

1960s

Referendum Wins on 2nd Try

The Library and its supporters made other changes as well.

Unlike the ballot of two years earlier, when each building was posed as a separate question, the 1960 proposal appeared as a single issue. And this time around, the referendum received wide support not only from the new Friends of the Berwyn Library, formed in February 1960, but also from numerous community organizations and individual residents.

“Every PTA, educational association, men’s and women’s civic clubs, taxpayers’ organizations, city administration and political party leader have recommended approval,” noted the *Berwyn LIFE*.

The Berwyn Junior Civic League was a primary backer. The League sponsored a showing of library film trailers in four Berwyn movie houses in the weeks before the referendum. On the Saturday prior to the election, the League organized two motorcades to Berwyn shopping centers, with the lead car equipped with a loudspeaker system offering music and announcements promoting the referendum.

Political leaders were outspokenly supportive.

“When you realize that these buildings and this most worthwhile program can be financed and accomplished at the cost of approximately two packs of cigarettes a year to each Berwyn resident, it certainly becomes the greatest dollar value ever offered the voters of this city,” said Alderman Frenette.

Mayor Kriz, in a personal appeal, noted, “The cost of this improvement is small when compared to the advantages gained in keeping Berwyn a first rate community by maintaining the city’s high reputation and in preserving property values.” He urged support “to maintain Berwyn’s reputation as a progressive city and assure continuation of present high cultural standards.”

“There is a direct relation between library facilities and the earning power of a community’s residents,” editorialized the *Berwyn LIFE*. “This will be the start to raise the cultural and economic levels of Berwyn.”

“Referendum Wins Easily.” That *Berwyn LIFE* newspaper headline announced the 8,016 to 4,627 victory in which only four precincts out of 67 rejected the referendum.

That September, a construction contract was awarded to A.H. Viren and Sons, Inc. of Berwyn, and ground was broken that same month.

The construction was not without obstacles.

“When we started to build at 16th Street, we had the worst spring,” recalled Mrs. Rose Oplatka, a member of the Board at that time. “Water kept coming into the excavation at 16th Street, and we had to pull out the heavy equipment and dig by hand.”

New Branch Construction

By August 1961, work on the new South Branch at 34th Street and Oak Park Avenue was far enough along for the library to announce its Windsor Avenue location would close on August 13 so that staff could prepare for the move and be ready to receive patrons by the time school opened.

North Branch occupancy would be delayed “so as not to place too much of a strain on the staff to pack, move and reopen both buildings at the same time,” Director Polivka told the *Berwyn LIFE*. Formal dedication of both branches was to be held several months later.

New buildings meant new expenses. By December, the Library was asking the City Council for a 1962 budget of \$88,954, a 30 percent increase in funding over the previous year.

New borrowers had increased from 134 in October 1960 to 302 in October 1961.

To assure adequate staffing to serve this increase in patronage, the Library Board asked for an additional \$3,000 for salaries.

Another \$4,000 was requested for custodial services to clean the oversize glass windows, large floors and public toilets in the new facilities. To enable the library director to travel between buildings and reach out to the community, the Board sought \$2,500 to purchase an auto and \$1,000 for fuel to run it.

A new era had begun.

For nearly 70 years, the Berwyn Library had been constantly on the move from one rental location to another. Now service was permanently quartered in two new

buildings in North and South Berwyn that had been designed specifically to meet library needs. Together with the Central Branch in City Hall, library service was within easy reach for all residents of Berwyn.

Dream Fulfilled, Dr. Hall Retires

With his construction dreams finally fulfilled, Library Board President Dr. Albert W. Hall decided it was time to retire. He left the Board in 1963 after 30 years of service.

Throughout the 1960s, book purchases and circulation rose in tandem. In 1966, the library budget received a big boost to \$90,016 under new Mayor George Dolezal. The librarian's salary increased by \$800, and wages rose for all other employees as well. The 1966 budget also included \$350 for the inception of an audio/visual program at the South Branch and \$1,500 to create a public meeting room in that branch's basement.

Nevertheless, by November 1967, Library Board Member Joseph Zeglin was still asking, "Will we ever complete the unfinished basements of our two new libraries?" In a letter to the editor of the *Berwyn LIFE*, Mr. Zeglin pointed out that "thousands of cubic feet of space lie dormant in these buildings. The community has been deprived of those cultural and educational aspects that should exist. We have lingered long enough."

In the library's 1968 budget application to the City Council, Board President John Kotaska further explained the library's request for \$55,000 to complete basement facilities at both branches:

"These areas have been in partial use, but due to safety and health reasons our programs will have to be discontinued," Mr. Kotaska said. "The very popular children's movie program will be our first casualty."

But although the library was able by the end of the year to announce expanded hours for the South Branch (now to be open mornings Monday through Saturday "for the convenience of patrons"), it would be several years before basement renovations could be completed.

Looking back on those times during a recent interview, former Board Member Mary Toriello particularly remembered problems in the 34th Street Branch basement. "You could not use the basement at all because the door to the boiler room was put on backwards," she said. Mrs. Toriello recalled teaming up with fellow Board Members

Ruth Borch and Harriet Hillary to get the door properly installed and the stairs revamped so the lower level could be used for children's movies and programs. "It took us awhile, but we got it done."

It was worth the effort, Mrs. Toriello said, because the 34th Street Branch was so highly valued by area residents. "My neighbors used to go every other day to take out books," she recalled.

Berwynites of the late 1960s were devoted readers, but their reading tastes were changing.

Library Director Polivka noted that in 1967 adults were reading as many fiction as nonfiction books and selecting more significant literature. She attributed this to "better books made available by publishers, the desire of Americans for self-improvement and interest generated by the media.

"Since more and more people were investing in the stock market, books and periodicals on this subject were in constant use," Mrs. Polivka noted in a *Berwyn LIFE* interview. Interest in judo, yoga, jiu-jitsu and hypnotism also were on the rise. But light romance and westerns were declining in popularity, "probably due to the availability of this material on television," the Director theorized.

Total circulation the previous year for both books and periodicals was 163,687, and Polivka observed growing use of the library by local schools and particularly college students.

In 1968, Berwyn joined the Suburban Library System (SLS). Founded to promote and foster the improvement of public libraries in Cook, DuPage and Will counties, the system also offered reciprocal borrowing among its members. The Berwyn Library saw it as a way to enable its patrons to access audio/visual materials and special books that were not in the Berwyn collection.