

1 COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND 1  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS  
2 CITY COUNCIL  
3 CITY OF NEW YORK  
4 ----- X  
5 TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES  
6 Of the  
7 COMMITTEE CULTURAL AFFAIRS,  
8 LIBRARIES AND INTERNATIONAL  
9 INTERGROUP RELATIONS  
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11 February 12, 2020  
12 Start: 1:09 p.m.  
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14  
15 HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall  
16  
17 B E F O R E: James G. Van Bramer,  
18 Chairperson  
19  
20 COUNCIL MEMBERS:  
21 Joseph C. Borelli  
22 Laurie A. Cumbo  
23 Mark Gjonaj  
24 Francisco P. Moya  
25

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3 A P P E A R A N C E S

4 Dennis Walcott  
5 President and CEO of the Queens Public Library

6 Meghan Cirrito  
7 Friends of the Court Square Library

8 Frank Wu  
9 Court Square Civic Association

10 Mary Jo Betta[SP?]  
11 Resident of Long Island City  
12  
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3 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: [GAVEL] Alright, we are  
4 ready, great thank you. Good afternoon and welcome  
5 to this hearing of the Committee on Cultural Affairs,  
6 Libraries and International Intergroup Relations. My  
7 name is Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer and I am the  
8 Chair of this Committee and we are formerly in  
9 session.

10 This afternoon, we're going to be discussing the  
11 very important topic and that is the closure of the  
12 Court Square Library. This coming Saturday February  
13 15<sup>th</sup>, it's hard to believe will be the last day of  
14 public service for the Court Square library and after  
15 that, it will close with no date or even exact  
16 timeframe on when it will be open. It goes without  
17 saying that libraries are some of the most accessible  
18 and democratic institutions in the City and it's an  
19 absolute shame to see one closing particularly at a  
20 time when New Yorkers need these spaces and in a  
21 community that is growing by leaps and bounds and at  
22 a time when seemingly this neighborhood needs the  
23 library more than ever, it is closing.

24 So, we're here to address this closure and to  
25 better understand how we got to this point.  
Understanding how we got here, with this branch

closing in a few days, I hope would also help inform the process that the City's libraries and in particular Queens Public Library undergo in the face of changes to its physical plants, leases, that may involve its branches and the changing demographics and nature of our neighborhoods in New York City.

The library's closure and its status should come as a surprise to no one. Two years ago, in the spring of 2018, the community and others including my office began to engage the Queens Public Library on their plans to continue service in the face of a lease expiring at the current location. Because of the advocacy of the friends of the Court Square Library and negotiations with building owners, in the spring of 2019, we all celebrated the extension of the lease. But we all knew that extension would only enable the public library more time to find a new location.

Everyone there knew how much time we had and what needed to be done but the question therefore is simple, what happened in the intervening months? How did we get here? And what did the library do to make sure that this community was denied library service.

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3 It's absolutely unacceptable that a library would  
4 close in the City of New York and I believe that this  
5 is a failure on the part of the Queens public  
6 library. Only when it was clear that this library  
7 was closing and the community rose up and expressed  
8 outrage, did there seem to be an increasing effort to  
9 find a space but it was too late.

10 Court Square is one of the fastest growing  
11 neighborhoods in the entire country and that we are  
12 reducing city services, taking them offline in this  
13 neighborhood should be abhorrent and shocking. And I  
14 know the Queens Public Library has talked about  
15 funding and money in relation to this, and money is  
16 very important but I want to cite a few different  
17 statistics. With respect to funding for the Queens  
18 Public Library in the last five years and what we  
19 have done in the City of New York.

20 In fiscal year 2016, overall funding for the  
21 Queens Public Library, this is expense funding was  
22 One Hundred and One Million, Six Hundred and Ninety  
23 Six thousand dollars. Of that, Ninety Five Million,  
24 Five Hundred and Eighty Six Thousand was baselined  
25 i.e. permanent.

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3 The next year, funding went up to One Hundred  
4 Five Million, One Hundred and Fifty Nine Thousand.  
5 Virtually all of that baselined. The next year, FY  
6 2018, funding went up again several million dollars.  
7 One Hundred and Eight Million, Five Hundred and  
8 Ninety Seven Thousand. Baselining went up again, One  
9 Hundred and Seven Million, Eight Hundred and Forty  
Four Thousand dollars.

10 Huge jump in FY'19, overall funding to the Queens  
11 Public Library, One Hundred and Fifteen Million,  
12 Eight Hundred and Eight Thousand. Baselining One  
13 Hundred and Twelve Million, Eight Hundred and Twenty  
14 Eight Thousand Five Hundred.

15 This past fiscal year, record funding for the  
16 Queens Public Library, One Hundred and Twenty Two  
17 Million, Twenty One Thousand dollars. Of that, One  
18 Hundred and Seventeen Million, Four Hundred and Sixty  
19 Five Thousand Five Hundred, baselined.

20 So, this is not a question, is the library not  
21 receiving adequate resources. Certainly, any  
22 nonprofit institution in the City of New York would  
23 want even more funding and I want even more funding  
24 for the Queens Public Library but the libraries  
25 received record funding, incredible increases and

baselining to match that and yet, the Queens Public Library didn't make sure that we had and they had planned for and allocated the resources to make sure we had permanent and continuous library service. That to me is unacceptable.

So, the closure of the library in light of this increasing resources, is even more befuddling. It is true that the library had a great deal for a few decades but that deal ended and Savanna did not want and had no interest in maintaining this community facility. Bad on them for not understanding the importance of a library and how it could actually, I would think increase the value of their property but it was then accumbent upon the library, when it knew it didn't have a willing partner to come up with a solution for this community that did not include closure of a public library branch.

So, we want to know many things and I'm anxious to hear from the President and CEO of the Queens Public Library. But did the library do enough to prevent this from happening? Was there the sense of urgency, that I think all of us who love libraries and love this community understand. Did the library move too late to find what we all know is needed to

1 happen here? And this is something I've certainly  
2 heard from some folks in the community and a question  
3 that I will obviously ask to, was the library okay  
4 with this library closing? Did the Queens Public  
5 Library accept this as something that they were okay  
6 with it? Either way, we find ourselves in an  
7 untenable position and I know that there are members  
8 of the community who are going to speak and I know  
9 that the President and CEO is here to testify as  
10 well.  
11

12 I want to recognize members of the Committee Mark  
13 Gjonaj from the Bronx, and Joe Borelli from Staten  
14 Island and I know other members are coming as well.  
15 I want to thank my staff, including Jack Bernatovicz,  
16 my Legislative Director, Matt Wallace my Chief of  
17 Staff, Committee Counsel Brenda McKinney and our  
18 Legislative Policy Analyst Cristy Dwyer and our  
19 Principal Finance Analyst Aliya Ali.

20 With that I will ask President and CEO Walcott to  
21 deliver his statement and then we'll do questions and  
22 hear from the members of the community as well.

