

TRUSTEES OF FORBES LIBRARY
Interview with Adam Novitt
for the Position of Director, Forbes Library
October 20, 2016

Present: Mr. Carrier, Ms. Hess, Ms. Sheirer, Mr. Twarog, and Ms. Wight. **Also Present:** Members of the Search Committee Dylan Gaffney, Martha McCormick, and Molly Moss.

The meeting began at 4:05 PM in the Coolidge Room.

Ms. Hess introduced the Trustees, members of the Search Committee, and the candidate, Adam Novitt. Mr. Novitt has been the Director of Lilly Library since 2015. Before that he was Director of the Sunderland Public Library from 2011-2015, and Director of the Pelham Library from 2007-2011. From 2002-2008, he was a Reference and Outreach Librarian, Archivist, Grant Writer, and Project Manager at Forbes Library. Mr. Novitt received an MLIS from Simmons College in 2007 and a B.A. in English Literature from the University of Massachusetts in 1998.

Mr. Carrier explained that Mr. Novitt would first give a presentation on why public libraries matter in the age of the internet. Then the Trustees will ask ten questions, followed by questions from the search committee. Members of the audience will then be invited to ask questions of the candidate. Paper forms were made available at the meeting to solicit feedback, and feedback can also be sent by email to the Trustees. The Trustees will consider the feedback when making a decision at a special meeting after the last interview on October 24.

Presentation

Mr. Novitt thanked the Trustees and members of the audience for this opportunity. He gave a presentation entitled "Forbes Library Ready to Lead into the Digital Age." Mr. Novitt said that Forbes has unique assets that position it to become a leader. He talked about the history of the public library and the format changes that have occurred over the last 5,000 years from clay tablets, to papyrus, to books and now to digital formats. He said that each format change has caused nervousness in users and libraries, but we have adapted and changed. When he worked at Forbes he developed a workable system for kindles, which some libraries have replicated. The book is still a good format, requiring no external power source, and will be with us for a long time. However adult circulation in 2013-2015 is down 8-10% statewide and traditional books are under threat. The biggest challenge is with streaming media, which will potentially cut into the circulation of traditional library materials, and the library needs to create a new story to replace it. The library can position itself to lead because it has unique and important assets. Northampton is a great city with a vibrant downtown and an intellectual population that is financially stable. Forbes has a beautiful building and physical space, and is in close proximity to Smith College. It has an excellent staff, as well as Trustees and Friends who are engaged and involved. Forbes has opportunities to reach out to various populations including people who work from home or telecommute. At the Sunderland Public Library, he formed partnerships with groups to better support the community. With churches closing, libraries can step in and fill the role of bringing people together to share information. He organized circle dancing that brought together multi-generational groups of people, a knitting group, and a

Presentation (continued)

coffee group. Community is even more important in the age of the internet, which can cause alienation. At Lilly Library, he organized a Lego group for children, a sidewalk chalk program, and an indoor flying drone program. He and his wife were married at Forbes Library and it was the happiest day of his life. He looks for ways to create natural alliances with all departments in city government who have information needs. Librarians are information professionals and can become experts on city information. He created a program where police read to children to foster a better sense of community. The library is there when disasters strike that knock out power. The library remained open, showed movies, and offered pizza during the power outage following the snowstorm of 2011. The library can also help train community emergency response teams and provide emergency training to the public to make it more essential to the city. Forbes and Lilly libraries can work more closely together with a free exchange of ideas that benefit everybody. He would explore creating joint positions where staff could work at both libraries to share their culture. The library needs to create the narrative and preserve important stories. While at Forbes he received a grant for an oral history project, and participants were very emotional telling their stories. He would like to create a model where the library would gather stories through university quality oral histories and then export them to other libraries. He would like the library to become the town public information department. He would use interns through his relationship with Simmons School of Library and Information Science. The library will still circulate books and stay true to its core values, but the future will look a little different than it does now.

