**Cost/benefit analysis**

**Renovation vs. new construction:**

At the Jan. 27 public meeting, we heard a handful of proposals to relocate the library to another downtown location, instead of going to CSJ. Working on this project since the last city bond in 2009/10, we have examined a lot of similar proposals that failed because we do not believe they represent good value for the taxpayers.

**The first one was the proposal for a whole-building, full renovation of 10 Court St.** The cost on that was $6.85 million to $11.4 million. The board at the time rejected it on two counts:

First, we did not know how or where to raise that kind of money in Rutland. It’s an outsized project for a community of our size, even one as generous as this one.

Second, if we did gather enough community support to do that kind of a renovation, it would be at the expense of the many other charitable needs in our community. We felt it would be irresponsible to pursue such a grand project, which is why we have been talking about a small-scale, top-priority renovation for $1.5 million instead.

**The second one was to do “something” in The Pit.** That proposal was rejected in 2009, leading to the bond to do emergency roof and plumbing repairs at 10 Court St. See the note below on new construction.

**The third was to look at a co-location with Wonderfeet in a new downtown location.** We love Wonderfeet!! We partner with them regularly! But let’s have that talk about new construction … .

**New construction:**

Cost estimates for new libraries run a wide gamut but they’re not cheap. There are three main reasons:

* People want public buildings to be a positive expression of their community, so they’re rarely done on the cheap. It’s one of the reasons people like the current building.
* Libraries are expected to be relatively high-tech these days, to meet public demand for services.
* Library furnishings are very expensive, because they are expected to last through 20 years of hard, daily service.

There are enough examples of actual library construction projects publicly available to get an idea of real-world comparisons:

* A proposal for a 2017 build in Belmont, MA, which listed [$300-$400 per square foot](https://belmontpubliclibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Belmont-Public-Library-Conceptual-Feasibility-Study.pdf) for a 39,000 s.f. building.
* El Cerrito, CA, has been building branches for the past decade or more at [prices between $472 and $717 / sq.ft.](https://www.el-cerrito.org/DocumentCenter/View/6660/El-Cerrito-Library-Cost-Comparison?bidId=) (And branches don’t need all the functions of a main / sole library location.)
* Powell, WY, is using [$350 / sq. ft](https://www.powelltribune.com/stories/new-library-actually-estimated-to-cost-8-million-to-10-million%2C22707).

So for purposes of a ballpark estimate, $300 per square foot is very much a bargain-basement price. Rutland Free Library needs something like 30,000 square feet, allowing for modest expansion over the next 20-30 years. $300 times 30,000 sq.ft. is $9 million. Add another 3,000 sq. ft. for Wonderfeet and the price is $10 million, give or take. Even the next-lowest per foot estimate, from Wyoming, puts the cost for a building of that size at $11.5 million. The RFL board already rejected spending $6.85 million as too large a project for our community, let alone one that’s half again as large.

**Why the difference?** The sole factor that makes the former CSJ site both possible and valuable is the $1 million 2006 renovation. (That’s $124 / sq. ft. ***renovation*** cost in a structurally sound, wide open space, encompassing 8,100 usable square feet on the main floor and mezzanine.) We need to spend an additional $1.2 million on purchasing the site, creating the children’s area, and renovating the office and public meeting spaces around the main room.

And the only way we can afford that is because of the planned senior community next door. Construction projects require a lot of overhead (fencing, trucks, cell phones, traffic control, etc.) and combining work on the two projects slashes the overhead cost by many tens of thousands of dollars. And the developer has agreed to replacing the roof membrane and siding in order so that the new library is not a leaky eyesore but a real enhancement to the quality of life for the community. Every one of these pieces is integral to getting the project done at a price the library can afford.

**The Paramount example.** Finally, there was the suggestion that “we should do like the Paramount did!"

The biggest single piece of the Paramount funding was a [$1.35 million congressional earmark](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/budget/stories/111097.htm). It was considered an example of “wasteful pork-barrel spending” that led to earmarks being outlawed in 2011.

Even if you track down a funding source, using state or federal money for an outdated library in Vermont is a hard sell politically because half the libraries in the state are in old buildings desperately in need of upgrades. So even if you convince your delegation to support your project, it’s going to face opposition from dozens of other towns who are trying to do the same work (Brandon and Castleton have both been standing in line for federal grants to install elevators. The reason that's significant is that elevators are an ADA / access issue and those typically go to the top of the grant stack. And still funding is elusive.) It's why renovation grants are so small and so fiercely contested. It’s theoretically possible to get federal money, but if grants for downtown improvement are there for the asking, why don't we see them already?

The state Department of Libraries services include tracking grant opportunities. Their starting estimate is that if we had a really good round of grant writing and hit a jackpot or two, we could raise as much as $30,000, which is one-third of 1 percent of $9 million. So “do it like the Paramount,” while an admirable goal, isn’t even slightly realistic.

Finally, as part of the groundwork for a renovation to 10 Court St., we have walked many city officials through the building. As a result, the city has been reserving $750,000 in bonding capacity in anticipation of RFL asking to go on the ballot for a bond for that money to repair the current building. Because we can do the CSJ project without needing a direct infusion of tax dollars, the city would gain the ability to use that money on any project is sees fit, or hold it in reserve.

In summary, Rutland Free Library can afford to move to 71 Clement Road with no bonding or other direct infusion of taxpayer dollars. We have the money because we have set aside major, one-time donations for many years in order to afford renovations to 10 Court St. Before committing to spending $1.5 million on the project, we did our due diligence. While doing that work, we discovered to potential move to a location where we can provide more services to more people for less money. We had to pursue that possibility: Anything else would be a failure to look after the best interests of our users and supporters, particularly including the taxpayers of Rutland City.