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One Staff, Two Branches

THE QUEENS BOROUGH PUBLIC LIBRARY AND NEW YORK CITY'S FISCAL CRISIS OF THE 1970S

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ABSTRACT: During the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, New York City imposed deep budget cuts on the three library systems: the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Public Library, and the Queens Borough Public Library. As the city cut budgets, the public demanded that libraries be kept open, and elected officials struggled to do both. The Queens Library's staff was reduced from over 1,100 to barely 700, with branches open only two or three days a week, with one staff serving both. New buildings remained vacant because the library lacked funds to operate them. When the library proposed closing some branches, the NAACP successfully sued. In the late 1970s, the three systems came to rely upon federal monies for the first time for basic operations. In the early 1980s the city regained its financial footing and library services stabilized, but the budgeting process for the libraries has remained politicized.

KEYWORDS: Queens Borough Public Library, fiscal crisis, New York City, New York Public Library, CETA

Almost every year since 1986, the Queens Borough Public Library has boasted the highest circulation figures of any library system in the United States. That achievement should not be totally unexpected, since the sixty-one branches and central library serve a borough of more than two million residents. Queens is arguably the most diverse place on the planet, and the institution serves a wide array of publics, providing books, periodicals, and media in many languages. Today it might be tempting to see such success as inevitable, but in 1986 such an achievement was the culmination of a phoenix-like rebirth. Ten years earlier New York City's fiscal crisis imposed deep and painful retrenchment, resulting in the loss of professional staff, reduced book budgets, and unprecedented reductions in service.

The City of New York teetered on the brink of default in 1975. Decades of deficit spending, a generous and expanding social safety net, a growing public

Table 1 QBPL Circulation, 1974–1983

Year	Items	Percent change
1974–1975	6,481,354	8.9
1975–1976	6,600,471	1.83
1976–1977	5,909,845	−10.46
1977–1978	6,225,518	5.34
1978–1979	6,128,948	−1.55
1979–1980	5,852,476	−4.51
1980–1981	5,954,290	1.74
1981–1982	6,877,351	15.5
1982–1983	8,633,612	25.53

Source: QBPL, Annual Reports. So demoralized was the system, the Queens Library issued no annual report for 1979–1980.

sector workforce, the loss of private-sector jobs, and a stagnant tax base had brought the city to the edge.¹ Edward L. Sadowsky, who represented Queens in the City Council from 1961 to 1985, chaired the Finance Committee during the fiscal crisis, soldiering in the front rank during the never-ending budget battles. “Before the seventies crisis,” he explained, “the city blindfolded itself and refused to face the reality of what was being funded” and “found it unbelievable that it could be confronted with this kind of disaster.” There was no frame of reference, no precedent; there were no old hands who could explain how they managed last time. “This was new,” Sadowsky recalled. “The city had never confronted anything like this before.”²

New York’s rapidly deteriorating financial fortunes simply overwhelmed Mayor Abraham Beame (1974–77). His administration’s refusal to recognize the severity of the situation, let alone address it, eroded confidence in the city’s capacity to manage its affairs. Asked about declining tax revenues, Deputy Mayor James Cavanagh breezily countered, “It’s out there somewhere.” But, in fact, hoped-for revenues really weren’t “out there somewhere.” Budget deficits had been the norm during the Wagner and Lindsay administrations, and the city simply issued additional municipal bonds at whatever rate the market set. Now, however, the banks refused to buy the city’s paper, and bankruptcy was imminent.³ Beame’s only strategy was to seek aid from Albany, Washington, and beyond. Visiting the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, Beame wrote his prayer on a slip of paper and placed it between the stones. It was a single word: Help.⁴

Figure 1 Queens Borough Public Library News, Volume 3, No. 2, July-August 1989.

Governor Hugh Carey led the state through the crisis, working with the legislature to stave off collapse. In a matter of months in 1975, they created the Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB) to manage the city's finances and the Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC) to restructure its debt. Reduced to the role of spectators while others determined the city's future, elected officials still had to implement the rescue plan passed in Albany and craft budgets reflecting the new fiscal realities imposed by the EFCB.⁵ There was precious little room to maneuver, however, for the immediate goal was not restoring municipal services to pre-crisis levels, but putting the city's financial house in order as quickly as possible so as to restore its credit rating. In 1979 the General Accounting Office in Washington reported that reprioritizing the budget "will be an academic question if the City cannot reenter the long-term bond market."⁶

The fiscal crisis caused a precipitous drop in spending. Between 1975 and 1978, capital expenditures fell by 62 percent, from \$1.36 billion to just over \$500 million.⁷ All public agencies experienced deep reductions, but nowhere were the budgetary cuts as painful as those inflicted upon the city's three library systems—the New York Public Library (NYPL), the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), and the Queens Borough Public Library (QBPL). Independent and self-governing, the libraries nonetheless depended almost entirely upon government funding (and still do).

