What can I add to the discussion of the New Canaan Library that hasn't already been said?

A few questions keep coming up: at the Board of Finance presentation, at the Town Council meeting, and at the Friday Advertiser coffee.
First, "When did $5 million become $10 million in our long-term plan?" This question refers to the fact that the town has earmarked $5 million for the library in our 5-Year Capital Plan for the past several years. Town leaders learned around six months ago that the library would be asking us for $10 million of a now $30 million project. We asked the same question, "What happens if you only get $5 million from the town?" The answer is that the beautiful, state-of-the-art library as presented costs $30 million. If we cut $5 million out of the budget, then we won't have a town green, underground parking, a solar roof and many of the other qualities that make this beautiful, useful, and efficient. Furthermore, some of the early, significant donations are predicated on the town's participation at the $10 million level. Donors want to know everybody is pulling on an oar.

I polled the Town Council in October to gauge our appetite for spending $5 million to $10 million. (6 yes votes. 2 no votes. 1 was uncertain.) I believe that the library will get $10 million from the town, but the Town Council and Board of Finance are really wrestling with the 5-Year Capital Plan. The library may get the money over five years, not three years.
Second, “Have you considered saving the original 1913 building?” The answer is yes. The library board conducted hundreds of interviews. They know that many residents have a sentimental feeling about the original building. They asked their architects to show them designs that incorporated parts of the old building. The result was a series of tradeoffs that the board is not willing to make. It will result in an inferior design, a much greater expense and a slower timetable. Stamford’s Ferguson Library is an example of compromised design. So is New Canaan's current library, a century-long pastiche of additions and patches. While I will be sorry to lose the handsome façade of the current library, I have not heard an actionable plan to save it, move it, or use it. I believe the community is overwhelmingly in support of moving forward with the new design now.

The third question, “With all of these new meeting spaces, all of these after-school and evening programs, why do we still need Lapham Community Center? Can we move Lapham senior programming to the library?” The answer is no, both buildings are incredibly busy with little overlap. Our current library handles about 214,000 customers per year, providing 1,560 programs to 37,000 patrons. After spending $28 million in 2009, the Darien Library now serves twice as many people (71,166). Darien offers the same number of programs we do (1,556) but now with a new facility have 65% more visits per year (355,972). With similar levels of activity, 150,000 more visits, the New New Canaan Library will be plenty busy, resulting in a $6 million shot in the arm for our downtown. Don’t mess with Lapham. Lapham Community Center is already one of our busiest buildings handling 30,000 visits per year from about 1200 residents. That's roughly the same population as the high school managed by a staff of two.

The fourth question, “Will a larger library cost the town more?” The town contributes to the library's operating expense. After private investment, they’ll be a stronger nonprofit organization with an endowment in a better, more efficient building. They could cost the town less. I’d like to see some projections but the best example of this may be the Waveny Conservancy where every dollar spent...
there works harder than ever.

Tough questions. But the library has done a very good job talking to the community, gathering support, answering objections and making the case to build this library, this year. More than just a pretty design, they've done the hard work of presenting a complete package as an investment not an expense. Town Hall will find the will to fund it.

John Engel is chairman of the Town Council. Chairman's View represents his opinion, not necessarily those of the entire Town Council.

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