Statement by Judy Haas, President of the Hillsborough Public Library Advisory Board, at the meeting of the Somerset County Freeholders, Tuesday, March 10, 2015.

My name is Judy Haas; I am from Hillsborough Township. I am President of the Hillsborough Public Library Advisory Board. I am also a member of two Boards of Education and I am ethically obligated when I speak publicly to indicate that I am not speaking on behalf of either of them. That being said...

Several members of the Hillsborough Public Library Advisory Board are here today to advise you of our concerns about the potential erosion of the library system from the point of view of our patrons and community. We are calling your attention to this because our library matters very much to us.

There is an ongoing effort on the part of the administration of the library to emphasize and enlarge the central office and create cookie-cutter constituent branches. This plan now includes the promotion of some branch directors and demotion of others in a manner that we find divisive and hurtful to morale, and which requires colleagues to compete with each other for jobs currently held by each other. All of the advisory boards were recently invited to a dinner for our service, and then told that by the next year, none of us would have the same Branch Directors. It was stunning and extremely upsetting. Many of these people built the library system through their work and their responsiveness and connection to their communities. When the top people in the branches are treated this way, it sends a message to everyone in the organization that they have much to fear for themselves as well.

Social media pages of each individual branch and publicity efforts of each branch and local programming efforts were stopped at the end of last year with no input from patrons. The theory was to centralize all of that for brand purposes. The result is local patrons having to comb through information that is not relevant or important to them in order to find what they want. Our patrons don't want to travel all over the county for programs. They want to attend programs in their library that are of interest to them and their children. In doing that locally, they also see neighbors and friends and people with similar interests. Most people view their library as a community center. Where our library succeeds is based on individualized programs and communication based on community needs and the unique make-up and diversity of each neighborhood. However, this was not considered in this plan.

Throughout this process, there has been no meaningful transparency or community discussion. A few Commissioners indicated that they had vetted the plan and supported it. This "vetting" and "support" are not reflected in the agendas or minutes of the Library Commission, and no apparent vote was indicated either. Certainly there was no invitation for stakeholder or public input before these actions began to take place. The ship had sailed well before we even heard it was in the water. Information has been piece-meal and sometimes contradictory.

We don't understand the impetus for this reorganization. We were told that instead of having a consultant study the system, the current Director elected to review other systems himself and find one for us to emulate. We were recently told that the only constant among other systems was that there was no constant. So ultimately, there was no best practice and no guarantee that even a best practice would necessarily benefit our system. It is also not right that one person decides on the plan, implements the plan, and evaluates the plan. That's a flawed process.

We feel our Library system has served us very well and has been nationally recognized as a Star Library for many years and a "Best of the Best" on our local level. One of your new Commission members said at their meeting that the high ranking of Somerset County itself in a national poll was due, in part, to our library system. Well that is the library system AS IT IS NOW. If it isn't broken, why are they trying to fix it? It feels very arbitrary to us.

Many years ago when the County considered the consolidation of Police Departments, there was a significant consultant study, local review committees, and much community input over years. It was good to review that, but the ultimate decision was not to consolidate. I dare say that many of us feel the same way about our Libraries as we did about our Police Departments. The libraries already have economies of scale through a county system; there is really no reason to diminish the local flavor of each branch for a consistent, but lower common denominator. The local knowledge of our local staff and their linkages to our Township and School officials and our patrons and businesses results in better service to our patrons. This is not accomplished through centralization.

Carol Senff, President of the Warren Friends of the Library, wrote in a letter to the Commission: "Every taxpayer in town is a stakeholder in his/her local library with the expectation that the library will serve their needs and reflect the interests of their demographics. Like the neighborhood school, our library is an integral part of the local community. Its purpose is to serve the people of our community addressing their needs and priorities. In our state where home rule has been an established practice, this “corporate” model approach to reconfiguring the library seems to contradict what our citizens want and expect. In the business of providing service, isn’t it essential to know your customer? Not easily done in this new “one size fits all” model."

I agree wholeheartedly.

Our moral imperative is to represent how our patrons will be impacted and as such we are communicating these issues to you to implore you to act.  Please review this plan and ask hard questions about how this will benefit the local libraries versus hurting the local libraries. Thank you.