A Period of Expansion

The crisis came at the end of a decades-long period of institutional growth for the Queens Library (founded in 1896). In 1900 Queens had a population of

barely 153,000; by 1930 it had grown to over 1.1 million. The library struggled to serve the booming borough, renting storefronts, providing deposit collections in jails, candy stores, factories, and hospitals, and running a bookmobile to reach distant neighborhoods. Seven Carnegie libraries were built between 1904 and 1922, but additional construction came slowly. Not until the 1950s did the Queens Library commence building in earnest.⁸

Harold Tucker led the QBPL from 1954 until his death in 1973, and he advanced an ambitious program to replace rented-storefront branches with modern buildings. His campaign proceeded at a measured pace until the Great Society opened Washington's checkbook and funded construction through the Library Services and Construction Act (1962). The federal government redefined public libraries as essential institutions for furthering social and racial equality, in the urban north no less than the segregated south. In one year, between 1964 and 1965, federal appropriations for libraries nationwide jumped from \$7.5 million to \$25 million.⁹

Tucker was both deeply committed to such ideals and adept at obtaining federal funds for branches in underserved neighborhoods. He had the good fortune to preside over an expanding institution at a time when both the city and the federal government generously funded library services and construction. This was especially beneficial for Queens, as its population grew by half a million between 1950 and 1970, reaching nearly two million. During Tucker's tenure a new Central Library and a dozen branch libraries were built, and eleven branches were expanded or rehabilitated. At the time of his death, seventeen additional projects were in the pipeline.¹⁰ Sites were purchased, funding for construction allocated, and architectural plans drafted. The fiscal crisis brought this ambitious expansion program to a crashing halt.

Targeting Library Budgets

In truth, for libraries the fiscal crisis arrived during John Lindsay's administration (1966–73). In March 1969, the city proposed cutting the QBPL's allocation by \$1.7 million, more than 20 percent, but a letter-writing campaign and demonstrations outside local libraries convinced the city to back off; funding was cut by only \$300,000.¹¹ In December 1970, after the city reduced the NYPL's funding by \$161,500, the flagship research library on Fifth Avenue, traditionally open every day and evening for a total of 87 hours a week, was closed on Sundays and holidays for the first time. The next year the hours were reduced from 78 hours a week to only 40 (today it is open 52 hours a week).¹²

In January 1971 Tucker informed the trustees that he had prepared a plan to reduce the budget by \$98,800 and that a vacancy freeze was in effect, resulting in the loss of twenty-nine positions. "Up to this point it has proved possible to accommodate these losses without having to reduce services," he explained, but "service hours will be affected eventually."¹³ The city also requested that the schedules of all hourly employees be kept under seventeen hours per week to reduce pension costs.¹⁴ Further, for the first time the city revoked funds already authorized for the QBPL, which meant that plans for new branches already on the drafting table could not move forward.¹⁵

Tucker lamented that Mayor Lindsay's budget gave libraries an "extremely low priority." In what soon became a wrenching annual ritual, the library appealed directly to the public, "who responded to our efforts" and bombarded the borough president and city council with mail. As a result, funds were restored for ten construction projects; the Brooklyn Public Library had funding restored for four projects, and the NYPL six.¹⁶

After Tucker's sudden death, the trustees selected Milton Byam, a veteran of the Brooklyn Public Library, former chairman of the Library Science Department at St. John's University, and from June 1972 to June 1974 director of the Washington, DC, Public Library. Byam was the first African American to lead one of the city's three library systems, but he clearly lacked Tucker's commitment to extending services to all residents. In that sense, he was the perfect man for the moment, for he actually supported the idea of contracting what he considered an overextended system. A smaller number of regional libraries would be more efficient than dozens of modest branches scattered across the borough's 120 square miles. He had in fact halted a building program in Washington, opting for porta-branches and kiosks in lieu of traditional neighborhood libraries.¹⁷ In both Washington and Queens, Byam headed an institution facing a financial crisis following years of expansion, while confronting the rising expectations of patrons.

The QBPL opened three new branches in 1974, but that was the end of the era of growth and optimism. The fiscal crisis hit with full force the next year, and it was very much in doubt whether there would be funding to open four recently completed branch buildings. The library was accustomed to an annual ritual of proposed cuts followed by the inevitable restitution, but it was scarcely prepared for the challenges ahead.

The Crisis in Full

In December 1974 Byam reported to the trustees that the city's projected cut of \$850,000 for the next year had been softened to \$227,500. He proposed the elimination of Sunday service in twelve branches, shutting down the bindery, reducing hourly employees by 75 percent, and imposing a freeze on hiring and promotion.¹⁸ In January 1975 Byam called the situation "very grave." Looking to the future, he suggested, just as he had in Washington, portabranchees and kiosks to provide flexibility and, to his mind, efficiency. Anticipating that budget cuts would force the closing of several branches, he expected—or hoped—that this would seal the breach.¹⁹ In effect, Byam proposed a return to the QBPL's early history of deposit collections and visiting libraries. But in the 1910s the library adopted those measures as the only way to bring books to a rapidly growing population, recognizing that it was a temporary solution until there were fully staffed branches across the borough.