23 DENNIS WALCOTT: Thank you Chair and good  
24 afternoon to you and to the members of the Council  
25 and to the staff and to the public as well. My name



1 is Dennis Walcott as you indicated, President and CEO  
2 of the Queens Public Library. Thank you for inviting  
3 me to testify on the status of the Court Square  
4 Library.  
5

6 While the libraries scheduled last day as you  
7 indicated of public service, is this coming Saturday.  
8 The lease runs until the end of March but it will  
9 require us to do a lot of work to close out the  
10 library.

11 We want to first, to reassure the community, to  
12 reassure the public as well as to the elected  
13 officials. We are truly dedicated to maintaining a  
14 Court Square Library, we have a commitment to do that  
15 internally and I want to make sure we say that  
16 publicly as well.

17 I appreciate the Committee's desire to learn  
18 about Queens Public Library's response to the  
19 termination of our lease, the challenges involved and  
20 where we are today. And with that, I'll be glad to  
21 entertain any questions or respond to some of the  
22 points you raised.

23 So, since this is my first oversight hearing, I  
24 will go by the way you guide me on how to proceed  
25 sir. So, thank you.

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3 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, I'm shocked at how  
4 short your testimony is. You have been before this  
5 Committee many times.

6 DENNIS WALCOTT: Not as an oversight committee  
7 though. It's a little bit different.

8 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: We've had oversight  
9 hearings on public libraries, nonbudgetary oversight  
10 hearings but either way, I would just say, the  
11 testimony is breathed of any real meaningful  
12 information on what's happened and what the library  
13 has done to maintain public library service in Court  
14 Square. Certainly, we are going to ask lots of  
15 questions but I'm surprised you didn't come to this  
16 public testimony, before the public, before the  
17 press, before the community and address anything. It  
18 is literally a paragraph.

19 DENNIS WALCOTT: As you indicated that you plan  
20 to ask a lot of questions and I am here prepared to  
21 answer every and any question that you have to the  
22 best of my ability and as you well know that we have  
23 made a major commitment in looking for space. We've  
24 seen space throughout the district and we've talked  
25 to your office as well about space and you have  
26 talked to us about space.

You and I have had conversations before around Amazon, when Amazon was taking a look at the building where Savanna is located as far as potential library as well as the Falchi Building. And so, we have done a lot as far as pursuing potential space for Court Square.

I'm pretty confident that we will have space hopefully identified in the very near future. Currently, we have a number of sites that are very interesting but I think you raised an important point as far as the price per square foot. We have several lease sites, as you probably know. We have LeFrak, we have Fresh Meadows, we have Pomonok and the price per square foot in those areas in the libraries are totally different then where there is in Court Square.

On average, we've been looking at a price per square foot of roughly \$100 per square foot. We've seen a couple at \$80 per square foot and while we have thankfully as a result of your leadership, benefited in the budget, as you also well know, last year we had a PEG before the City Council came to the rescue and took the PEG off the table to receive additional funds as well.

2 And with that program, to eliminate gap we were  
3 taking very serious looks at potential layoffs and  
4 other types of service cuts to respond to that and as  
5 the CEO of the Queens Public Library, it is my  
6 responsibility not just to plan for this budget year  
7 but also in moving out into the future budget years  
8 and I think that's where we may have a little tension  
9 as far as the budget figures as they exist right now  
10 versus what will be in the future. And I cannot  
11 position the Queens Public Library to pay roughly \$80  
12 to \$100 per square foot and as well, the build out  
13 costs that can average up to \$1 million.

14 So, with all of that being said, I mean I am  
15 totally prepared to answer any question that you may  
16 have.

17 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, let me ask you some  
18 questions.

19 DENNIS WALCOTT: Please.

20 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: But I just want to say  
21 that regardless of what the property values or price  
22 per square footage is in any particular neighborhood  
23 in Queens. You lead an organization that is called  
24 upon to serve every single one of those neighborhoods  
25 equally. Whether the price per square foot is very

low in a neighborhood or the price per square foot is higher in a certain neighborhood. That's a challenge I understand but you can't point to the more expensive land in Long Island City as a reason not to provide that community with a library.

The issue before you is to make sure that even given the challenges and the disparities in a borough where some neighborhoods have lower price per square footage, some have higher. Your job is to figure out how to provide library service for all of them equally and that's what's not happening here. So, I want to just talk a little bit about this library and hope you can share some information which is not in your testimony.

Can you talk to us a little bit about gate count at Court Square? How many people use the Court Square library? Has that number been going up? Has that number been going down? Like, what does that look like?

DENNIS WALCOTT: We've seen roughly 100,000 people who come through our doors at Court Square and that number has gone up. As you well know, Court Square is a library that's in great demand. I think

where we may have lost some of our customers, and  
it's not totally reflected in the gate count.

Some of the people who may have been in the old  
City Bank building and as the City Bank building has  
been clearing out, we don't have the same traffic  
from there. But as you well know and the public  
knows that the population in community is growing  
like crazy. And so, we have roughly 3,600 square  
feet for the Court Square Library and every square  
foot is in use and as a result of you and others as  
well, over the last number of years, we were able to  
expand the space there and since I took over as  
President and CEO, we also expanded the services.  
Because originally it was Monday through Friday and  
now it's Monday through Saturday in meeting the six  
day.

And even after the sixth day had been passed by  
the City Council on the executive side, Court Square  
still had not been providing that and that then  
expanded as a result of all of us working together on  
that.

So, the numbers have been going up but it's  
roughly 100,000 people that come through the door.

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3 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, gate count is up,  
4 more and more people are using the Court Square  
5 Library and let me recognize Council Member Francisco  
6 Moya from Queens has joined us on the Committee.

7 Circulation rising, program attendance, programs  
8 rising.

9 DENNIS WALCOTT: Metrics are good. I mean, the  
10 program numbers are going up at Court Square as well  
11 as throughout the system. Circulation has basically  
12 been somewhat even and you know, we have circulation  
13 going up and down depending on the month and the year  
14 but circs has been pretty good Court Square as well.

15 So, again, all the metrics, justify us  
16 maintaining a Court Square Library and there is never  
17 any question in my mind as far as maintaining a Court  
18 Square Library. At the same time, I have a fiduciary  
19 responsibility to plan for the outyears. If we're  
20 going to get a good lease, we're going to have to go  
21 for a ten and ten or a fifteen year lease in  
22 negotiating a deal. And for me to talk about  
23 negotiating a deal based on \$100 per square foot is  
24 unacceptable.

25 And so, yes, my leadership is required to make  
sure I look at a variety of spots to find the best

spot to deal with a new library being in Court Square, but there's a lot of balancing acts going along with that and so, we've seen some interesting spots. I mean, we have three spots that really have been peaking our interests. One spot I think I may have referred to when we had a conversation before that - while I didn't identify the specific spot but has three contiguous spaces next to each other. One 1,800, one 2,100, and one 2,500 square feet and our goal would be possibly taking a look at collapsing the 1,800 and the 2,100 to make a 3,900 square foot library.

So, we're negotiating there and taking a look at that.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, I will get to the sites you're looking at now and where we find ourselves now but I do want to go back a little bit because now we're in crisis mode. We're losing a library and the public library is clearly talking to lots of people, looking at lots of spaces, but no matter what you ultimately decide on. No matter what is possible, we're going to go a period of time without continuous library service in Court Square.

