

Part 3 of 3 - What do you get for your money.

Without libraries what have we? We have no past and no future.

–Ray Bradbury

In parts 1 and 2 of this series we established that communities need public spaces to gather. These spaces need to be close to where we live and attuned to our town's distinct needs. We need a place where we can be Watchung distinct from neighboring towns. Public spaces fulfill the needs of children and adults and create an environment amenable to living a happy healthy life and raising happy healthy families.

It's key that we recognize that in accordance with N.J.S.A. CHAPTER 33. LIBRARIES, Watchung cannot withdraw from the Somerset County Library System (SCLS), whether by council or election vote, and also never establish another library. If we withdraw from SCLS we must establish and maintain a municipal library with a required minimum tax of 1/3 mil for the operation of the library. (This works out to \$0.33 on each \$1,000 of equalized value of the property). Additionally, even if we withdraw from SCLS the county library tax would be due for at least two years after that withdrawal. Withdrawal from SCLS would also mean we could not access any of the other libraries within the system.

In short, if we want access to SCLS we must pay the tax. The tax amounts to approximately 2% of our current tax bill and allows access to thousands of print, audio, video and electronic resources.

Being a member of SCLS is a shared service that works. In addition to the cost effectiveness of participation in the SCLS we have another opportunity to share funding. In the last election NJ passed a Library Bond

Construction Act which can provide grants of 50% of the cost of construction, reconstruction, development, extension, improvement and furnishing of New Jersey's public libraries.

Some may ask, if we can use any SCLS branch why do we need our own building. As noted previously, an adequately sized public library in Watchung fulfills many needs such as providing space for local programs desired by our unique citizenry, and serving as the civic anchor of our community. What does Watchung offer its residents? Our schools are no better than those of surrounding towns, we don't have a walkable downtown, we're not on a rail line, we're not known for exciting or diverse dining choices, and we don't have hiking trails or other outdoor experiences available for residents.

What we are is a small town that can offer the cozy, homey feel of a town where it's clear that we care about each other. A town where we nurture everyone, youth, adult and elders. In order to fulfill this small town promise we need a center of civic life, a gathering place, we need inclusive public spaces. A healthy small town encourages involvement by young and old, it fosters community. Our own public library is the place to do all of these things. Towns across New Jersey large and small welcome public libraries, so much so that 98% of Jerseyites are serviced by a public library. Each town has the opportunity to display its unique "flavor" by the public entities it cherishes and maintains, what will ours be?