The 1975–76 budget, the first crafted during the crisis, was even gloomier. As an opening gambit, the city requested that the library "perform a single act: lay off 122 staff members." Byam explained to the trustees that the city would, of course, "reduce our budget by the amount of money representing those positions no matter what we do. But our contract with the city specifically precludes them from telling us what to do with appropriated funds. This request is even more 'out of order' in that it is directed to funds not yet appropriated." The trustees noted that their sister library systems, together with the Board of Education and the Health and Hospitals Corporation, all intended to determine in their own way how best to impose the cuts. Laying off the 122 staff would come on top of an existing 152 vacancies, and with the retirement of about a hundred personnel a year, the library confronted a reduction of nearly one-third from their authorized staff level of 1,069.²⁰

One ray of hope was the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), a federal program enabling local governments to train and hire the long-term unemployed. The city used CETA to rehire 3,338 municipal workers who had been laid off. In all, thirty-three municipal agencies employed CETA workers during the 1970s. In 1975 the Queens Library employed sixty, and the number rose and fell with the ebb and flow of federal dollars in succeeding years.²¹

During this early stage of the fiscal crisis, the QBPL's strategy was to negotiate and delay, believing that, as in budget battles past, a mutually acceptable compromise was possible. But this was hardly a normal process, and the cuts were unprecedented. Rather than comply and lay off 122 staff, the library

offered to return the \$500,000 already allocated to open new branches. Not only was the city not receptive to such bargaining, it demanded an additional 24 layoffs. Reluctant to lose so many experienced people, the board of trustees voted to return to the city two recently accepted new buildings, the Lefferts and East Flushing branches, to accept no future branch buildings, and to return the \$300,000 recently allocated for the portabranh and kiosk program. The library offered to voluntarily close on six consecutive Mondays, effecting a savings equaling the 24 positions. But the city rejected this counteroffer and any other options suggested by the library short of actual layoffs.²²

The cuts proposed in the fall of 1975 would have reduced the library's budget to 1964 levels, a draconian measure given the system had opened seven branch buildings since then. "A cut of this magnitude," Byam told the board, "would require an extensive diminution of hours with little library service going on." Seeing no way to implement incremental contraction, Byam proposed that eleven of the "least used branches" be closed to reduce the overall physical plant to a manageable level and eliminate personnel. "Those branches," Byam explained, "are pitifully used from a circulation point of view, and therefore their continuance cannot be justified in the existing financial climate." Several of the branches at risk, however, were located in predominantly black communities. The board engaged in a "serious and sobering discussion of the implications of employing use as a rationale for closing" and acknowledged they were entering a racial minefield. Nonetheless, they unanimously voted to proceed.²³

As anticipated, the outcry was loud and immediate. The NAACP filed suit in Brooklyn federal court on the grounds that the closings would have "a disparate effect on minority residents and are therefore racially discriminatory." Using circulation figures to justify closing a branch was "neither rational, objective or reasonable" as branches in black neighborhoods were already open fewer hours and received less funding. Elected officials and community groups quickly supported the suit.²⁴ Racial discrimination was the only ground on which library supporters could gain traction in the courts. Every branch closing hurt its immediate neighborhood, but unless it was a minority neighborhood the courts would not intervene.

The city had originally signed off on the QBPL's planned shrinkage, but after the NAACP filed suit, budget director Melvin Lechner rescinded his approval and recommended a scheme of pairing libraries, as the Brooklyn Public Library had done. The trustees, of course, only wanted to extricate themselves "from a suit which nobody wanted and from which the library had nothing to gain." It was clear that the institution faced months and months of

Figure 2 Children demonstrating outside the yet to open Bellerose Branch, March 1977. The Queens Borough Public Library, Archives, QBPL Photo Collection.

litigation, for the judge “indicated that he would award a stay to the NAACP for appeal purposes even if he rendered a decision favorable to the library.” Because of the suit the QBPL could not “effect the closings proposed to make the required savings.” Even then, the city demanded a further \$765,000 cut.²⁵

Anger and lawsuits arose in other communities also. A fifth-grader wrote, “Every Saturday I go to the library and read and read. I really go there to get away from the house but I really like to read. But if you don’t open the libraries I’ll be so hurt inside and very sad.” Patrons staged sit-ins at the Rosedale and Sunnyside branches; libraries were also occupied in Manhattan and the Bronx. The trustees praised Byam for his handling of the sit-ins: “The situation was explosive and dangerous. The Director’s appropriate handling of the matter resulted in cooling rather than exacerbation of the situation.” Residents filed a lawsuit to block the pairing of the Rosedale branch, to no avail.²⁶

The QBPL was being squeezed from two directions: the city imposed deeper and deeper cuts, and the public demanded that their libraries provide a pre-crisis level of service. In December 1975 Byam met with the chairpersons of the community boards at Borough Hall and was told in no uncertain terms that all libraries must be kept open and the new library buildings had to be

opened, even if they had to be manned by volunteers from the community, a clearly impractical solution from the library's perspective.²⁷