Trustees Questions

1. Describe your present and previous work experience and how it has prepared you for this job.

Mr. Novitt said his first job was working on a 1,600-acre farm as a field operations manager. Several different languages and dialects were spoken by the crew bosses, and there were extremely strong personalities. He quickly learned how to get things done and learned a lot about complex social situations. After that he was a mechanic, a bicycle messenger, and a beekeeper. He worked in sales for WFCR and then for a small advertising agency where he learned a lot about effective messaging to draw people in. These lessons are applicable when selling a budget to the city, writing grants, or creating buy-in to library programs. When he started at Forbes he fell in love with the library and pursued a graduate degree in library science with the hope of someday coming back to Forbes. He was the Director of the Pelham Public Library and instituted some programs there. He cleaned up their bookkeeping and won a star library award for service based on program attendance over population. In Sunderland he tripled program attendance and brought in a lot of people. He has been the Director at Lilly Library for a little over a year. He re-negotiated the contract with CWMARS and saved thousands of dollars by changing the elevator service contract. He instituted robotic vacuum cleaners. He removed impediments to access by doing away with a password system that was difficult for both staff and patrons. His experience has included every aspect of library work. He still enjoys working on the reference desk and has an open door policy.

2. What is your management style? What do you see as the most difficult task in being a manager/director?

Trustees Questions (continued)

Mr. Novitt said that he likes to talk to people in person. The director's office is somewhat removed and he makes it a point to get up and interact with staff as much as he can. He considers his management style to be similar to his teaching style. Ideas are generated by people at all levels, but the decision is made by the director. He gave an example where he conducted a trial comparing the error rates when a scanner beeped or did not beep, which had been a cause of confusion for patrons. He is analytical and likes to measure things. He examined Northampton's cost for CWMARS, and through records was able to re-categorize the library and bring down costs. He likes removing impediments and reducing frustrations and said small things can make a big difference.

3. Tell us about the most difficult personnel problem that you have had to deal with. How did you handle it? How was it resolved?

Mr. Novitt said that he encountered a difficult personnel problem at the Pelham Library. When he arrived, there was an employee who had recently been re-classified. He was not aware of the backstory and made decisions about the ILS system where he was perceived by this employee to have over-stepped. He said he is not sure what he realistically could have done differently. When it became difficult, a third party was invited to facilitate a discussion, after which they both understood each other better and could then work together more effectively. He said that not every problem is avoidable, but if people are well meaning, almost any situation can be resolved.

4. How do you keep up with what is hot in the library world? How do you decide when a trend is worth pursuing?

Mr. Novitt said that he would address the question in three ways, as background, middle ground, and foreground. As background, he reads the Sunday New York Times every week as well as Bloomberg Business Week. Often friends and relatives send him articles about libraries. He reads major annual reports such as the PEW Research Center annual survey of libraries and the Aspen Institute Libraries in the Exponential Age. For the middle ground, he goes to conferences and workshops where he finds it very valuable to talk to other people, especially other library directors, to hear what they are doing. In the foreground is the community. He speaks to people in the community such as the people here today. He is involved in the Northampton community including NCTV and the Cultural Council. He knows the police chief and other city officials. He believes the library should capitalize on the partners we have. Lately his teaching experience has caused him to consider libraries from the perspective of someone just entering the field.

5. What kind of partnership and/or collaborations do you see as advantageous for a public library to establish within a community?

Mr. Novitt said he spoke about some of this in his presentation. When he was here years ago, he set up an archives management tool. He said it would be great if people from the senior center could add metadata to the local history collection and contribute something that is deep and special to them. He said that community partnerships are essential to the ongoing success of the library.

Trustees Questions (continued)

6. What techniques would you use to evaluate service quality and customer satisfaction with services provided?

Mr. Novitt said that the library's first best resource is the staff, the people on the ground doing the day-to-day work. They are in position to understand the impediments and generate the great ideas that are optimal for the library to implement. The management team needs a good relationship with staff to transfer information upwards. Secondly, he would measure background information including what kinds of materials are circulating. He would look at how the data we are already gathering can be used to make our services better. Periodically we need to ask the public, and maintain a good relationship so that the community can generate ideas. He would look at opportunities to partner with other organizations. He wants to focus on things that make a difference in people's lives, and use library resources to deliver services that are of high value to the community.

7. What are some of the unique service populations that the library can serve and how can that service be provided?

Mr. Novitt said that when he worked at Forbes he did outreach and delivered books to people who couldn't come in to the library. This was a unique population, often including people with intellectual needs near the end of their lives. This experience formed his framework for service. He has close personal relationships to people with disabilities and understands how those disabilities affect them. He said that outcomes are important and the oral history project was incredibly powerful as a way for people to tell their stories.

8. What kind of public relations program would you envision for this library?

Mr. Novitt said that he makes it a point to arrive early and leave late. He hand-delivers checks downtown so that he can connect with city employees. He sees this as a form of outreach. While he was working at Forbes, the library lost its outreach car, so he began delivering books by bicycle, which resulted in a story in the newspaper. Over his career, he has come up with ways that interest reporters in writing stories about the library. His background in advertising and public relations has given him this perspective. He also engages in public relations through the many community groups he participates in, including the parking committee, rail trail committee, and the Northampton democratic committee.

