

TRUSTEES OF FORBES LIBRARY
Interview with J. Matthew DeLaney
for the Position of Director, Forbes Library
October 13, 2016

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

The meeting began at 4:10 PM in the Community Room.

Ms. Hess introduced the Trustees, members of the Search Committee, and the candidate, J. Matthew DeLaney. Mr. DeLaney is the Administrative Director of the Onondaga County Public Library in Syracuse, NY since May 2015. Before that he was the Library Director of the Manlius Library in Manlius, NY from September 2013 to May 2015 and Library Director of the Tully Free Library in Tully, NY from June 2011 to August 2013. From May 2010 to June 2011 Mr. DeLaney was North Albany Branch Manager at the Albany Public Library. Mr. DeLaney has a Master of Science in Information Science from University at Albany, and a B.A. in Philosophy from Binghamton University.

Mr. Carrier explained that Mr. DeLaney 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. DeLaney thanked the Trustees and members of the audience for coming out for his interview. He said he would speak on the broad topic of the role of the library in the age of the internet and address it in three ways, through a personal story, the library's role in the community, and the role of the library in individuals' lives. Mr. DeLaney related a personal story of a proud moment he experienced when visiting the small community of Tully, NY last week where he had been Library Director a few years ago. The community is now vibrant with a new grocery store, coffee shop, wine shop, park, pottery shop, and childcare center. When he was director there, the library had an "idea board" where the seeds were planted that transformed the entire community. At the time the town did not have a grocery store, and the library was instrumental in forming a farmer's market, which later led the way to a grocery store and the other businesses. Mr. DeLaney said this shows the impact a library can have when it listens to its community and focusses its efforts. Mr. DeLaney said it can be hard to measure outcomes and to demonstrate value to stakeholders, but this experience exemplifies the saying that nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come. The library's role in the community can be a hard question to answer. He has never seen the internet as a threat or a challenge to what the library has to offer. He likened it to growing your own food and cooking it at home, compared with eating out in a restaurant. Both experiences are valuable in different ways. The library's role is to empower people and enrich their lives, and the internet enhances that experience. It can be a platform for conversation and community engagement. The library provides a safe place for people at all

Presentation (continued)

different stages in their lives, from childhood to adulthood, and is a regional treasure with unique collections. Mr. DeLaney then spoke about the role of the library in individuals' lives. He travels frequently and talks to people about how they got to where they are in their lives. He is interested in the transformational moments that provide pivot points and can change lives. The library is so much more than a repository for books. People may come into the library to borrow a book, but then see posters for events and other materials, which can spark passionate lifelong interests. Mr. DeLaney said that in a time of rapid change, the role of public libraries has never been more important.

Trustees Questions

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

Mr. DeLaney said that his career has had a clear trajectory and that he is passionate about libraries. He started at a large urban library in Albany and wanted more freedom and flexibility. He took a position and downsized to a smaller library in Tully, NY with 4-5 staff members. He did everything it takes to run a library on a small scale. From there he went to a library with 25 staff members and a budget of \$1.2 million. He worked on organizational restructuring to clear bottlenecks and make the library more flexible and adaptable, helping it to become a "star" library in Library Journal. From there Mr. DeLaney joined the county administrative team, overseeing 9 city branches and 23 member libraries with a budget of \$14 million, where he oversees 200 employees. He is interested now in going to a place where he hopes to be part of a smaller library system again and return to the work of helping the library achieve its goals.

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

Mr. DeLaney said his management style is one of empowering library staff with all the tools they need to remove barriers and allow them to do their job working toward common goals. He said it is important to make sure that the mission and vision of the organization is clear and that everyone understands their role. It is important to establish a solid foundation and to have effective communication both internally and externally, and to get feedback from the community. The library must maintain the structure of the building and respond to changing needs. They need to creatively engage with the community. Librarians are passionate about their work and staff need the tools to do the job well. Mr. DeLaney said that one of the most difficult tasks is in dealing with the different classification systems that have been around for over 100 years and processes that have existed for a long time. It is important to encourage staff to think about accomplishing goals in a different way, and not to get stuck in a routine. Mr. DeLaney said that Forbes had adapted well compared to other libraries he has seen. It is important to demonstrate the library's value to stakeholders when it is becoming increasingly expensive to run the library operation and to provide the best service to different audiences.