At the city's expense budget hearing on December 17, 1975, the library was told to prepare for further cuts. The city also asked "for impact statements on various ranges of the loss of Capital Budget money used to purchase books," an especially unhappy prospect because every dollar cut would mean the loss of "\$2.00 in annual local incentive aid which has been provided by the State." Already 44 staff had volunteered to be laid off, and 38 others retired "to save the jobs of their fellow workers." As 1975 drew to a close, Byam was out of ideas; no option before the board was at all promising. With municipal default a distinct possibility, the trustees voted unanimously that in such a case "the library be shut down."²⁸

As expected, the budgetary process the next year was even worse. When the NYPL was ordered to cut \$1.2 million from its \$22.5-million budget, *Daily News* book reviewer Judson Hand compared the assault on public libraries to the barbarians burning libraries across the collapsing Roman Empire. Pointing out the obvious, which nonetheless had to be said, he wrote, "Further cuts in service will mean that scholars, writers, slum kids who are turned on to learning, casual readers and hobbyists will be increasingly cut off from the books that are central to their development. The effects on city schools, which use public libraries as extensions of their learning programs, will be equally tragic."²⁹ Even during the Great Depression public libraries were open six days a week. That was inconceivable during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s.

A Statewide Crisis

With the greater portion of the budget already dedicated to debt service, pensions, and essential services—sanitation, police, fire, education—the city council was boxed in. According to Councilman Sadowsky, "When all is said and done, the city is no more than a service bureau. . . . When you have to begin to make cuts you have to do it on the margins. You have to make judgments of what is more important and what is less important. Is it more important to keep libraries open or is it more important to hire porters to clean up trash in the park?" While a comparatively small part of the budget, cuts on the margins generated the loudest protests. Police, fire, and sanitation received their share of cuts, but "there was a limit to what you could do with that." The situation was different with parks and libraries.³⁰

The magnitude of its budgetary crisis may have been unique, but the city was by no means alone. Libraries across the state were struggling. On Long

Figure 3 Opening day at the long-awaited Bellerose Branch, February 27, 1978. The Queens Borough Public Library, Archives, QBPL Photo Collection.

Island, the Nassau and Suffolk County library systems had serious budget shortfalls. The Yonkers Public Library struggled to maintain five-day-a-week service in the face of deep staff reductions, and the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library lost a third of its personnel during a mandatory county furlough in December 1975. The Utica library's allocation fell by more than half between 1974 and 1976.³¹ Fiscal realities notwithstanding, citizens across the state aggressively demanded full library services. Such a genuine outpouring of support certainly got the attention of elected officials.

The city's proposed budget for 1976–77 was catastrophic. The Queens Library faced a 35.9 percent cut, with cuts of 35.7 percent for the NYPL and 28.4 percent for Brooklyn. It allowed the library 852 positions, but the city expected additional savings so that by the end of 1977 staffing would be 706, down from a pre-crisis high of 1,154.³²

The Brooklyn Public Library was in the same boat, and like Queens increasingly dependent on federal dollars. Between 1975 and 1977 tax levy funding dropped from \$11.2 million to \$9.6 million; open hours fell from 2,651 a week to 1,273½ (–52%), and the two bookmobiles were parked. In 1975 the BPL had 1,201 staff, 1,048 funded by the city; two years later the number was 923 (–23.1%), only 676 city funded. With the loss of all part-time staff, Brooklyn explored using volunteers to fill the gap, but assured the union that

“no volunteer would be used to replace a full-time staff member whose job is vacant because of the budget situation.”³³

Never before had library hours depended upon federal as opposed to local funding, and by now New York City’s fiscal crisis was having an impact in Washington. As the national economic picture became ever bleaker, the Ford administration pulled back from its modest commitment to continue funding CETA. Ultimately Congress did vote an emergency allocation of \$960 million, averting layoffs of federally funded municipal employees for seven more months.³⁴

At this juncture, the Queens Library was no longer the master of its destiny. All decisions were directly tied to funding from the city, the state, and the federal government. Even federal allocations through the Library Services and Construction Act were cut by \$100,000. Its budget was on a “cash basis,” and everything from staffing levels and open hours to the pairing and unpairing of branches depended on each small budgetary adjustment. Given those fiscal realities, and lacking funding for staff, operating expenses, and books, the library refused to accept the newly completed Bay Terrace branch from the city.³⁵

The QBPL budget for 1977 was cut by nearly \$2.7 million to \$14.3 million. With more layoffs inevitable, the union demanded the library use the \$200,000 it receives from interest on endowments, fines, and other fees to retain staff; at the time the monies were used for book purchases, training and conferences, paying part-timers, and supplementing salary of the director and others in upper management (Byam’s salary was a very modest \$19,000). Robert Schmidt, an officer of the librarians’ local, stated, “The library should spend all of this money to prevent layoffs. . . . We’re strapped for people.”³⁶

