

Norwalkers: \$460K library deal worth the money

By Nancy Chapman [4: 49 am EDT July 3 2017](#) [4 Comments](#)
NancyOnNorwalk online

NORWALK, Conn. – The complicated proposal for Norwalk to spend \$460,000 for a six-year purchase option on land next to the Belden Avenue library is heading for a vote, backed by strong winds of support as it sails forward.

No one spoke against the deal at Tuesday's Common Council public hearing; those that spoke left an impression.

"We felt this was probably the best, most interesting public hearing we have ever experienced," Council Finance Committee Chairman Bruce Kimmel (D-At Large) said Tuesday. "Roughly 20-25 people spoke eloquently in favor of the proposals before the city. It was just a nice experience sitting there and listening to them. ... We get beat up so often so often as public officials – this was a very enjoyable experience and I think afterwards we all felt great, both the public and the Council members."

The Council Land Use Committee is slated to vote **Wednesday** on the proposal to pay developer Jason Milligan \$460,000 for the six-year option in a deal negotiated by former Mayor Alex Knopp, chairman of the Norwalk Public Library Board of Trustees. It is scheduled to go to the Board of Estimate and Taxation on Monday, July 10; the full Council will get it the next night, Kimmel said, promising to use his prerogative as Finance Committee chairman to send it along without a Committee vote.

The hope is that Norwalk taxpayers never spend more than the \$460,000 although the deal includes a six-year fixed \$4,885,000 purchase price for 11 Belden Ave., Knopp has said on several occasions. The idea is that a private/public partnership will benefit all, with a developer footing the bill for improvements.

The purchase option would cost less than \$14,000 a year for the 30-year lifespan of a new library, and the deal should be looked at in the same way that the city evaluated buying Calf Pasture Beach, the Gallaher Mansion or Oak Hills Park, Knopp said at the public hearing.

"Sure, there will always be debate about the details but I think in the end we need to do something big and having a modern library with sufficient onsite parking is big goal for the city," Knopp said.

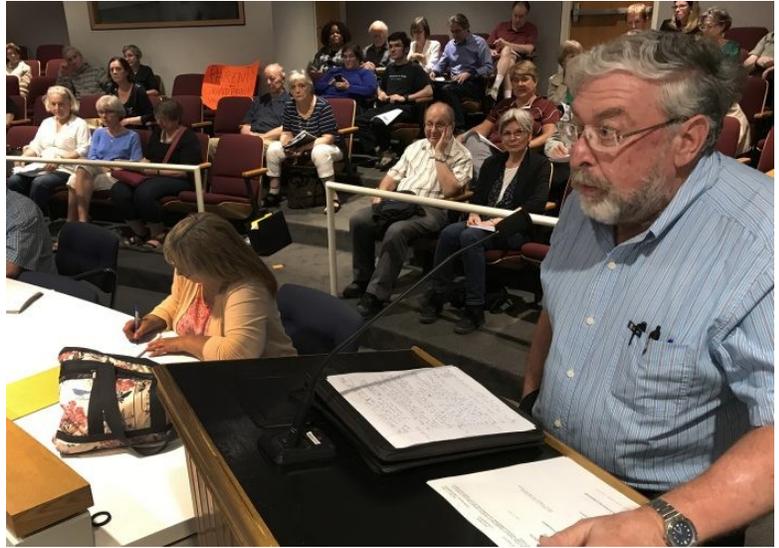
In the short term, the deal provided 14 parking spaces immediately, as Milligan reopened a lot he had closed; there are plans to revamp the lot to make it 50 parking spaces.

The deal also prevents Milligan from building the 69-unit apartment building approved by the Zoning Commission for the property. Milligan could go ahead with that right away if the proposal is not approved, **Knopp said** at Tuesday's hearing.

The Planning Commission and the Parking Authority have approved the deal, and 10 votes are needed on the 15-member Council because it's a special appropriation, he said.

This fall, for the first time, every Norwalk school child will receive an application for a library card, Knopp said.

"The question before you tonight is whether Norwalk will have the capacity to serve these hundreds of new patrons as well as the 33,000 current Norwalk residents who already have their library card," he said. Barbara King was first to the lectern after the former mayor.



Former Norwalk Mayor Alex Knopp talks to Common Council members Tuesday in City Hall.



A plan for the lot at 11 Belden Ave., next to the Norwalk Public Library.

"I realize some taxpayers will see the price of the option and think this is too much money," King said. "I wish the cost were less, too. However, as you consider the option for the six-year purchase price for the land adjacent to the library I would hope that you also consider the cost of doing nothing. Once the land is gone the ability to expand the library will be lost. The cost of building a new library in the future, even if land is available, will be even more costly.

So, the cost of doing nothing is an opportunity that may be lost forever. That is a price that I feel Norwalk can no longer afford."

"We allowed the property to be sold to another developer who wanted to build more apartment units," King said. "Don't get me wrong, I think the addition of apartment units is doing much to revitalize parts of Norwalk and the additional inventory is certainly keeping my rent down. Thank you. However, how many more apartments do we need in the downtown area?... We need to move forward with expanding our library."

Library usage has grown 70 percent, with 533,224 visitors to the main library at Mott and Belden Avenues, Norwalk Public Library Director Christine Bradley said.

"This tremendous increase is driving a lot of our concern," she said.