DENNIS WALCOTT: That is correct.



CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And we don't know exactly what timeframe that is because you are not even close to signing a lease.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Well, you don't know that. I mean, potentially, we maybe. You never know, we're in conversations; that's why I was focusing on that aspect in response to the question.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: We'll get to it, but I want to actually talk about what got us to this point and how I certainly believe and I know lots of people in the community believe that we had time to actually never get to this point. And what did the library do when it knew that it was faced with this, right.

So, in the spring of '18 when we realized we were coming up against the end of the lease, now, yes, there were extensions. There were two extensions, right.

DENNIS WALCOTT: One, but maybe two, but go ahead.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, since the spring of 2018, at a minimum we knew we were going to be discontinued in terms of what the building owners want to do with the building.

In the spring of 2018, what did the library do, could you walk us through from the spring of 2018 what the library was doing to identify alternative sites and secure the necessary space to continue library service. Because the sense, Mr. Walcott, is that the library new at a minimum of the spring of 2018 that it was in danger of losing this library. Yes, there were a couple of extensions that were granted but that in the meantime, the library didn't do anything to find a suitable, alternative location.

So, now, here you are at City Hall and I would ask you, what did the library do in the spring of 2018 to secure additional sites. Yes, you're looking at multiple sites now.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Well, I can respond to the question easily.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: I'm not finished asking the question.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Oh.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And what did you do then. Were you actively looking at sites then and for the last two years or did you just start in the last several weeks in Ernest to find a location?

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2 DENNIS WALCOTT: Well, one, I totally disagree  
3 with the premise and using the term the last couple  
4 of weeks. I mean, we've been looking for space for a  
5 good while and back then in -

6 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: You said it takes a good  
7 while.

8 DENNIS WALCOTT: You said the last couple of  
9 weeks, now that is a total mischaracterization.

10 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Then tell me the truth.

11 DENNIS WALCOTT: Well, I'm trying to.

12 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Okay, then give us the  
13 dates then. You taking exception to several weeks.

14 DENNIS WALCOTT: You were asking about 2018 and  
15 so, I'm going to respond about 2018. I think you're  
16 aware that one, the shifting of the burden for the  
17 libraries needed to be addressed in a different way.

18 We were basically evicted by Savanna and we all  
19 agree to that. Am I correct? I mean, we all agree  
20 to that but yet, we have pursued Savanna and City  
21 Bank in talking to them about maintaining a library  
22 there and we put significant time back in 2018 in  
23 talking to Savanna and you and I have talked about  
24 that. And so, Savanna at one point, didn't respond,  
25 we continued to pursue, we talked to City Bank. We

had parallel discussions both with City Bank and Savanna around maintaining the library.

Eventually, we met with Brian Weaver[SP?] at Court Square library to talk about the future of the library at Court Square and all of this was taking place during 2018 and Savanna made some noises maybe but in reality they said no, but come back to us later on and we started to see the reality that we were not going to have a place there.

So, then we retained a broker to take a look at space. Part of the brokers responsibility was trying to find space in a reasonable price point and once we found out that that reasonable price point wasn't available then we upped the price point and went to another broker in 2019. And so, we were very serious about that but also, parallel to that, if you remember and I know you do, that part of the discussion was also with Amazon, which is going to be the major lease holder in the Savanna building as well.

And we had a very productive discussion with Amazon at the Long Island City Library, talking about the library to move where we are and building a library for the future. Unfortunately, that did not

materialize and then we found that another tenant would be one of the major tenants that Amazon decided not to relocate into Long Island City and that was Synteen[SP?] and we reached out to Synteen and pursued them as well as far as the potential of having a sublease with them in the building.

Also, to put it in context, that with Savanna itself, their vision was to make their building now the Time Warner Center of Long Island City, so they really didn't have any opportunity for us to even have I think an acceptable opportunity for us to even talk about having a library there.

So, with the two week timeline Chair that you laid out, I totally disagree with that. We were very serious in 2018, very serious in 2019. We expanded the breadth of the price point that we were looking at to try to find suitable space. Once we saw the reality of how much per square foot space was in the area itself, and then we continued to expand our search as far as looking, including me going out in 2019 and early, middle of 2019 to look at spots as well. And I want to the area, talked about that when we met with some of the friends and so, we've been pursuing it extremely diligently as far as the future

of a Court Square library, but also, whether we agree or not, the balancing act that I feel is responsible as far as the moving forward.

And then, also thanks to your leadership, we were able to potentially have a deal with Tavros as well and having a library in the future and that would be roughly four years off, give or take depending on the construction timeline and then with that, part of that conversation, we were looking at different price points with Tavros. If we wanted a basement, it would be roughly \$10 per square foot. If we wanted the main floor, it would be give or take \$55 per square and then if we wanted to go above the main floor, it would be roughly \$45 per square foot.

So, we started that discussion as well and we were in discussions with Tavros Mark Webber and others around the future of a Court Square library.

So, those are the steps that we've taken and we've looked at a number of sites in the period of time that you identified. We've looked at roughly twenty sites plus and I personally have looked at roughly ten sites of those twenty site and some sites have ranged from 2,500 square feet up to 7,500 square feet over the last several years.

So, we have been very diligent as far as the process is concerned in looking for sites and unfortunately so far, have not found a site that we can say we're in a point of signing a lease today, but hopefully, very soon, we may be in that position.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, a couple of things. Number one, in 2018, when you say you were engaging realtors and looking at potential sites, but it sounds like, what you said is that they were just too expensive and so, you weren't willing to pursue those.

DENNIS WALCOTT: That's a fair characterization but also, in 2018, I indicated we were having 2018, we were having conversations with Savanna or trying to have conversations with Savanna to stay there as well. So, we were talking about where we are currently with Court Square and even going to the second floor or other floors and then, and I may mispronounce the name, Savanna and others mentioned the Falchi building, is that it?

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Falchi.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Yeah, and then you and I, I think, or Matt and I talked about that, whether that was in the catchment area.

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3 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: I do not believe it is.

4 DENNIS WALCOTT: Right, we did not agree that it  
5 was. So, we even went to that level of talking to  
6 you about that building being outside of the  
7 catchment area.

8 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, a couple of things.  
9 I want to talk about the Tavros site, because if we  
10 all believed that a public library was in danger of  
11 closing, then in deed, there would be a full court  
12 press and we would be pursuing multiple angles and  
13 multiple directions at the same time, all to avoid  
14 the very thing that's going to happen in a couple of  
15 days, which is a library closing.

16 And, that's precisely why when Tavros approached  
17 me about a building that they were building literally  
18 across the street from this site and because they  
19 actually wanted to lower the height of the building  
20 and change the density of the building, they needed  
21 approval from this Council. I said to them, while  
22 the library is looking at a potential loss of its  
23 lease and we are pursuing lots of other angles, it's  
24 incumbent upon me at the Council Member who cares  
25 very much about libraries and this particular library  
to say to you, I want you to work with the Queens



Public Library and find a way to have a potential permanent library directly across from where this library is and because of that, they did engage you and there was and is still, I would hope the possibility of having a permanent and larger Court Square Library in that building.

