

GUEST COLUMN

Forbes Library needs you now more than ever

By **RUSS CARRIER**

One of the amazing aspects about living in Massachusetts is that most communities, regardless of their size, have a free public library. It is impossible to calculate the positive impact that these libraries have had since the initial ones were established in the first half of the 19th century.

I think we can all agree on how lucky we are to have a library of the size and quality of Forbes in our community. We have a lot of folks to thank for that, beginning with the foresight and generosity of the library's founder Charles Forbes himself. Fortunately, since the opening of the library in 1894, the trustees, administration, and staff together have striven to make a visit to the library more than just about circulating materials and research.

In fact, they always envisioned that a visit to Forbes should also be an experience to be savored and remembered long afterward. This dream commenced with the decision to design and construct a building that was not only unique and incredibly beautiful, but also quite remarkable in size, given Northampton was just half its current population at the time of its construction.

Over the decades, through gifts and purchases, the library acquired a strong collection of circulating and research materials as well as many beautiful works of art and fine furnishings. To paraphrase former library director Blaise Bisailon, Forbes became a place not only to read, conduct research, and study, but also a place for patrons to browse, admire, reflect and enjoy.

However, despite using the term free, we all know that the many and varied services the library offers are really not without cost. The library's total operating budget for the coming fiscal year will grow to over \$1.5 million. Some folks may not be aware of this fact, but Forbes Library is not now and in fact has never been a department of our city government. Instead, Judge Forbes envisioned a rather unique relationship between the library and the city back in the

late 19th century that is still in place today.

On one hand, the city is legally responsible for the maintenance of the building, covering all the operational expenses of the library, and replacing the building if destroyed by fire or other natural disasters. However, Forbes is actually a public charitable trust owned and managed by an independent board of trustees who are elected by the citizens of Northampton.

While the city is required to cover the operating expenses of the library, there are a number of things that make Forbes the special place it is today that are not currently covered by city taxpayers. Among them are all circulating materials, technology purchases and updates, programing expenses, professional development for the staff, special collections development and restoration, legal fees, strategic planning expenses, small but significant maintenance projects and improvements which make the library so special, marketing costs, and providing small amenities for the staff that help make Forbes a little bit better place to be employed.

As a result, in the short term to cover these important expenses, the trustees depend on the income from the library's endowment, the effort and generosity of the Friends of Forbes Library, donations received during our two yearly appeals, Library Giving Day and the Library Annual Fund, as well as the much appreciated unsolicited gifts that periodically come our way.

In the long run to make sure future generations continue to have a great public library at their disposal, the trustees have recently established the Charles Forbes Society. For those who are considering end of life planning and want more information about joining the Charles Forbes Society, please contact Lisa Downing, the library director, at 413-587-1016 or ldowning@forbeslibrary.org. All donations to Forbes, regardless of their size, are needed and help to make Forbes Library the special place it is.

Russ Carrier is the president of the board of trustees of Forbes Library.



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Forbes Library in Northampton dates to 1894.