New York State was facing financial difficulties of its own, and the balanced budget adopted in March 1976 included sharp cuts in cultural and social spending. Even within those constraints, Republican John Marchi of Staten Island, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and Democrat Burton G. Hecht of the Bronx, chairman of the Assembly Ways and Means Committee, crafted a bill to provide increased state aid for public library systems. Passed in May, their bill was the first good news for the city’s three systems in over a year.³⁷ With their funds, the NYPL and Brooklyn Public Library opted to retain or rehire personnel. Queens decided to acquire a computerized circulation system. Computerization would not cause additional layoffs, but neither would it permit the rehiring of librarians and staff who had been let go.³⁸

Responding to Austerity

Computerizing circulation functions was certainly an ambitious and ultimately necessary innovation, but in the context of the fiscal crisis it seemed like an extravagance. The annual cost of the Gaylord Computerized Circulation Control System was estimated at \$400,000, but Byam insisted that it would save \$990,000 in personnel and other costs. Not surprisingly, the union representing library workers voiced its opposition. Edith Freidheim, president of Local 1321 of DC 37, called it a “questionable project whose costs and savings are still far from clear,” predicting that the library “will waste all this money, people will be unemployed who could have been working, libraries which could have been opened will stay closed, and two years from now when everyone realizes what a blunder has been perpetuated Byam will have gone on to another job unscathed by it all.”³⁹ Her prediction was wrong. Despite such criticism from the press, the public, and the union, the QBPL went forward, and the new barcode system—the first in the city—went into operation in the spring of 1978 in the new Lefferts branch, one of the libraries whose opening was delayed for years.⁴⁰

In late June 1976 the QBPL began pairing branches, with one staff serving two libraries on alternate days. The Central Library in Jamaica and thirteen larger branches remained open six days a week.⁴¹ Union official Robert Schmidt pointed out that pairing staffs would not reduce the amount of work, for they “still have to check magazine subscriptions at each branch, send out overdue notices from each branch, check in books, order books and do cataloging and shelving. This behind-the-scenes clerical work takes up sixty-five to seventy percent of the librarians’ time. This will have to be done in only half the time at each branch. The only cut in work will come from the reduction in time that the public desks are manned, and this usually takes up only about twenty percent of a library employee’s time.”⁴²

The QBPL’s 1976–77 annual report summarized the bleak situation. Since 1974 staff had been reduced by 28 percent, from 1,032 in 1974–75 to 746, and hours slashed by 44 percent. Remarkably, circulation dropped by only 10 percent.⁴³

Sensitive to public expectations, the Queens Library repeatedly adjusted hours and staffing over the next two years according to changes in funding and the availability of CETA workers. In May 1977 the library announced that paired branches would return to the July 1976 levels, a six-day pairing totaling 22 hours a week (one day 1–8 p.m., two days 10 a.m.–5:30 p.m.).⁴⁴ Only two months later, Byam announced the end of pairing—each branch would

Figure 4 The new computerized circulation system at the Lefferts Branch, 1978. The Queens Borough Public Library, Archives, QBPL Photo Collection.

again have with its own staff—and the return of five-day-a-week service. He “pledged to restore full library service to Queens as rapidly as training of CETA personnel allows,” again revealing an uncomfortable dependence on federal largess.⁴⁵

Based on comments to the press, Milton Byam was not the most dedicated champion of the library. In his estimation, the community branch library was “all but dead,” and he didn’t feel that was “all that bad.” “When I was in Brooklyn,” he said, “I never felt we had to build all the branches we did, and that’s even truer in Queens. I know that is objectionable to some people, but that’s the way I feel personally.” Referring to the unopened branch buildings, Byam suggested that “political pressure” would force the system to accept them, “but it will be at the expense of the rest of the system.” His vision of the library was limited to “strictly defined educational functions.”⁴⁶

Byam stated flatly that the system was heading “down the drain,” and he was not exaggerating. In 1974 the Queens Library’s budget was \$17 million; by 1977 it was down to \$9.8 million, a nearly 40 percent reduction. While the thirteen reference centers remained open six days a week, the forty branches

were open only five full days over two weeks; five new buildings could not be opened, and construction on five more had been halted. Byam predicted that “even if our proposed budget is approved by the city with no cuts we are going to have to close some branches,” but added, “I don’t want to get communities in an uproar until I have to.” He predicted that by 1978, even if the budget were stabilized, the QBPL would be forced to shut twenty of the paired branches and pair the remaining twenty. He noted that after the NAACP sued to prevent the closing of three branches in minority areas—because, he said, those communities “don’t use the branches as much”—future closings would be decided on the basis of geography, not usage.⁴⁷

