Carnegie Library board seeks opportunities

By Tom Lindley

"Surplus wealth is a sacred trust which its possessor is bound to administer in his lifetime for the good of the community." – Andrew Carnegie

Businessman Andrew Carnegie brought knowledge and information to the masses in an egalitarian way. His namesake libraries, all built around 1900 or so, are still dotted throughout the nation as an incredible legacy, reminding us all that with great wealth comes great opportunity.

We see that same selflessness in the form of the foundations that so generously support community efforts, the Paul W. Ogle Foundation chief among them. The Jeffersonville Carnegie Library Foundation board of directors has spent the past seven years learning that that same level of spirited giving is what shapes our community into the place it is today. Even those who do not have foundation-level funds have given what they can. The Jeffersonville Carnegie Library is a project that many, many people have gotten behind, and as a board, we'll always be grateful for that support.

Because of the tremendous support of the community, members of the Jeffersonville Carnegie Library Foundation board are especially dismayed at The Remnant Trust's decision to leave Jeffersonville. This is a community that embraced the Trust's amazing collection of rare books and manuscripts. We relished the opportunity to have bragging rights over much larger cities that did not win the collection. We know that many are crushed, but also mystified as to why the Trust never followed through on promises to open the collection to the public. This was something we were assured from the beginning would happen, and it never materialized. You may feel misled – but I assure you, we were, too. Our vision was always to have the building open to the public. But the building was, on most days anyway, locked tight. This was never our intention, and in the future, this won't be tolerated.

Now, the Jeffersonville Carnegie Library Foundation is faced with some big questions: how do we preserve the legacy of Andrew Carnegie and his selfless gift to Jeffersonville? How do we give the supporters of our project and the public of Southern Indiana the facility it deserves?

This is a question we haven't had to answer for seven years. Since our organization formed in 2002, we have concentrated our efforts on the restoration of the building and renovations that would suit the needs of the Trust. It's a bit of an identity challenge for our all-volunteer organization – not a crisis, but an opportunity.

As we see it, our duty is much greater than to maintain the now-restored building. Certainly that is an effort in and of itself, but a beautiful building that does not serve a purpose is pointless. We see the library building as a place that, when it was built, was a vibrant hub of activity. People came to visit in crowds, read, learned, and appreciated the building's beauty and its monumental impact on downtown Jeffersonville. Other notable edifices rose up around it. We want the building to return to that same vibrant status, to be a hub of activity and energy. How we get there is a path that we cannot see yet.

We are open to opportunities, suggestions and thoughts as to what would be the highest and best use of the property. This landmark deserves thoughtful, serious consideration, and considerable due diligence on our part as to any suggestions or proposals that come our way. This effort will likely take some time. We know you're anxious to find out what's next – and we are too. But speed isn't our friend in this chapter of the building's life. We will be deliberate and analytical in the process of meeting and selecting a new tenant. We want a partner, someone who is as invested in our community as we are, someone who will regularly open the building to the public.

Andrew Carnegie may have given us some of the best advice there is on finding a new partner for the future. Carnegie said, "As I grow older, I pay less attention to what men say. I just watch what they do."

Consider us older, and wiser.

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