But that was never meant to stop or curtail into the efforts to find a replacement for this rental. Indeed, what I always expected was that while we were waiting for the Tavros build out that we would have another location where the library would rent until we were able to move into the permanent location that I had hopefully secured.

DENNIS WALCOTT: We're in total agreement about that. I mean, if I said anything to convey that I wasn't in agreement with that, and so, we were looking for other space knowing that the Tavros deal was sometime off in the future and when you talk about permanent space, it's still permanent space that we would be paying for.

So, I just want to be clear that we are in agreement that while Tavros was a nice deal, but that deal, they haven't even broken ground yet. And so, we would also have to pay money in the build out.

So, part of the deal with Tavros, is that they would make certain contribution to the library but we would still be ponying up dollars out of the expense side for the build out. And so, then, if I may, just one more point with that, so that also is important as you asked about context. To put in context and I said this to a group I think last week, that in the ideal world, I would only really like to build out one time because a build out can cost up to \$1 million and having that type of expense money of building out would Tavros, a good deal, I still with a short term type of deal, especially if it's a short term deal waiting for Tavros which may not become a reality for four years and it's tough to negotiate a reasonable lease for a four to five year period of time.

So, those are the pieces that I was balancing as far as a short term deal or lease until the Tavros deal became a reality.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, I understand that but in hearing you even say that you only want one build out and I understand why that is ideal, it reminds me of something I said at the opening, which is this nagging feeling and I think that some in the

community have that you as the President and CEO but also the Queens Public Library, were okay with this library closing as opposed to other more expensive options. And I think there is this nagging feeling that while there were some efforts to find a space that you deem affordable, ultimately the library came to the decision that allowing this library to close and lapse was an acceptable way to go.

DENNIS WALCOTT: I totally disagree with it. I mean, if I could find a space to have it be concurrent to the closing of this particular space and opening up right away, I would do that. I mean, I think it's ludicrous to think that we want Court Square to close. That's not true. I think the reality is and I have a fiduciary responsibility and I can't undersell that because I do not want my future successor whenever that may be, to say, what was Walcott thinking in signing off on a deal that is going to strap this library in the future.

So, I have that responsibility. I'd rather take the short-term heat then deal with a long-term fiscal implication that's wrong for the library and I want to do the right thing for the library.

But if I could find a space for Court Square and that space can be signed just like that, I would do that and so, my goal would be in the ideal world, even with the Tavros deal out there is to find a deal where I can have a ten and ten year lease with a price per square that's relatively reasonable, at the same time, factoring in the build out that carries out because we can't use the capital money for this.

So, it would have to expense money and instead have expense money say up to \$1 million for a five year period of time while we're waiting for the Tavros deal to become real, then that's something that's not fiscally responsible but if I could find that balancing act and I think as you well know sir, that we looked at alternative spaces as well. We talked to a number of sites as far as possibly co-joining with them in looking and unfortunately that didn't materialize either.

So, I think it's pretty important for me to convey both to you, to the Members of the Council and to the public, that if I could have the Court Square lease end at X-point and then start a new lease without any gap, I would love to have done that.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, but we didn't get that.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Right.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And I understand you have a fiduciary responsibility to the Queens Public Library but you also have an obligation to the Court Square. An obligation to provide continuous library service to the tens of thousands of people who live there, to the children and that to me, is paramount particularly when you look at the funding data that I talked about earlier and that is who is being failed here. The people of the Court Square neighborhood. The children who live in that community.

All of those babies that you and I have seen many times who are going to story time. All of those families are not going to have a public library and that is unacceptable, particularly when you look at the numbers that I cited. And what I fail to understand and find unacceptable, is how the library knowing that this deadline was starring at you, didn't take some of that increase and set it aside. That there wasn't already well in advance of this moment, both of private and public fundraising drive to make sure that we could and had to. We really had

1 to, there was no choice. See that's the thing, I  
2 mean, the library accepted the choice that closing  
3 was maybe an evil but a necessary evil. Whereas I  
4 would say, given the resources, given the time you  
5 had, you didn't even have to face that choice nor  
6 should you have ever thought that was an acceptable  
7 necessary evil, to close the library. Because had  
8 you done all of that planning and had you said, we're  
9 going to take some of this expense money, not  
10 capital, we're talking about expense money and I  
11 don't know if the foundation has been engaged, your  
12 private fund raising arm has been engaged at all on  
13 this to make sure that we had the resources. To make  
14 sure that we had at least a rental, that we had at  
15 least a trailer. We don't even have that. You have  
16 the bus going out one day a week. One day a week,  
17 that's unacceptable. That's absolutely outrageous in  
18 this City in this moment with this much money in your  
19 budget, that we would have Court Square having a bus  
20 going one day a week when in truth, you had the time,  
21 you had the resources.

22  
23 And I am interested and I will ask you about what  
24 the Queens Library foundation or your fundraising arm  
25 did on the private side, to see if you could get some

funding to actually make sure that we had at a minimum a trailer out there somewhere in Long Island City that could provide a space that would require, that would allow the community to have a library space.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Sure, so let me respond to a couple of things. One, I mean, we just see it a little differently in that we have done a tremendous amount of work of trying to find space and while you think incorrectly so, that we have a lot of money, you cannot guarantee me that that money will not be there in the future. And I look forward and always appreciate and I don't want to even make an undersell at this particular point, your leadership around libraries in general. Not just Queens, but libraries in New York City, it's been fantastic and we truly value that but at the same time, I can't guarantee five years out from now, even with money that's baselined because what you did not talk about is the expenses that have gone up. The healthcare that's gone up and other expenses that have gone up to respond to that money that has been used. How we've invested the money in collections. How we've invested the money in more librarians and we have

invested that money. It's not like we have money sitting idly by and therefore, I can just have that money go into the Queens Public Library Court Square Library.

So, I just want to make sure that the public and we all understand that we've had a wise investment of that money and we'll talk about it even in more length when it's time for the prelim budget.

So, that's been utilized as well, as far as the foundation is concerned, the foundation is raising money but again, we're still recovering in the raising of money from the past and so, we're building on restrictive revenue but it's not going to be solely devoted to Court Square and my goal is to make sure we have Court Square in place with money coming in, both whether it's from the foundation or whether it's from the government to pay for us moving out in the out years.

We've devoted a lot of the foundation and resources as you well know also in Hunters Point and Hunters Point got a million dollar grant and we have a lot of money from the foundation that's being raised and focused around Hunters Point. So, we're having the foundation taking a look at a variety of



needs. We met with a funder yesterday and walking around and talking about potential options. So, we're always laying out options.

Where I may have been mistaken and I will own this, is thinking of the benevolence of others, as far as saying, oh, we're a library, let us come forward and try to be helpful and we haven't gotten that type of response per say, say from the corporate sector, but we've reached out to private industry as well to try to get them to understand the importance of a library and you know, donating space or giving some space.

