

Part 1 of 3 - Civic Life and the Public Library

“We are like puzzle pieces who are perfectly suited to make a giant picture together, but we are assembling ourselves in the dark.”

— Vironika Tugaleva, *The Love Mindset: An Unconventional Guide to Healing and Happiness*

There’s been a good deal of talk and bit of animosity surrounding the Watchung public library. There are those who think libraries are obsolete, those who think a library is a financial burden, those who think other towns libraries can meet our needs, and then there are those who believe that a library is, and must be acknowledged as a vital public space.

There are few spaces today where we can come together as a community. We rush from home to work, school to scheduled after school activities, and spend a much of our limited “free” time tethered to electronic devices, disconnected from each other and the institutions of civic life. We see this disconnection in the number of people who have stopped voting and attending community meetings. We, have a great need to connect with each other, to restore civic life.

Ray Oldenberg, in the [Planning Commissioners Journal](#) writes “Joy in living” depends upon people's' capacity to enjoy the company of those who live and work around them. Places to do this must be provided and the time to do it will be available if those places are close to where people live.

The Watchung library is a place of community building, a necessary “third space” separate from the first and second spaces of home and work. As a critical “third space” the library serves as a space where everyone is welcome, a space that fosters a sense of place and civic engagement. Community space is the heart of democracy and civil society. The library can and should be an anchor of community life.

You might say we don't currently use the library as an anchor of community life so we don't need it. The problem with this argument is that it doesn't address the very real need for this type of space. The reason the library isn't being used to its fullest potential is the lack of adequate space. Denying the existence of adequate space in the future does nothing to address the heart of the matter, the need for community building, the need for "Joy in living".

We have an opportunity to decide what kind of community we want to be. Are we people who encourage civic engagement inclusive of all? Do we have a vision of our future as a shared community or are we content to live isolated lives? Do we believe that this community is ours to create? Do we have leadership willing to create the conditions necessary for civic engagement?

I envision our new library as a hub of civic activity. A place open to all, with flexible space able to host clubs, discussion groups, talent shows, and so much more. I see our new library as a space where our community comes together, as an anchor to revitalize the retail area around the lakes, increasing foot traffic therefore enhancing the desirability of this area to private businesses. Mostly I see people in conversation, connecting, enjoying life in our small town. I hope you can too.