (paragraph b) - I don't think that we're stripped of our other regulatory powers."

Austin said that when there's discrepancy regarding the status of a library, certain things are potentially at risk including grants, the ability of Town residents to use their library cards at other libraries, interlibrary loan services, grants, etc. if we are not in compliance with the State. Austin agreed to table this subject until next month's meeting.

VIII Interim Director

Austin stated that it would be wise to look further for other people who could serve as Interim Director, before voting on one specific candidate out of respect for the opinions of the Board of Selectmen.

Sam moved and Claire seconded a motion to ask the Personnel Subcommittee to search for candidates (including prior KML Directors) and present their findings at the next (probably special) meeting of the Commission. The motion passed unanimously.

IX New Business

Corbin moved and Christine seconded a motion to discuss the points in the farewell letter posted in the Suffield Observer by the former Library Director. The discussion about the motion included comments that we cannot discuss former employees or grievances (per the Town Attorney), that there would be no benefit in doing this, but some felt that it wouldn't be a rehash, just a clarification. Corbin, Christine and Mike voted in favor of the motion; Austin, Bob, Claire, Despina, and Sam voted against. The motion was defeated.

Christine moved and Corbin seconded a motion to discuss the reason that Austin knew about Joe Grimard's wanting to resign from the KML Commission about 5 months before the other Commission members were informed. Corbin, Christine, Mike and Despina voted in favor; Bob, Claire, and Sam voted against. Austin abstained. The motion carried. Austin explained that he hoped to convince Joe not to resign; he notified Colin; and then the Commission did not meet over the summer. Jerry mentioned to Austin that 5 months is way too long to sit on this information. Austin said that that was correct. Austin then told the Commission that the proper way for a Commission member to resign is to send a letter to the Board of Selectmen. Sam added that if the person resigning is a Democrat or a Republican, they should notify the Democrat Town Committee or the Republican Town Committee, as they may have qualified candidates that they can recommend to the Board of Selectmen.

No other new business was discussed.

X Public Comment

Corbin Adzigiroy spoke to clarify certain points on the *Suffield Observer* article that the recent Library Director wrote about her resignation.

Fred Sweitzer requested that in the posting for a new Library Director, we should make a proactive effort to look at a diverse pool of candidates.

Annie Hornish said that unlike what had been said earlier, the Town Attorney's opinion is not binding. A Board or Commission can employ their own attorney. The Town Attorney's opinion is an advisory opinion.

Rick Sotil stated that he had Robert Strano filming this meeting so that people could be informed about what happens at meetings within Suffield, and also stated that everybody needs to feel that they belong in this town.

Neil Hornish asked if the video would be available. Bob Strano replied that it could be viewed at Rick's website, "sotil4firstselectman.com".

Sarah Tschannen said that she has three young children. They are being taught to be kind, inclusive, and a friend to others. She said her kids will think for themselves, and no one should tell them what to read or not read. There are many wonderful children's books that get them to think more, and be aware of the people they run into.

Julianne Williams said that she has 2 children, and that her family trusts the KML staff to put appropriate DVDs in the children's section.

Dr. Kristina Hallett has had several people under the age of 18 ask her why the library doesn't ask them for their opinions. She said that the LGBTQ community is under-represented at KML. Due to the First Amendment, their representation needs to be increased at KML.

Mary Jane Smith spoke of her 40-year tenure as a college librarian, and mentioned everyone's "freedom to read". She requested that the KML Commission to be a staunch supporter of librarians.

Nina Kendrick agreed 100% that parents are responsible for what their kids read. However, library staff are responsible for what books appear on end caps. She said that children are being harmed. KML should have books presenting ALL points of view. Gender dysphoria is a point of view that this library tends to showcase. We should have books that warn about the potential harm of certain books.

John Woods said that he's had a library card since 1959. His family were regular users of KML. They have used this library for four generations, and he thanked those involved in running it.

Pinki Shah (KML staff member) thanked people for their support of the library. She said that her job is to provide information on any subject to anyone seeking it, and she does not offer her opinion on what to read.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 8:52 p.m.

-Bob White, substitute secretary