The cumulative impact was indeed devastating. Over four years 286 staff had been dismissed and 1,100 service hours per week eliminated; no books were being repaired as the bindery was one of the first casualties; the three bookmobiles had been parked, and service to hospitals terminated. In 1960 the system employed 672 people, and the physical plant totaled 620,000 square feet; in 1977, with the physical plant nearly doubled, there were only 707 staff.⁴⁸ With an influx of 150 CETA workers, the QBPL could legitimately promise to return service to 1975 levels, with branches open at least five days a week. Relying on CETA workers was hardly a panacea, however, for they were no substitute for the generation of library professionals let go since 1975. Nonetheless, “teams of Queens Borough staffers gave ‘blitz’ training (general orientation as well as task-oriented sessions) to give their new CETA people the training they would need to man the circulation desk and perform other specific duties.”⁴⁹

A Heavy Lift Brings Extra Funding

Many New Yorkers had fond memories of their own local library, and the climate of cuts and more cuts seemed an unacceptable break with the promise of publicly funded public libraries. Sy Seplowe grew up in Bronx using the NYPL’s Morrisania Branch, and for no other reason than to make sure that the city’s children enjoyed the same advantages he did, he formed the Committee to Save Our Neighborhood Libraries. Seplowe reached out to over 200 fraternal, ethnic, and neighborhood organizations across the borough, while attempting to elicit “commitments, not promises, from Queens public officials” for full service and the opening of the new branch buildings. “We want to save our libraries. We want to try to increase the staff and the budget. We want to force our legislators to come up with some remedy to help the libraries. We are not asking—we are demanding.”⁵⁰

The committee gathered at Borough Hall on May 22 to kick off the campaign and head off new cuts proposed by the mayor. Organized public pressure, they hoped, would insulate the libraries. Nearly forty civic groups signed on, and fifty people came to Borough Hall. Ed Sadowsky and other Queens council members attended, making it clear that libraries had become a hot political issue.⁵¹ The elected officials truly wanted to help; the question was whether they had an opening to do so.

Surprisingly, the high-profile meeting had an effect. Led by Sadowsky, the Queens delegation agreed that their funding priorities should include restoration of libraries and school crossing guards. They agreed to seek funding to complete the Howard Beach, North Forest Park, and Rockaway Park branches and to open Bellerose, Hillcrest and Bay Terrace. Defending the city council against critics who called it ineffectual, Sadowsky said, "As far as I'm concerned, it has been the council which has taken the lead on restoration of school and library service. I don't know if we'll succeed; we're not home yet, and it'll require hard bargaining. But it shows we do have the power to change priorities."⁵²

Miraculously, the city council voted an additional \$400,000 for the Queens Library, a windfall that the library director quite visibly and unapologetically fumbled. Byam "expressed his appreciation to the citizens of Queens whose concern for libraries resulted in the restoration of budget funds," but he regretted that the public misinterpreted the \$400,000 as additional funding for the library. "Many communities will be disappointed that all new branches cannot be opened," he asserted.⁵³ His comment about the QBPL's inability to accept new library buildings from the city and open the long-delayed branches may have been honest, but also set the stage for an unpleasant political showdown.

On June 30 fifty women and children demonstrated at Queens Borough Hall to demand the opening of the Bellerose branch, which had remained vacant since its completion two years before. They barged into the office of borough president Donald Manes, angry that he had scheduled and canceled four meetings with them. Finally cornered, and with a reporter from the *Daily News* covering the confrontation, Manes explained that "ever since the city's expense budget was allocated last month, he has been laboring under the impression that the Bellerose branch would be open." His understanding was that the \$400,000 would allow both the East Flushing and Bellerose branches to open, though the library agreed to open only East Flushing. For his part, Byam denied that the money was specifically marked for those branches, only to "put our total budget on par to what we received last year."⁵⁴

Byam sat down with elected officials at Borough Hall on July 6, and the meeting was certainly unpleasant. He continued to insist that savings from computerizing the circulation system "would result in manpower savings that would be rechanneled into increased service and facilitate opening of Bellerose branch." The Queens councilmen had cajoled their colleagues into approving the funds and made public promises to their constituents that Bellerose would open because they believed they had reached an understanding with Byam during the give-and-take of the budgetary negotiations. Byam denied making any such commitment. Referring to his telephone conversation with deputy borough president Lawrence Gresser, he said there was a "misunderstanding," that he was "speaking in the abstract when questioned about the cost of opening a branch." Gresser countered, "Obviously I was sure, and felt very comfortable in reporting the conversations" as a solid commitment. Councilman Matthew Troy was outraged, because he had "gone on record with assurances to his constituents that the additional funds allocated to Queens libraries would insure opening of the Bellerose and East Flushing branches." He warned that the library "would get hurt next year" if it went against the wishes of the community this year.⁵⁵

The entire process was simply frustrating for the neighborhood. One Bellerose resident said, "Until they give us a definite date . . . we don't have a library." Another wrote impatiently to *Newsday* that she and her neighbors wanted the long-delayed branch to open at once, and not wait for the miracle of computerization promised for January.⁵⁶