So, we continue to pursue that and we will always pursue that but again, the money that has been increased that you cited has been utilized extremely well and wisely for the benefit of all of our libraries throughout the borough.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Right, but not Court Square.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Court Square has benefited as well but not necessarily Court Square moving forward because I can't guarantee what's going to be in the future as far as the price per square.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, you made that case a couple of times.

DENNIS WALCOTT: I have.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And I just want to say and as you know, maybe other than Nick Buron, no one in this room has been involved at the Queens Public Library longer than me and been involved in these budget cycles, right, this is 22<sup>nd</sup> year either working for the Queens Public Library or being Chair of this Committee. And no one knows better than me that even if we baseline funding for libraries, there are variations and there are dips in the economy and we are subject to those realities but I would say, that the library had several leased libraries throughout the entire time that I am associated with this institution and whether we were in good budget times or bad budget times, the library didn't cancel the leases or stop paying for those community libraries.

Indeed, it kept them all open, no matter where were with the budget cycle. So, your citing you know, despite the fact that we've baselined now almost \$120 million of the Queens Public Libraries budget, well that could dip at some point and

therefore, I can't enter into a lease for Court Square that I think is too expensive because we might see a dip in funding at some point. But you have several other existing leases at libraries and yet, you continue all of those despite the fact that funding could dip at some point in the future for the library.

I'm just saying, that again, it very much seems to me that you as the President and CEO of the library, have made the conscious choice and or the library didn't secure enough private support or take some of this funding to set it aside so that we could have a rainy day fund for the Court Square Library to make sure that we were continuing service there.

Though, I asked you before if the foundation had done any specific fund raising for this over the last two years.

DENNIS WALCOTT: No, not necessarily specifically for this.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Right.

DENNIS WALCOTT: But the foundation hasn't done anything specifically for a particular library as far as the lease is concerned but I mean, to answer you directly -

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: But it could have if you  
would ask them to.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Yes, they could.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: You are the presidency  
of the library and I believe the foundation -

DENNIS WALCOTT: I take all responsibility for  
every decision that's made at the library.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Reports to you, so you  
could have gone to the head of the foundation and  
said, we have this lease expiring and we anticipate a  
need for some additional funding to pay for  
potentially leasing out a space or having a trailer  
and could you go out there and see if we can get some  
private foundation philanthropic support to make sure  
that the money is there in the unfortunate event that  
we are in fact evicted as we will be on Saturday.

I'm just saying, that was a possible -

DENNIS WALCOTT: That's a theoretical possibility  
but at the same time, as you well know, having been  
on the side of the library as well as fund raising,  
even with private fundraising, one cannot guarantee  
funding in out years and you know that. And so, as a  
result of that, could we have raised some money that  
could be specifically targeted for Court Square,

possible. Could we guarantee that money would be in out years and therefore, I'm signing a lease for whatever period of time based on speculation, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't do that to Queens Public Library and at the same time, being committed Court Square and going back to your point around the other lease sites.

When you have a price differential of roughly \$60 per square foot of our most expensive lease, compared to what the Court Square market is showing at this particular point, that's a heck of a price differential. And with those lease sites that we have, it ranges roughly and don't hold me to this exactly but roughly \$15 per square to roughly \$35 per square and that's a realistic price for us to have.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, let me ask you, in all honesty, do you believe -

DENNIS WALCOTT: I've been honest nonstop.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Do you believe - I phrase the question, let me ask you in all honesty.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Okay, but no, I mean, I don't want it in all honesty. I mean, I've been honest in every response that I give.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, let me rephrase the question but say the same thing. Let me ask in all honesty, that's what I said, do you believe that the Queens Public Library could have and should have done something sooner to avoid this moment?

DENNIS WALCOTT: No, and I'll tell you why I said no. Because I think we did just about everything we needed to do to try to find space. Again, it's not that I made a conscious decision to say, oh, we don't want to be in the Savanna building or the Court Square building. Savanna made a conscious decision and we pursued -

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Everyone agrees with that.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Yeah, but the burden is shifting like we haven't done our due diligence. We did our due diligence. We look for space, we talk to Savanna, we talked to Amazon, we talked to Synteen, we've talked to the private industry in the area as well. We've reached out to brokers. We changed brokers, we became engaged with several properties, especially that maybe worthwhile for us to pursue and we are continuing to pursue and we are continuing to pursue those properties. So, I think we did

everything that we had to do at the particular point  
at where we are right now.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Well, I fundamentally  
disagree with that.

DENNIS WALCOTT: I know you do; I know.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: I fundamentally disagree  
with that because what you had to fundamentally do  
was keep this library functioning for this community.  
That is what you ultimately had to do and not allow a  
library to close in Court Square. And so, therefore,  
and I'm shocked, I mean, I really honestly thought  
that you would say, you know, we did everything we  
could but in hindsight, we could have started  
earlier. We could have actually done this; we could  
have actually done that.

DENNIS WALCOTT: You know, can I just one second  
with that point, if I may. In that, you know, I  
thought about that in preparing for our discussion  
toady and we could have started four years ago and  
I'm not sure that would have made a difference to be  
where we are right now. It's just, we're caught in a  
vise of looking for space, a price point being  
extremely high, being conscious of a budget moving  
forward and factoring all those things in along with

our commitment to maintaining a Court Square library and I'm not going to be held, I'm not going to allow the Queens Public Library to be held hostage by a price per square that would potentially hurt the library in the long run. I just can't do that, and so, like I said to you, I will take the short-term heat and I take the responsibility for it but at the same time, I am fully committed to having a long-term plan to making sure that we have a Court Square library but we just see it differently and I understand that.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Look, I've heard you say that a few times, I will say it again. I would prefer to hear you say that I will not disenfranchise the people of Court Square as long as I'm the Presidency of the Queens Library that you can both be prudent and be a prudent fiscal steward of the public library dollars but also say you know, not on my watch. We'll find some way, we'll find a way to make sure that we have continuous public library service, which gets me to a trailer.

DENNIS WALCOTT: What did you say, I'm sorry, a trailer?

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: A trailer.



1 COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND 41  
2 INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

3 DENNIS WALCOTT: Okay, I didn't hear you.

4 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, I've worked at the  
5 library for eleven years, when libraries were being  
6 rebuilt, when a new branch was being built, when  
7 significant alterations were being made that rendered  
8 the library unusable for longer let's say, than six  
9 months at a time. The library would often put a  
10 series, one or two trailers together that would  
11 actually make a small, but legitimate and functioning  
12 library service for the community. We did that in  
13 multiple, multiple locations.

14 DENNIS WALCOTT: Most recently, we did it at  
15 Elmer's.

16 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Right, because, and  
17 because the library rightfully said, that while  
18 building a new library was absolutely the right thing  
19 to do and imperative, it was unacceptable to close  
20 the library all together for a period that was longer  
21 than several months. Right, you couldn't leave a  
22 library in Queens, a community in Queens without a  
23 public library.

24 So, when those extended periods happened, where a  
25 building was being torn down, a new building was

being built, the library would make that investment and erect a couple a of trailers and have a library.