The library is a "tremendous asset to Wall Street" and a "cornerstone for development," Norwalk Preservation Trust President Tod Bryant said.

"It is partially the role of the city of Norwalk to make sure there is a reason for anyone to want to live there," he said. "Developers can't or won't do that. A recent **study by the Pew Research Center** shows that the Millennials and Gen Xers who would fill those apartments surprisingly enough visit public libraries at a rate greater than any other adult demographic. A great library is only part of the equation to draw people to Norwalk but it should not be overlooked."

"Parking is essential for many in our community who can't use the library unless there is nearby parking," Betty Bono said, calling the library "a gathering place free of charge for all who love reading, history, science and the arts."

Laurel Peterson, Norwalk poet laureate, said the library has been key to her effort to reach people, even if her featured speakers and audience members have had to walk a long distance to get there given the difficulty in finding parking.

"If we as a town are serious about promoting literacy and the arts our library is an essential resource but it's only a resource if people can access it," Peterson said.

"I want to know who wants to live in a community where people don't place importance and value on reading and gaining knowledge," Ben Otis said, calling the number of people using the library with only 34 parking spaces available "a real tribute to what the library can be."

"Throughout history libraries were not just places to store books but places that are central to learning and progress, situated physically and psychologically in the heart of the cultural, political and economic life of the community," Michael Diamond said. "The role of libraries is clearly changing significantly. They are becoming the hub of the new information economy. Indeed, for many people in our community without access to the worldwide web and the vast amounts of information that is now stored electronically, the library represents a vital if not the only place where they can gain access to this information and the expert guidance on how to navigate through it."

Libraries "tell a story about what is important and noteworthy about that community" and the revitalization of Norwalk's libraries is key to the city's renaissance, he said.

Eric Chandler said he's gotten a lot out of the library but has sometimes circled the block four or five times just to return a book.

"I don't even understand why we are having this discussion," he said.

Stuart Garrelick said it would cost each of Norwalk's residents just over \$5 each to lock in the possibility of a new library, and, "Hey, it's a good deal."

"It's important," he said. "It's a necessity, it's not a luxury.... Ultimately this is an economic issue. We know we don't have money and we have to prioritize. But I want you to recognize the fact that things that add to our quality of life as important as the air we breathe and the water we drink and act accordingly.

Don't classify this as a luxury that can be passed over because we don't have money."

"It doesn't matter what money it costs because we missed our chances, we were sitting around," Missy Conrad said. "... We missed our chances, you pay more but it's worth it. So, please go for it."

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Sue Haynie [July 3, 2017 at 6:46 am](#)

This is a good start. A library is at the heart of any great city. Far too many Norwalkers use one of the lovely libraries in our neighboring towns because access to Norwalk's main library at Belden Avenue is just too difficult. A public/private partnership dedicated to Norwalk's main library would be a worthwhile pursuit.

John Levin [July 3, 2017 at 7:50 am](#)

Alex Knopp is a skilled and creative problem solver. We are fortunate to have him as part of our community and willing to serve as a community leader, in this case as chairman of the Norwalk Public Library Board of Trustees. I would love to see him as mayor again some day.

Dorothy Mobilia [July 3, 2017 at 8:52 am](#)

This is a great start. Strong libraries shape communities. I hope the momentum continues in bringing our distinctive Carnegie-endowed institution into the 21st century. Norwalkers deserve a fine library they can be proud of, just as residents of neighboring communities rely on their libraries for a wide range of services and knowledge. Kudos to Chris Bradley and Alex Knopp.

jlighfield [July 3, 2017 at 9:31 am](#)

This is a good example of the financial illiteracy of a generation of people who should know better. Today's lesson is called Opportunity Cost. In 2015 when GGP was seeking approval for their mall concept instead of the planned mixed-use development, I floated a concept of having a new library facility at the mall site. That use, in fact, is in the LDA even now. The proposed cost of building a library facility in the mall was approximately \$9 million. That is GGP would spend \$9 million to incorporate the facility in the mall building.

The usual suspects came out against this idea. Because having GGP invest \$9 million as community investment in 2015 was simply too big and bold an idea or something like that.

Now we are supposed to be thrilled that Norwalk is on the hook for \$460k in rent for parking that has a dubious claim as a need (see, history is important, the Issac Street parking lot was deemed underutilized 10 years, or so, ago, so that more housing could be built) and on the hook for \$4.9 million to buy land.

The opportunity cost here is the \$9 million lost in 2015 because the usual suspects couldn't think through a deal that would end up funding an investment for the greater good of all of Norwalk. You could make the case that the \$3.5 million from the removal of the hotel use, should be deducted since that is now a community investment. Whatever the number you want to use, the investment side of the ledger looks to me like one generation has saddled the next generation with yet another bad, expensive deal when there were other options to pursue.

So while I am fully in favor of a new library that addresses the 21st century needs of the next generations of people living and working in Norwalk, this plan fails to get Norwalk there.

It is striking that the generation that will pay for this deal, and presumably utilize this vision of what a 21st century library should look like, was not in the room speaking in support of the deal.

When major corporations move to Boston and NYC, along with the not-in-the-headlines smaller companies, they point out lessons that every town in Connecticut should heed. Young people don't want to live in communities that consistently ignore their needs in favor of a generation that still thinks that investing in a car-centric suburban lifestyle is economic development for the future.