9. If you were appointed Director, what kind of relationship would you strive to establish with the Library Board? What would you expect from the Board?

Mr. Novitt described his relationship with the board at the Sunderland Public Library. He would draft a framework of an idea including facts and bring it to a board meeting. After the discussion, he would develop the idea further and do more research. At the next meeting, the board would then vote to proceed or table it. He does not think the Trustees' position is to manage the library at a granular level, but to work together so that everyone has the same vision, which should include some presence outside of board meetings.

Trustees Questions (continued)

a. If you make a recommendation to the Trustees and they reject it, what would you do next?

Mr. Novitt said it would depend on the recommendation and the nature of the rejection. He said it is important to recognize that everyone has the best intentions and is coming from the right place. He said it was okay to bring items up for discussion again especially if new information becomes known. He does not have any direct experience with adversarial conflict. If it is something truly important that he really believes in, he might ask the Trustees to make a case for why it was rejected. Ultimately, the Trustees have their role, and it is not his role to override their decisions.

10. If you were offered this position, what would be your top three priorities and how would you determine them?

Mr. Novitt said that his first priority would be to understand the exact nature of his role and to get to know the staff and Trustees. His second priority would be to introduce himself to the community and to make himself known. He enjoys working on the desk and believes that the public needs access to the library director. His third priority would be to solicit opinions from the public on where the library should go. He has a lot of ideas, but is not currently operating within the system, and would want to extend a hand to find out what is most pressing.

Search Committee Questions

Molly Moss asked Mr. Novitt to describe his experience with staff training and development. Mr. Novitt said that he added a line item specifically for staff training at Lilly Library. He encourages staff to go to training and conferences. He said an open-door policy is not enough. You need to reach out to people and encourage them. He encourages staff to go to staff meetings at Forbes to help understand how the two libraries can cooperate. He said going to conferences and getting out in the community with your peers elevates your desire to do a good job.

Martha McCormick asked about his experience with Friends groups and volunteers. Mr. Novitt said that volunteers were an important part of work at the Pelham Public Library. They helped prepare books for cataloging and sometimes they worked on the desk. Volunteers can add a real depth of knowledge and bring in assets you might not already have. He said that Friends groups are an amazing group of people who do so much for the library, such as the garden tour and wine tasting. These great events bring people into the library and create ways for citizens to get involved. He said the Friends are essential to the library, and he would try to nurture and grow the organization in a number of different ways.

Mr. Carrier asked Mr. Novitt how many employees work at Lilly Library. Mr. Novitt said that there are 18 employees. He is the only full-time employee and there are five other salaried and benefitted employees. The rest are intermittent part-time workers.

Public Questions

Dee Michel asked Mr. Novitt what projects or decisions he was most proud of and for which did he have regrets.

Public Questions (continued)

Mr. Novitt said that at the Pelham Public Library he started a program of library teas. He obtained the long-term loan of a grand piano and invited people from the community to come in and play on Sundays. He said the piano playing was incidental and more importantly, it was a way for the community to spend time together, meet old friends and make new ones. He has been gone from Pelham for five years now but the program has become a focal point for the community. A regret of his is that he did not have enough professional standards in place when he did the oral history project at Forbes many years ago. It is a project with so much potential, and he would like to revisit it. Part of the reason he wants to be Library Director at Forbes is to do something great and make a big contribution.

Rodney Kunath asked about the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Library and Museum. He told a story of growing up in Northampton and knowing Mrs. Coolidge when he was a child. He talked about the history of the museum and how it was established. He said in the past few years there have been rumors that the museum will close or leave the library, which has upset many people. If he were to become director, would he keep the museum?

Mr. Novitt said that the Coolidge Museum has a long-standing and deep history with Forbes Library and in his first 5 years he would like to see a plan to best utilize this asset. Forbes is the only public library to house a presidential museum and it is both a unique opportunity and a responsibility. He would want to see interpretive programs of interest to people based on the collections the library houses and maintains. He would want to talk to people who are passionate and have a vision for the museum. He would try to support it in a way to leverage its value. He has always had a special feeling for archives and special collections because they tell the story of a community. He would like to see the collection include stories such as Mr. Kunath's. The museum is a special place and a great tool for outreach and he would want to approach it in a way to add value to the museum and the community.

