

175 Gray Road
Ithaca, NY 14850
September 5, 2017

The Hon. Michael E. Lane
Chair
Tompkins County Legislature
Gov. Daniel D. Tompkins Building
121 East Court Street
Ithaca, NY 14850

Dear Chair Lane and Legislators:

Tonight, the Tompkins County Legislature will consider three resolutions which if adopted would condemn the county's Old Library building to the wrecking ball. I believe such action would be a mistake. Please reconsider.

Tonight's resolutions would authorize sale of the property to Dewitt House Associates, LLC, a division of the Travis Hyde Development Group. Travis-Hyde would demolish the 50-year old library building and replace it with a four-story, 58-unit apartment house across from DeWitt Park. It would change the neighborhood's historic character... and for the worse.

A few short years after the Old Library's cornerstone was laid, Joni Mitchell sang:
*Don't it always seem to go, That you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone.*¹

The Old Library Building is too good to lose. It has many good years of useful life left. It deserves to be kept in the public's ownership and used for a public purpose. We in this county paid for the structure with our tax dollars. Now we're virtually giving it away for a fraction of what we paid to construct it. Yes, it's tempting to make a quick buck selling at a loss something that's not immediately needed. Moreover, that temptation only gains appeal when one plays with somebody else's money, namely *our* money, our taxpaying investment. I, for one, feel cheated.

I urge your Legislature to reject tonight's resolutions and to refer the matter back to committee to study alternatives. At least, the Legislature should delay action pending a Public Hearing. Hasty action makes for bad governance.

In this community, we throw away all too much only to harbor regrets later. The esthetic impacts of Travis Hyde's Dewitt House proposal have been discussed before this body in the past. So let me focus on a second reason to reject the Travis Hyde plan, the economics:

OFFLOADING THE OLD LIBRARY DOESN'T MAKE SENSE:

Tonight's resolutions would sell the Old Library's building and land to Travis Hyde for \$925,000. That's the value assigned to it by the Tompkins County Assessment Department. The

¹ Joni Mitchell, *Big Yellow Taxi* (1970).

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Department values the land alone at \$700,000.² The calculation would leave only \$225,000 assigned to the multi-story, brick and steel building that stands on the site. The Department's website provides no comparable properties for comparison. County assessors may have been flying blind. I would respectfully submit that the Assessment Department has under-valued the Old Library. I don't slight Travis Hyde. Like me, they snap up a bargain when they see one. But county taxpayers are taking this one on the chin. The taxpayers deserve a better return.

In 1967, Tompkins County's then-Board of Representatives spent \$1.7 million to build the Old Library.³ That was 50 years ago. Since then inflation has grown by 632 per cent.⁴ Given that fact, the Old Library's building and grounds today should be worth roughly 12 million dollars. Nonetheless, the County Legislature tonight proposes to offload the structure and land for a mere \$925 thousand. One could argue that, accounting for inflation, the county taxpayer is receiving *less than eight cents on the dollar!* And this estimate doesn't even account for the costly asbestos removal efforts the county was required to undertake in 1983-84.⁵

The library vacated the site in 2000. County use of the building since that time has been limited and sporadic. The property has fallen victim to benign neglect. But ignore the weeds growing from between the rotting wooden steps, damage that's only superficial. No one has alleged that the Old Library is beyond repair or condemnable. It's a serviceable structure if placed in the right hands and accorded tender loving care.

Shortsightedness is a common trait with municipal governments. Businesses plan; politicians often respond only to the moment. That said, together, let's look to the future.

Governments grow. They always have. They probably always will. Not too many years from now, some future County Legislature, confronted with the reality of cramped quarters, will ask its taxpayers to bite the bullet; to bond and mortgage its future. What might it do? My hunch is that it would revive the center-of-government concept. Demolish "Building C", the County Annex; condemn the neighboring Wiggins' offices and Key Bank; and construct a Courthouse Complex addition with the price tag of *10, 20, or maybe 30 million dollars*.