Did you consider that for this location and if so, what happened and if you didn't why not?

DENNIS WALCOTT: So, as you probably know Chair, in that with those scenarios that you laid out, those trailers are capitally eligible and there's a big difference of that versus the expense money. And so, again, and I'll defer to the people better at this than I am, that when you are building out say Elmhurst or others, you have capitally eligible money to allow you to have that bridge between the tearing down, a renovation of a library and then they restarted that library to fill that gap.

And so, that is key distinction and right now, with the trailer, if I had made a commitment of a trailer, than that really doesn't - it will not allow me to from a financial point of view, to hopefully sign a lease with a potential landlord on space with either to tie me into Tavros or with the goal of having a long term lease to have a library in the future.

So, the capitally eligible part for this particular scenarios since it is not as a result of

construction, would not be available to me which is  
available under the scenarios that you laid out.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: You could have asked for  
capital funding for this.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Not that I'm aware of. I don't  
think so and we can have our folks check. I don't  
think that something like this would be capitally  
eligible, I don't think.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: But in those other  
cases, it was capital dollars that paid for the  
trailer.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Because we were doing renovation  
work of an existing structure.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: I understand that.

DENNIS WALCOTT: No, so, I'm saying that's the  
key difference.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: The capital dollars were  
used in the past for trailers.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Yeah, I haven't disagreed with  
that, yeah.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, what I'm saying is  
that the library system could have asked me or the  
Council or the Mayor for capital funding last year

that then might have been able to be used for a  
trailer.

DENNIS WALCOTT: No, no, because as I understand  
it, that it would not be capitally eligible. I'm not  
saying that we didn't have the capital money. It  
would not be capitally eligible, which is a big  
difference.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Well, I think we may  
have a disagreement and maybe a lack of clarity on  
it.

DENNIS WALCOTT: We can double check on that but  
that's my interpretation and impression.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Again, I believe that if  
the will were there.

DENNIS WALCOTT: The will is here sir.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: But it wasn't because  
you didn't seriously pursue a trailer and or the  
funding for the trailer. Again, just leaving it in  
this position where we don't have anything.

So, let me ask about and I know at least one of  
my colleagues may have questions and we'll get to  
that and then I'll come back but your ongoing  
discussions about a potential site, potential rental  
site, what's the latest on that and what kind of

1  
2 timeframe can you give the people of Court Square,  
3 not just in terms of when you might sign a lease  
4 because you might be able to say, although I'd like  
5 to hear the exact timeframe, we could sign a lease in  
6 the next couple of weeks but as we all know, that  
7 doesn't mean the people of Court Square will have a  
8 library in a couple of weeks, right? There will be a  
9 protracted period of time where there will still be  
10 no library.

11       So, what's the absolute latest, real time  
12 deadlines. Real time dates and expectations of when  
13 this community could expect a library because I'm  
14 sure you would understand the communities frustration  
15 and mine that if we just keep saying we don't know.  
16 You know, we can't give you a date when you might get  
17 a library again. You're essentially not going to  
18 have library service for an indefinite period of  
19 time. That's frustrating and infuriating for lots of  
20 people. So, what can you tell the community about  
21 where you're at because you were close when we had  
22 the meeting about a month ago with the Court Square  
23 Library as well.

24       You had identified that site that you talked  
25 about.

3 DENNIS WALCOTT: The one I talked about the  
4 contiguous space, yeah.

5 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: With the joining spaces.  
6 It's a month later, are we closer to signing a lease  
7 and then what is the timeframe or the projected  
8 timeframe to actually build that space out and give  
9 us library service once again in Court Square?

10 DENNIS WALCOTT: So, a couple of points. One, to  
11 totally agree with you. I understand the frustration  
12 and the anger on the part of you, members of the  
13 Committee and especially the public. So, I truly  
14 understand that.

15 Two, I think the devil is in the details, as far  
16 as depending on the space itself. For example, we  
17 have our folks going out to a space within the next  
18 week or so which will involve our capital people  
19 taking a look at it as far as potential build out and  
20 they will get back to me as far as how long they  
21 think it will take to build out the spot that we're  
22 looking at. And then I will make decisions based on  
23 the options available to me that both again, goes  
24 back to the point of making financial sense but also  
25 how much it would cost to build out.

So, and I think it's important for me to give context as well. So, as you know, some of the spaces are and not the specific spaces but some of the spaces are different sizes and shapes and have issues. We have a space that we liked but it does not have bathrooms. So, factoring the build out, we'll factor in the bathrooms.

We had some space that we liked but then didn't meet the ADA requirements that we felt were important, so we ruled that out.

So, to say to the public right now a definitive timeline, that I cannot do. It is my hope to have a Court Square library in place by the end of this calendar year. A renovated, a built out library by the end of this calendar year.

So, that factors in a required amount of time for building out. It requires amount of time for going through the negotiations and signing the lease and that's my goal of what we're shooting for right now.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, have you made progress and you recall the meeting that I'm talking about at the library with the friends of Court Square.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Uhm, hmm.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Because we had very similar discussions that day at the library. Have you made any progress? Are we closer to a deal with any of these potential sites or are we in the exact same place and have had no forward movement since that day?

DENNIS WALCOTT: Put it like this, if this hearing was held, the hearing wouldn't be necessary as far as saying we're closer or not. I think by next month I will have a definite idea of having a deal in place and so, that's my hope to have something resolved by next month, as far as a lease agreement. But again, the devil is in the detail and then once, if we do have a deal in place by next month, then it's the amount of time of the build out that will go into that.

So, my people are looking at a potential space that I maybe referring to, to see what it would take to build that space out to be a functioning library and this may happen sooner than later.

So, again, I can't give you a definitive timeline, because you never know what happens in negotiations and I'm not going to negotiate through us here and the press itself and the public. And



that undermines my ability to negotiate a good deal  
for the library.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: I certainly understand  
not negotiating in public and not negotiating against  
yourself but obviously, there does need to be some  
level of transparency.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Understood.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And accountability to  
the community. We've been joined my Majority Leader  
Laurie Cumbo of the Committee and needless to say, I  
have more questions but I think Council Member Gjonaj  
has questions or no? Yeah, Council Member Gjonaj.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Thank you Chairman.  
Thank you, President Walcott. Again, I find myself  
in a unique position based on my background to be  
helpful during this hearing.

I was a broker at one point in my past life  
before I became a public servant and having had gone  
through this painful experience myself, whether it be  
for a private entity or a public one, I can attest to  
the fact that I worked on deals for years to find out  
that they won't close or that they do close.

And I just want to share with you some of my  
thoughts on the million dollar build out potential

for \$3,600 President Walcott. Sounds extremely low based on the numbers I've heard when it comes to libraries. That would be at about \$278 a square foot and I've heard number of two and three times that when it comes to build outs. I won't hold my breath on that number and that's only through what I've seen and witnessed myself.

But I do have some questions here as far as, and I do understand the price per square foot concerns and it's about a juggling act as well and Chairman, I share this with you. Many times, a broker tries to balance between the anticipated close date and the anticipated opening date, so there is not a double rent being paid. We have to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars. I commend you on being a good steward of taxpayer dollars. It's easy to be able to pay for two locations simultaneously and perhaps not offering the services as you wind down one to open up the other, which is a complete injustice.