Almost the entire political establishment of Queens and many community activists turned out for a meeting of the board of trustees in August. All testified that the \$400,000 was specifically allocated to open the two libraries. Grudgingly, the trustees approved a motion "to accept the Bellerose building from the city as of November 1, 1977 and to ask the City to complete the repairs as quickly as possible. However, this board is aware that by taking this action it will be necessary to review its budgetary allocations and to make adjustments in service throughout the system in order to find the funds with which to open the Bellerose Library as soon as possible, but no later than March 1, 1978." The long-awaited and now politically sensitive Bellerose Branch finally opened on February 28, 1978.⁵⁷

The very public wrangling over Bellerose highlighted Sadowsky's point about funding at the margins of the budget, where relatively small sums could make a significant difference. This episode also highlighted the impossibility of the Queens Library fulfilling public expectations, even when reinforced by

elected leaders, within an austerity budget. Still, the library badly misjudged this situation, demonstrating little understanding of the heavy lifting by the borough's elected officials at a time of city-wide cuts. For an institution that did not have to make its case for funding, the library had certainly squandered the public's good will.

The Koch Years

In November 1977 Ed Koch was elected mayor, and he immediately put his stamp on the beleaguered city, becoming its most visible cheerleader and most severe disciplinarian. The financial situation was not of his making, but it was nonetheless now his responsibility. While he knew how much pain cuts to libraries, schools, and parks caused, he remained committed to balancing the books. Koch admitted he was a "neophyte in terms of the budget," but quickly grasped that "you have to have three consecutive budgets that are balanced before you get into the public markets where you can raise funds for your capital budget." Given that hard truth, Koch

had to make a decision at the end of the second fiscal year and during the course of the adoption of the third fiscal year, of whether or not we were going to go to a balanced budget in that third year instead of waiting. The consideration is that you have to cut the budget much more because you have to cut that which you would normally be deferring to the fourth year. . . . At that point, there was no fat in the budget; you were cutting programs that were essential. But there was no option, and we did it. . . . I had to convince the people that what I was doing was in their best interest, even though it was giving them a lot of pain.⁵⁸

In the short term, there was undeniably "a lot of pain."

The three library systems had made modest gains since the low point in the spring of 1977, when staffing was barely half the 1970 level. The NYPL was down from 1,500 to 800 staff, and hours at a typical branch had fallen from 60 hours a week in 1970 to 38 in December 1976, to only 30 the following spring, rising to 40 in June 1978. In Queens Sunday service had been eliminated in December 1974, but was restored at thirteen regional branches with federal funding in January 1978. Approximately 600 CETA workers were spread across the three systems. But the first Koch budget demanded further staff cuts, even while allocating funds to open three completed but mothballed

branches in Queens. The budget assumed that 70 positions would be lost through attrition, but the three new branches would require 50 staff. "It's not that the libraries in this city are well off," remarked Byam, "but we were beginning to creep back from despair."⁵⁹

Whatever gains the libraries had made were the result of federal funding. In 1974–75, the last year before the crisis, the three systems received \$54 million from city and a negligible \$100,000 from Washington; in 1975–76 the city's allocation dropped to \$51 million; in 1978 the libraries received \$56 million from city and \$8 million from Washington. Still, the increases were largely eaten up by inflation, with costs rising for books, periodicals, and everything else. The libraries were living hand to mouth. At least temporarily, CETA made expanded hours possible. According to Barbara Rollick, children's director for the NYPL, "children's libraries have been sustained by CETA workers to a particular degree," and the delay in funding resulted in several vacancies for children's librarians. During the years of austerity, children's libraries had to curtail visits by school classes, story and reading aloud hours and sessions for preschoolers. In 1975 the Bronx kept only one bookmobile in service; parking the second brought an immediate drop of 90,000 a year in children's circulation. However necessary the cuts, they were especially hard on the children.⁶⁰

In November 1978 Queens expanded hours to levels approaching pre-fiscal crisis status, with Saturday service restored at twenty-one branches.⁶¹ At the same time, however, the Koch administration pressed for an additional 10 percent cut in the library's \$17-million budget. A *Daily News* editorial called the action "distressing," coming as it did atop "already sharply curtailed service," and suggested, "First, the city should take into consideration the economies that have already been made. Second, the library system must not be singled out, over other municipal services, for cutbacks. And finally, if economies must be made, let's use a scalpel, and not a meat ax."⁶² In December hours were readjusted downward to reflect this new round of budget cuts.⁶³

An editorial in the *Woodside Herald* likened the never-ending cuts to the Nazis' enthusiastic burning of books, an act that singled them out "as haters of the written word, haters of education, knowledge and even emotion." Why, the paper asked, must libraries always suffer such cuts?