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?

Trustees Questions (continued)

Mr. DeLaney described a situation where he came in as library director and there was an existing problem with a longtime employee who was struggling with drug addiction. The person was loved by both staff and public, but sometimes brought their personal problems to the workplace resulting in some egregious behavior that affected everyone. Allowing those behaviors sent the wrong message to staff and did not provide a safe workplace. Eventually the employment ended. It was difficult to come in as a new administrator and handle such a delicate situation, but ultimately it was best for the employee and staff, and morale improved afterwards. Ms. Reall asked a follow-up question about what help had been offered such as opioid, drug, and alcohol treatment programs, or referral to an EAP program. Mr. DeLaney said that all of those options had been offered and tried, but had not been successful and that it had been a very long process.

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. DeLaney said that he does not proclaim to be an expert in cutting edge technology, but has people working for him who are. He reads about libraries all the time and visits them when he travels. He talks to library staff to broaden his perspective on how other places are doing things. It is important to have a range of experiences and staff who clearly understand, feel supported, and explore new ways of doing things. He believes in investing in professional development. Libraries offer a vast range of services from contemporary fiction, to local history, to computers and maker spaces. Internal and external communication in a rapidly changing media market are key to having people share their experiences and knowledge. In deciding which trends to pursue, Mr. DeLaney said that it is important to put in the work up front in understanding the priorities of the community, board, and staff. With limited resources, decisions need to be made about what is most important.

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

Mr. DeLaney said that he spoke earlier in the day with the search committee about this topic and said that in a vibrant thriving community such as Northampton, with strong connections to art, literary, and historical resources, it is vital to understand those resources and not duplicate them. The library should focus instead on complementing and supporting already existing efforts in the community. The library can serve as an entry point to other service points. Secondly, the library should have as many relationships as possible with the groups that offer those services. Public libraries cannot control all the resources or do it all themselves. The library should understand what it does well and direct patrons and community members to those services.

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

Mr. DeLaney said that feedback should be more than an annual survey. Dedicating time to that is wonderful, but it is important to get feedback from people who use the library services. What do they like

Trustees Questions (continued)

about the library and what don't they like? Feedback can include email suggestions or focus groups, and is part of the strategic planning process. It is also helpful to look at how the library compares to comparable libraries in the state in terms of size and community. There are 371 public libraries in Massachusetts and Forbes is about 77th in terms of the size of the population it serves. He would look at whether the library is expending a comparable number of dollars and other professional standards.

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

Mr. DeLaney said that he believes the library has a mandate to serve all populations. The challenge is in knowing which populations aren't being served because they aren't coming in to the library, and you need to look outside the box to see why they aren't coming in. There are unique ways to serve populations based on their needs. He has heard about Forbes' outreach program delivering books to people who can't come in to the library. At Onondaga they provide services to people that don't have access to a local branch library. He is considering purchasing a book bicycle with shelves to deliver books. He would like to bring in other partners in the community.

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

Mr. DeLaney said that the library website is an important public relations mechanism, and also an important outreach tool to reach people where they are. The library is always working on renovating and improving its website, which is like a virtual branch. From a public relations standpoint, the website needs to be exciting, engaging, and contemporary. The library also needs to engage with groups in the community, including local school boards and PTOs. He does not expect staff to participate on their own time, but it should be encouraged as part of their job to become embedded throughout the community. It is also important to have a communication plan, and to identify what is and isn't working.