And I'm mindful that we don't look for temporary places but we look for permanent and the best possible options which from day to day, hour to hour Chairman can actually change because you have to wait for a vacancy to come up. You have to negotiate with

a current property owner on the availability dates and the cost factors which you can't approve until you get a RFP, I believe to determine the bidding process of the cost for the build out, which won't be known until there is a walk through and you have your estimators look into the actual cost of relocation.

I'm summing all of this up and I apologize, I want to get to my question because I think there's also you know the manager pound gorilla in the room that's not being talked about and I'm trying to read between the lines.

Am I to understand that this was a done deal in negotiations that were being done with the once was the Amazon deal and was part of a footprint and a play that Amazon was going to build out this library. Is that what I'm understanding here?

DENNIS WALCOTT: I can't say it was a done deal at all. I would not make that type of statement. I would say that we were in conversations with Amazon around the potential library and other support from Amazon as well for the Queens Public Library. We had a lengthy meeting with a number of the Vice Presidents, as I indicated earlier in our Long Island

City library with Amazon and then we've had several  
phone conversations as well.

So, to say it was a done deal I think would be  
misrepresenting how far it was but I think there were  
conversations with Amazon as well as with Savanna and  
Synteen and others as things evolved over a period of  
time.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: So, there was a  
conversation, a potential role that Amazon would  
play.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Possibly.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Involving this particular  
library.

DENNIS WALCOTT: That is correct.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Which I understand now.  
So, it's not about a delay with intent of, and then  
since then, obviously the painful task of locating a  
space to accommodate on size and location and  
timeframe because I would imagine it's been what,  
eight months or so now that the Amazon deal has  
fallen apart. We no longer rely on that deal or the  
conversation.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Exactly a year Council  
Member.

DENNIS WALCOTT: I was going to say it's year  
this month, if not Valentines Day. Friday is  
Valentines Day.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: But this is, this is, to  
be fair, there was no guarantee.

DENNIS WALCOTT: I said that.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: They walked away and  
that is not in all due respect Council Member, this  
is my district, this is my library, why we're in this  
position. Right, that is not what happened here and  
I'm not going to allow that to be the narrative. We  
had this knowledge that Savanna was going to throw  
the library out essentially a couple of years ago and  
there were lots of different negotiations and all of  
them fell through for one reason or another but the  
truth is, the library should still have been a  
priority in terms keeping it open regardless of  
whether or not any of those things happened.

So, I just want to correct that record and this  
is not an Amazon HQ2 hearing right, this is about the  
Court Square Library and what the library was done  
and you don't have this information Council Member  
Gjonaj but the friends of the Court Square library  
are going to speak right after President Walcott and

there is a timeline involved here where the library, I believe, can and should have done a lot more to keep this library open and continuous library service happening and that simply didn't happen. And I think that is incredibly important to me and to the community who will be speaking shortly about what happened here.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Can I —

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Yeah, I think we're close to moving on but if you have another thing you would like to say, Council Member.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: I do, thank you for the courtesy Chairman.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Sure.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: On the Eve of the anniversary of Valentines Day where my heart and the hearts of many New Yorkers was broken over the Amazon deal, I felt that it was appropriate to bring up and I'm not making this an Amazon hearing, but knowing that in my own experience, a negotiation is a negotiation until it's either signed or it falls apart and I wanted to point that out that this was all part of it and the disservice of having a public

library or a vital city service not being provided to  
a community that they've enjoyed is a disserve.

So, we're trying to get ahead of this and I'm  
just going to ask you out straight Mr. Walcott on the  
current lease. Are you considering holdovers, hold  
over stay that is, that although you don't have a  
lease and it may have expired and you're supposed to  
close and move out, there are certain laws that  
protect you as a tenant, in this case, the City of  
New York, for being forced out through a hold over  
provision which I believe is typical in City  
contracts?

DENNIS WALCOTT: I'm not familiar with that  
provision. All I know is that our lease, we are a  
sublease of City Bank which is leasing now the space  
in the Savanna building itself. So, our agreement  
with City Bank was extended until March 31<sup>st</sup> of this  
year and so, for us to meet the requirements of our  
sublease with city, is a reason why we have to close  
out services as of this Saturday will be the last day  
because then we have to make sure the facility is  
suitable for City because then City has an obligation  
to Savanna as a tenant of Savanna.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: So, knowing a little bit about this as well, there is a provision as a holdover. So, although your lease expires, although you intended to move out and due to enforcing circumstances Chairman and this is important to know, you could still remain in that property for a duration of time and allow for court proceeding or allow for an additional agreement, an extension of time to be accommodated to both the public library and the needs of the community with the landlord in place. You do not have to vacate. No one is going to lock you out, it's illegal. No one is going to take your stuff and put it into storage or put it into garbage.

You can legally be a holdover occupant of the space until you work this out with the landlord or a court order determines otherwise and I would encourage that perhaps this is the path that we should take to keep the library open in the interim. Providing a service to the community and being good steward of taxpayer dollars so we don't spend our limited resources unwisely.



3 DENNIS WALCOTT: We'll have our Counsel review.  
4 I'm not an expert and my counsel is no longer my  
5 counsel who you are looking at.

6 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Is that something that  
7 you are familiar with or looked into at all or heard  
8 of?

9 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Chairman, I'm certain of  
10 this law. It would be just like you as a tenant, if  
11 you didn't pay your rent, no landlord could come in  
12 and evict you, even though it's commercial, you still  
13 have protections.

14 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: No, I gotcha and I  
15 appreciate that. I don't know if the general counsel  
16 is here from the library.

17 DENNIS WALCOTT: Former General Counsel. Former  
18 General Counsel of the library.

19 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Former General Counsel.

20 DENNIS WALCOTT: Chief Operating Officer now. So,  
21 what some said to me, my Chief Operating Officer,  
22 that then we would get into litigation with City Bank  
23 and City Bank has been four square with us as far as  
24 extending the sublease and I have no desire to expend  
25 library money in litigation with City Bank but we  
will do our due diligence but we are sublease-ee of

City and City has its own provisions, which I'm not familiar with or with Savanna as far as the major lease holder in the building. But we'll double check, I'm not familiar with that.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: President Walcott, I assure you there is a provision and protections that you have that you need to explore and I know that no one wants to go down the avenue of going through court hearings and proceedings. You're within your rights as a sublease tenant, do so.

DENNIS WALCOTT: We'll double check.

COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you. So, Dennis, you guys will pursue that and let us know about that potential avenue that we may have just learned about.

So, I want to ask again, if you don't think that there was anything that you or the Queens Public Library could have done differently here to maintain continuous library service. You know, we've had many conversations in the past and I think even at that public meeting with the friends of the Court Square Library, there was at least some acknowledgement that things could have been done differently or maybe the library could have responded more quickly or been at

a minimum, certainly communicating better with the  
community.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: But I'm a little  
surprised today to hear you say no, we did everything  
we could have and correctly and timely. I heard you  
say other things, so I'm a little confused.