"If only we'd spared the Old Library," will be the cry. Too bad, the Old Library is gone. We'd offloaded a serviceable structure for a song. It could have bought us time; given us needed space. Remember, *you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone!*

Some say the addition of Dewitt House will help alleviate Ithaca's housing shortage. But will it? At the August 16th meeting of the Old Library Committee, developers and some legislators defended the project on that basis. Prove me wrong with statistics if you can. But my anecdotal evidence holds that what's *really* needed in this county is more single-family *owner-occupied* housing, not rentals. Will working-class, middle-income commuters from Spencer, Cortland and Watkins Glen be enticed to relocate here by apartments with rents beyond what they can afford? I doubt it. Ithaca's rents are high. Travis Hyde knows that; it exploits it.

² Source: Tompkins County Assessment rolls; <http://property.tompkins-co.org/IMO>

³ Source: History; Tompkins County Public Library website; <http://tcpl.org/libinfo/about-history.php>

⁴ Source: Inflation Calculator; <http://www.in2013dollars.com/1967-dollars-in-2017>

⁵ Source: Tompkins County Public Library website, *supra*.

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That's why rentals hold value that condominiums do not. It may be sound business practice. But to say Dewitt House works to solve Ithaca's *true* housing problem is to raise a red herring.

THE ALTERNATIVES:

Should tonight's resolutions be rejected, should the Old Library's fate be returned to committee, meaningful alternatives to the Travis Hyde proposal can be pursued with reason, creativity, and thoughtful, ample public input.

We talk the talk of intermunicipal shared services. Let's consider putting words into action. Call this just one man's brainchild. But I'd suggest the Old Library, with only modest renovation—remove that garish wrap-around mural, please!—would make an excellent new Ithaca City Hall. Let's face it. City Hall at 108 East Green Street is a dump. It's a dungeon, an old NYSEG office, with a 1950's décor snatched from some Jimmy Stewart movie. Aside from a couple coats of paint and a few misplaced walls, City Hall hasn't had a meaningful makeover since I was covering news as a WVBR cub reporter in 1970, back when Hunna Johns was mayor! But at least back then Common Council chambers looked out windows toward East Hill. Now one only sees the fire escapes and brick walls of the adjacent buildings. A dungeon.

With a little work, the Old Library would make a splendid City Hall. And I'd be willing, even as a non-city taxpayer, to accept the county's deeding the building to the City for just a dollar. OK, we rural residents would absorb a loss. But we're receiving so little return from the Travis Hyde sale that it would make minimal difference anyway. And at least a healthy proportion of our county's taxpaying public would be reaping the rewards. A publicly-funded building would remain in public use. Win-win.

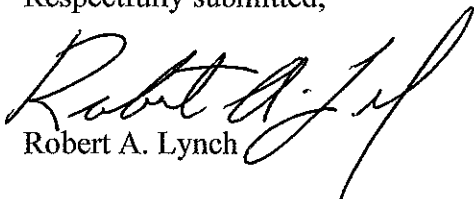
That's one idea, mine. Others may have better visions for the Old Library's future. Let's return this matter to committee, talk with our municipal sisters, and invite creative suggestions.

CONCLUSION:

I urge that we take a deep breath... plus another deep breath... and yes, another. Haste makes waste. Let's hold our horses on this one. Let's reject the Travis Hyde proposal outright. Then let's return the issue to the Old Library Committee for further deliberation and input. At least, let's schedule a public hearing before taking final action.

True, city committees have already weighed the esthetic elements of the Dewitt House plan. I believe they decided wrongly. But the *economic* impacts of this sale have not, to my knowledge, been analyzed. And neither have the intermunicipal opportunities been explored for the building's future. They deserve to be. Let's consider alternatives to an intrusive Travis Hyde edifice that will visually pollute the DeWitt Park district for perhaps the next 50 years. Please vote "No" on the Old Library resolutions tonight. Save our Old Library for the future.

Respectfully submitted,


Robert A. Lynch