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. DeLaney said that the board of trustees is responsible fiscally and for setting policies. It is their responsibility to deliver on the plan of the library. The relationship between the board and library director is a critical one. The library director is responsible to implement the plan and needs to be a strong and assertive leader. It is the library director's job to advocate for what is critically important to the library in a rapidly changing environment. The director needs to communicate why something is needed and bring information to the board of trustees. He expects the board to be passionate advocates for the library both politically and financially, and together with the director provide the best possible library for the community.

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

Trustees Questions (continued)

Mr. DeLaney said that the board is ultimately responsible for the library, but before decisions are made he expects that there would be a lot of communication. He would trust the board to know the community and to be authorities on their needs, and trust that the board is making the decision that takes the library in the right direction.

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

Mr. DeLaney said that his first priority would be to understand the community. As an outsider he would be reluctant to initiate change until he understood how the library operates. His second priority would be to ensure that he understands from the board and staff where the library would like to go as a joint effort. The strategic planning process that will take place over the next two years is critical as well as identifying barriers to the plan and gathering community feedback. His third priority would be focusing on ensuring that staff, trustees, and the community are able to articulate and voice their ideas on improvements that can be made to the library.

Mr. Carrier asked why Mr. DeLaney had changed jobs and had 4 different positions in the last 6 years, and what could the Trustees expect from him in terms of longevity. Mr. DeLaney said that each of his positions represented a progression in his career and that he has learned a lot from each position. He is proud of his accomplishments. Working within the Onondaga system of 32 libraries, opportunities to advance were often available to him and he took some but not every opportunity to advance his career and gain experience. Each position he held gave him vastly different experiences and the opportunity to learn more and to do bigger and better things. He is now at a point where he would like to find a place to settle down and stay for a significant period of time, which was not the case in the past. His range of experience up to this point prepares him well to be library director in Northampton.

Search Committee Questions

Molly Moss asked Mr. DeLaney to describe his experience with staff training and development. Mr. DeLaney said that in his most recent position, he is responsible for overseeing personnel, which includes training and development, and ensuring that there are funds to support the cost. The Friends group donates about \$30,000 to the library system of 32 libraries to support training and conferences. The system is in place and his role is to communicate regularly with staff about opportunities. He feels it is important to justify why staff travel around the country attending conferences. He added to the process the requirement that staff describe how they will bring knowledge back and share it with the rest of the staff in some way. It could be a written report or a presentation. One of the biggest challenges is the expectation that staff learn new software and technology, but time to do that had not been built into their work day. He overhauled the daily schedule by finding more efficient ways to staff service points and committed a percentage of each staff members' time to be used for trying and learning new things. For example, staff are expected to teach patrons how to use ebook software, but it sends a bad message if they don't know how themselves. It's not their fault and they need to be supported with time, resources, and forums for sharing.

Martha McCormick asked about his experience with Friends groups and volunteers. Mr. DeLaney said that the current Friends group he works with has

Search Committee Questions (continued)

a mission to support the central library which they have done historically through a lecture series of national authors to raise funds to support staff training. It has evolved now to the point where the series is no longer generating enough revenue and no longer makes sense, resulting in a changing vision and strategy. Facing financial hardship, they need to redefine how they support the library and generate revenue. At the Tully Free Library, he used volunteers for some aspects of service. Traditionally volunteers have been used in a basic way, to shelve books for instance, but in creating a public library that reflects the changing needs of the community, he is interested in using volunteers to share their passion and offer expertise and knowledge that expands beyond that of the library staff. He would look for creative ways to use volunteers, for example by doing high level programming work, as long as it doesn't interfere with civil service unions or take work away from staff.

Public Questions

Janet Gross quoted Mr. DeLaney as saying that he took his most recent position because it was a unique and exciting opportunity that he could not pass up. She asked what was unique and exciting about the position at Forbes that he would want to leave his current position.