Mark Parsons asked about local history, genealogy, and photo archive collections. He has heard stories that some libraries have shifted collections to historical societies to be taken care of, and asked how Mr. Novitt would increase the use of collection.

Mr. Novitt said that he might put on a show in the gallery and do something that would get a big story in the newspaper. He sees special collections as a way to reach out to specific groups. People are passionate about local history, but physical objects are limited by space considerations. He would work on digitization projects that provide ready access in a way that requires less mediation from librarians. Many of the projects he is interested in involve special collections and he wants to do right by them. They need to be as accessible as possible and have an important home in the library. The community can participate in adding value to special collections by contributing metadata through the online portal.

Julie Nelson said that use of special collections has been increasing every year and asked Mr. Novitt how he would meet the demand through staffing and hours.

Mr. Novitt said that the first step is to make the public aware of those usage statistics to help deliver the story to the people who are capable of helping. There needs to be good messaging and a compelling story to tell. The local history collection is well positioned to do so because it is full of

Public Questions (continued)

stories. He would create projects that tell the story of Northampton in a different way. He talked about an idea where people could take old photos and re-photograph them from the same point of view, to help people connect with history in a way that is meaningful to them.

Janet Gross said that Mr. Novitt has been laying out a vision for Forbes Library in the future and asked how he would go about getting the Trustees and staff to buy in to his vision.

Mr. Novitt said he has been laying out a lot of ideas as examples, but the library does not need to do all or any of them. There are many ideas for compelling projects going forward. He is not wedded to anything other than bringing a vibrant community together. There is room for multiple people to work on different things, and he would not try to force staff or Trustees to do something they don't want to do. Mr. Novitt said that he sees himself as a change agent and a big thinker. The circulation trends are real, and now is not the time for an incrementalist. We need to assess what we are going. Forbes is on track and the programming here is great, but the next library director will need to address the library's role going forward.

Dee Michel said that Mr. Novitt was a strong candidate and that he liked his specific ideas. He asked him to address concerns about follow-through, and why he has moved from job to job so quickly.

Mr. Novitt said that he has left every library where he has worked in a better position than when he arrived. He said that when you start out in the library field it is necessary to move from job to job in order to advance. He said that he has been working toward this position for 12 years and has no further ambition than to finish his career here at Forbes Library. Happi Cramer said that while Mr. Novitt has worked in Pelham and Sunderland, he has always lived in Northampton and loves this community. Mr. Novitt said that if he is entrusted with this job he wants to be equal to it. There will be a lot of challenges, but he believes he is ready for them.

Mark Parsons asked about patron privacy and whether Mr. Novitt would stand behind a decision made by a staff member, and if he did not agree how he would handle it. Mr. Novitt talked about his experience at the Pelham Public Library, which had family library cards when he arrived. As he has moved into more urbane libraries, his thoughts on privacy have evolved. Sometimes from the patron perspective, privacy policies can be inconvenient, for example when you can't pick up your daughter's books. Policies exist for a reason, so that when things get difficult, there is a policy in place to fall back on. Policies help staff make the right decisions. He believes that procedurally there are ways to protect privacy, for example not checking out books to family members. The library's circulation system was developed so that patrons can opt in to having their reading history saved or not. He said librarians are people who believe in the privacy of information, and are willing to stand up for protecting it.

Julie Nelson asked about censorship issues with collections. Mr. Novitt talked about the situation in Amherst with the Tintin comics as being a good model. He has a strong history of working against censorship and he has had Sharon Sharry, the Amherst Library Director speak to his students about it.

Trustees Wrap-Up

Mr. Carrier asked if there were anything else Mr. Novitt would like to tell them. Mr. Novitt said that you could not invent a library with such a beautiful building, strong community, and active Friends group. The library upholds the values of free information, preserves history, and is funded by tax dollars. Forbes Library is as amazing to him today as it was 12 years ago when he first started working here. He feels proud and lucky to live in Northampton and this is the job of a lifetime. He said that together we can do great things and Forbes is ready to lead the way. He said that he is excited about the position, but whoever is chosen, he will always have Forbes' best interest at heart.

Ms. Hess thanked Mr. Novitt for coming and speaking with the Trustees and the public. The final interview is October 24 at 4:00 PM in the Coolidge Room. Mr. Carrier thanked the audience on behalf of the Trustees for sharing their questions, and Ms. Hess reminded the audience to use the feedback form or email their feedback to the Trustees.

The meeting ended at 5:38 PM.