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Contact: Todd Alexis
827-6311
todd@bacherjackson.com
Steve Bacher 408-9694
Robert Jackson 827-8974

Freeholder Candidates Press

Library Planning

County Moves Forward without Long-Term Plans

CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE—In a longer than usual meeting of the Cape May County Board of Chosen Freeholders Tuesday afternoon, Democratic Freeholder Candidates Steve Bacher and Bob Jackson pressed Freeholder Ralph Bakley, Sr., who oversees the County library system, on the lack of long-term planning, timelines and clear priorities.

“At the last meeting you referred to a ‘Master Plan’ for the system. You said there hadn’t been one previously in at least the last 25 years. What you have now isn’t a Master Plan; it’s a condition assessment with recommendations for each branch, and it’s still labeled ‘Draft,’” Bacher said.

“There is no analysis of priorities, no timeline for work on the other branches and no long-term planning. You’re rushing to build an 11,000 square foot facility in Stone Harbor for fewer than 1,200 year-round residents, but you say nothing about when you’ll get to the needed upgrades and repairs to the other branches, which serve many more County residents.”

Reading from a copy of the County’s Facility Analysis, Bacher said, “If you use the Stone Harbor branch as a baseline, using round numbers, the Crest branch serves twice as many people and has double the circulation, Cape May

City and Upper about two and a half times, and Lower five times as many people served. Lower Township's library serves over 20,000 year-round residents and needs about \$400,000 worth of work. The Upper Township branch needs \$500,000. The Wildwood Crest branch needs over \$450,000. The assessment states that the Cape May City branch should be demolished and rebuilt, but provides no cost estimate. When will you get to this work?"

Freeholder Bakley indicated that there is no timeline for the other work, and expressed doubt that the Cape May City branch would be demolished as recommended by Garrison Architects in the Facility Analysis.

Another member of the public spoke in support of building the new facility in Stone Harbor, to keep the town from pulling out of the system and taking its ratable base with it.

Freeholder Candidate Robert Jackson asked whether the planning process is open to the public, as it appears to be going on behind closed doors, if at all.

Freeholder Director Daniel Beyel indicated that the library planning process is ongoing, and open to the public. He said that members of the public interested in participating could contact Bakley, County Administrator Steve O'Connor or Library Director Deborah Poillon.

"The library commission meets once a month in the middle of the work day, so it's not accessible to the general public. And they had a special meeting with 48 hours notice on the Friday afternoon before Labor Day to rush through approval of \$8 million in bonds. That's not a process with public input. Have they even publicized an invitation for participation?" Jackson asked after the meeting.

Bacher returned to the podium to state that he understands that the current Stone Harbor branch is inadequate and needs to be replaced, but he

questions the County moving forward without a clearly stated set of priorities and timeline for the other work described in the facility assessment.

After yesterday's meeting, Jackson pointed out that at the previous Freeholder meeting, Director Beyel had stated that the document in question was a Master Plan covering "the life of the bonds, about twenty years." "Why not just come out and say, 'We have a draft condition assessment, it's the first step, and we expect to have a long-term plan by some date?'" Jackson said. "No one forced him to call it a twenty-year master plan."

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