We are strongly opposed to any cuts in the public library system. . . . When questioned about why hours in the libraries were being extended, a spokesman said that it was "in response to long-standing requests from the community." Is it too much to ask that the city heed the requests of

the citizens for something they want so much? Libraries, no less than the uniformed services, should be considered an essential service. Middle class citizens of New York City have paid well for the privilege of having a first-rate library. . . . New Yorkers are paying plenty to keep this city afloat. . . . The privilege of having a library is not a privilege at all; it is a right. And a right that Mayor Koch and his cronies should not be allowed to take away. . . . Return the library system as a living, breathing part of New York for the living, breathing citizens.⁶⁴

The *Daily News* quoted residents from across the borough. A Korean immigrant in Flushing wrote, "No cuts. We need books. Very important for young and not so young." A Hispanic man in Corona said, "For new people in the city who are trying to learn English and are studying in night school, this would be terrible. A cut in the budget should not hurt people." And a Flushing woman wrote:

Anybody with any sense would not want to cut library services. This is a vital educational service. Where are all of our taxes going? What do they do with the money? Cut, cut. That is all you hear. It seems to me that at this rate the whole city will be cut and closed. . . . It is just mean. Many children spend hours in the library. What about the low-income families who can't afford to buy their children books and those big encyclopedias. Koch is just like the rest of them.⁶⁵

By imposing austerity budgets in first years of his administration, Mayor Koch was able to balance the budget and position the city to reenter the bond market in only three years. Koch compared himself with "Joseph in Egypt, only it was reversed, and the first six years we had no money, and then because we did everything we had to do, in the second six years of my administration we had a lot of money, so I could do a lot of things that we never expected to do."⁶⁶ The crisis eased in the early 1980s, and, finally, libraries enjoyed relatively generous allocations and could restore full service.

The Queens Library finally opened the Hillcrest and Seaside branches in the spring of 1980. Also that spring, the Woodhaven branch, a dignified 1922 Carnegie library closed since a fire in 1978, reopened. That scarred and shuttered building was an unfortunate symbol of those unhappy years, marking the failure of the city, of the state, of the Queens Library to live up to the relatively modest expectations of the public: library buildings need to be open. In 1981

the Bay Terrace branch opened, and in 1982 North Forest Park and Queensboro Hill, the scene of loud and angry demonstrations years before, finally opened their doors.⁶⁷ The years after the fiscal crisis proved to be the most exciting and productive for the Queens Library. Circulation rose dramatically, and the institution aggressively reached out to the new immigrant communities.

The Ongoing Crisis of Underfunding

At the time, libraries approached the challenges of the fiscal crisis as an aberration and assumed that after riding out the storm they would again receive full funding. But that has not been the case. The city's libraries have remained inviting targets in tight times, and the dance of mayoral cuts and city council restorations has continued year after year. In 1983, at the end of Mayor Koch's six lean years, Ed Sadowsky complained in frustration, "I think it is wrong, and it ought to stop. It's been a cynical game played by OMB [Office of Management and Budget] . . . they know what kind of uproar will ensue" and in the end, "everybody will be able to pat each other on the back and say what a wonderful job we have done."⁶⁸ That pattern persisted through the Dinkins, Giuliani, Bloomberg, and de Blasio administrations, though the proposed cuts were never as devastating as the libraries endured during in the 1970s.

In the wake of the fiscal crisis, the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Public Library, and the Queens Borough Public Library became rather more sophisticated about raising private funds to insulate themselves from the political process. Even so, 84 percent of the Queens Library's \$125.5-million budget still comes out from the city, leaving it ever vulnerable to a mayor's red pen. Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the NYPL's staff was reduced by 27 percent and funding for circulating materials was cut by 26 percent between 2008 and 2011.⁶⁹

To address the chronic underfunding, the three systems actively seek alternative funding streams. The Queens Library has been especially adept at securing funds from elected officials using their discretionary monies. By contrast, both the NYPL and the Brooklyn Library have begun to monetize their valuable assets. In 2005 the NYPL completed the controversial sale of *Kindred Spirits* by the Hudson River School painter Asher Durand for \$35 million (the oversized painting had hung outside the entrance to the reading rooms of the research library on Fifth Avenue). Two years later the NYPL sold the Donnell Library, located on West 53rd Street across from the Museum of Modern Art, for \$59 million; a smaller library opened in the base of the luxury condominium-hotel that rose on the site. In 2016 the Brooklyn Public Library

sold the building housing the Brooklyn Heights branch for \$52 million and agreed to redevelop the Sunset Park branch into affordable housing; in both instances a branch will open in the new building. These will certainly not be the last such transactions.⁷⁰

That the public treasures its libraries is unquestioned. That the public library is not a luxury but an essential social, cultural, and economic resource is also an accepted truism. Budgetary shortfalls have become the norm, however, and the city's three library systems are today forced to redefine their mission and rethink their service models, even to the point of considering the closing of underutilized branches. The Center for an Urban Future, a progressive think tank, has pushed for the sale or repurposing of library buildings, giving cover to elected officials.⁷¹

The battle to preserve local branch libraries was fought and won during the 1970s. Whether the public wins the coming battle is another question. The legacy of the fiscal crisis is the permanent politicization of New York's three public libraries and the library-loving public.

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