Mr. DeLaney said that he is looking for a life style change and is looking at libraries of this size in the Northeast. He is looking for a vibrant downtown, strong cultural resources, a community that invests in their library and honors traditions and history, and is politically progressive. He is interested in working in a community whose politics align with his own. He travels a lot but hadn't visited Northampton until two weeks ago. He immediately had the sense that he would feel at home here and that his skills would be well utilized. The opportunities at OCPL were very exciting, and have given him the reputation, knowledge, and skills to be at the top of that system and prepared him for this opportunity.

Peter Rowe asked what Mr. DeLaney would say to an irate patron who objected to a book in the children's room about a child having two mommies. Mr. DeLaney said he would say that a public library is a place that should be welcoming to people from all backgrounds and preferences. The library has a unique role to provide a safe space for everyone and is a reflection of the community and people it serves. Secondly he would say that censorship issues and providing free access are central tenets of public libraries.

Dee Michel asked Mr. DeLaney what projects or decisions he was most proud of and for which did he have regrets. Mr. DeLaney described a project at the Tully Free Library. Enrichment in the local schools had been cut due to fiscal challenges. There was a great teacher and a lot of students had benefitted from this program. The community was asking what could be done. The library was instrumental in obtaining a \$400,000 grant that brought in partners. They rented a room from the school and reinstated an enrichment program. This communicated to the town that a library can do a lot more and is a force for making things happen. He is extremely proud of that work. In terms of regrets, he said that OCPL contracted with a web firm to redo their website. The project wasn't managed closely enough and the web firm took control of the website. He had relied on the recommendation of a staff member, but had not done enough due diligence in the selection of the web firm.

Peter Rowe said that Forbes has a unique situation of being both publicly and privately funded and asked Mr. DeLaney what experience he has negotiating with

Public Questions (continued)

a public entity for funding. Mr. DeLaney said he has a similar situation in his current role as administrator of OCPL. The library is governed by the trustees to provide services, but the city owns the building and the county funds the services. The relationship between the city and the county is terrible and his role has been to mediate. A recent example is that the library sent out a press release announcing the elimination of fines in the children's department. Many of the children in the area live below the poverty line and 40% of them had fines that prevented them from using the library. In retrospect he should have talked to the county about it first. He understands that there are big forces in play and he was in the middle. He knows that Forbes is facing some challenges, and it is important that the library be in control of their resources.

Mark Parsons asked about patron privacy and whether Mr. DeLaney would stand behind a decision made by a staff member, and if he did not agree how he would handle it. Mr. DeLaney said that patron privacy is critically important and that when police ask for access to security tape, he will not share it without a subpoena from the court. A lack of patron privacy undermines all you are trying to accomplish with the library. He said that having good communication with staff is extremely important, and not to be angry or resentful when they make mistakes. He said it is okay to take risks, and we all learn from our mistakes. He believes in creating a work environment where staff feel they can take risks and be supported.

Mark Parsons said that Forbes has two things considered "gems" - the local history collection and the Coolidge museum - and asked Mr. DeLaney how he would support them and maintain them within the library. Mr. DeLaney said that public libraries have the responsibility to honor the things that have come before. It is critically important to maintain and provide access to the local history collection and the Coolidge collection. These collections tell the story of this community and establish the vision for the community. It is an incredible responsibility to be entrusted with their maintenance and support.

Trustees Wrap-Up

Mr. Carrier asked if there were anything else Mr. DeLaney would like to tell them. He said that he has never participated in such a transparent process with so much community input. He is very impressed by the lengths the board has gone to make the process transparent and inclusive. There are great candidates, and he is sure the library will find a great director, and he hopes to be that person.

Mr. Carrier asked if Mr. DeLaney had any questions for them and he said not at this time.

Ms. Hess thanked Mr. DeLaney for coming and speaking with the Trustees and the public. The next interviews are October 20 at 4:00 PM in the Coolidge Room, and 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 5:30 PM.