DENNIS WALCOTT: When you said you heard me say  
other things, such as?

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: You know, I thought at  
that friends at the Court Square Library, there was  
an acknowledgement that yeah, maybe we could have  
acted more quickly here or jumped in more quickly and  
there was a sense that both well, you had a  
commitment to this community. There was also the  
acknowledgement that all was not in fact done and  
certainly not done as quickly as it could have been  
from jump and I think that is a different approach  
today.

DENNIS WALCOTT: So, I think the difference is  
two things. One, and I didn't say this before, I  
could have done a lot better in communicating to the  
community. So, that I do acknowledge now and as far  
as the point that you're raising again, as I said a

little while ago, as I really did a lot of soul searching and if I did something three years ago, would we be in any different position. I don't think so and I put a lot of thought to that.

And it's not to just move away from responsibility, I accept every bit of responsibility as the head of the Queens Public Library but the positions that we're in, it's just based on the market place and based on circumstances that I have tried to respond to and so, in that context, should we have been out on this three years ago? Maybe, but then, I don't know if that would make any major difference right now because it is what it is and I have a responsibility to rectify the what is now, so moving forward into the future, there's a permanent Court Square Library in place.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, and we want to hear from the community members who have been waiting. I don't know if you'll hang around to hear them.

DENNIS WALCOTT: Folks will be here.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Speak but there are vast differences in all of our communities in Queens, as we all know and I believe you have 64 library branches at this point.

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2 INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

3 DENNIS WALCOTT: 66 facilities and 64 of them are  
4 libraries.

5 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Correct.

6 DENNIS WALCOTT: Because Queens Bridge was a  
7 library that then became the Tech Center back in  
8 2007.

9 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And there are great  
10 difference and you know; Long Island City is very  
11 unique. Court Square is very unique even within Long  
12 Island City. But my last question to you is, the  
13 people in Court Square deserve a library, need a  
14 library and this public library system and you as the  
15 President and CEO will make sure that they have a  
16 library.

17 DENNIS WALCOTT: That's a question and the answer  
18 is yes. I said that from the beginning, middle and  
19 the end. I am committed and I will look at the  
20 people from Court Square to say it directly to them  
21 to having a Court Square library and so, that is my  
22 commitment here in testimony and here in conversation  
23 and in our actions in pursuing various potential  
24 deals as far as trying to find a situation that will  
25 allow me to finalize a deal and hopefully, I'll be  
able to have a deal in place very soon.

3 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, I heard you talk  
4 about the hopeful April announcement, if there should  
5 be one and the timeline of having a newly renovated  
6 space by the end of this calendar year.

7 DENNIS WALCOTT: That's the goal. Yes, sir.

8 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And obviously, we are  
9 not disinterested in making sure that those things  
10 happen. I think we should of never gotten to this  
11 point but we have to make sure that we don't get here  
12 again anywhere else in Queens or the City of New York  
13 with respect to a library and stipulating the Court  
14 Square deserves a library, needs a library and will  
15 always have a library is absolutely essential to me  
16 and to all of the folks who are about to testify I am  
17 sure.

18 DENNIS WALCOTT: And to me as well sir.

19 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, with that, I want to  
20 thank Mr. Walcott for being here.

21 DENNIS WALCOTT: Thank you.

22 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And call Meghan Cirrito  
23 from the Friends of the Court Square Library, Frank  
24 Wu from the Court Square Civic Association and Mary  
25 Jo Betta, a resident of Long Island City.

Mary, are you going to join? We're going to do one panel of community members who are going to testify. Meghan will go first then Frank and then Mary. I know we have a three minute clock but we will be somewhat liberal in our interpretation of that and Mary, do you have written testimony?

MARY JO BETTY: What?

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Do you have written testimony? Are you submitting testimony? You're just going to speak from the heart, okay, great.

So, Meghan, when you are ready and this is Frank's as well.

MEGHAN CIRRITO: Thank you. Thank you to the New York City Council and the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations for inviting me to testify today regarding Queens Public Library at Court Square.

My name is Meghan Cirrito and I am the President of the Friends of Court Square Library. I'm also a mother, public education advocate, proud resident of Queens and former public Librarian.

All the hats I wear will inform my testimony today. As a child, the public library was both the cornerstone of my education and a free and open place

for my mom to bring me and my sisters while my dad worked 24 shifts as a firefighter.

Now, as a mother myself, the public library has been a gathering place for my family and center of early literacy for my sons. As a resident of Queens, Hunters Point and Court Square in particular, the public library has been a free and open gathering space in a neighborhood bursting with glass residential towers. Court Square Library is our community center.

As a public librarian, I could tell you countless stories of conducting story times where babies and toddlers began to bridge the 30 million word gap of new Americans attending English language learners classes, of seniors finding fellowship along with large print books and teens meeting with a social worker for assistance and understanding.

I think we can all recall important moments in our lives that took place in the public library. I think we can all acknowledge that it is fundamentally a bedrock of democracy. But nostalgia won't save Court Square Library. I am not here today to testify to the value of public libraries. I am here today to testify to the value of the public library in Court



Square. I am here to ask this committee what went wrong and how we can fix it.

I am here as a canary in a coalmine. If Court Square Library can be closed, no branch library throughout New York City is safe.

Today, I will address two important points to which all New Yorkers should pay close attention. Number one, what events and decisions led to the closure of Court Square Library over the past several years?

And, number two, how can the closure be prevented now?

The Friends of Court Square Library have spent the last two years attempting to work with Queens Public Library to prevent the closure of Court Square Library and I think that Queens Public Libraries overall added towards the friends and other advocates can be seen in Mr. Walcott's testimony this morning and the paragraph that he submitted.

We have been rebuffed and ignored at every turn. We are outraged as we have watched opportunity after opportunity squander to save the library. Mr. Walcott has spoken about his fiduciary duty to Queens

Public Library but he also has a duty of service to  
Queens.

I contend that Mr. Walcott and his staff are  
derelict in their duties of providing library  
service. The city building lease is expiring, which  
we all knew years ago. They have had plenty of time  
to find a solution and despite our persistent  
outreach, they have failed to do so. Queens Public  
Library failed in evaluating the Court Square  
community in taking note of the booming residential  
development and robust community, they have actively  
ignored a workforce that has been courted by the  
Economic Development Corporation to come to Long  
Island City each day to work, eat and use public  
services.

They have failed at the very basic understanding  
that public library service is vital to all New  
Yorkers. I ask the Committee today to evaluate the  
decision making that has forced us all to gather here  
today in haste and with emotions on high. This  
library is closing in three days and consider  
legislation that provides greater oversight of the  
public library systems and their ability to  
unilaterally close a public library. If it can

happen in Court Square, it can happen in your  
district to.

I do not give a damn about Amazon. I have seen  
reporting and spoken to officials who claim the  
closure of Court Square Library is the result of  
Amazons departure from Long Island City. That claim  
is absurd. Vital community services like public  
libraries surely do not close because a private  
company is no longer a tenant in the shared building.  
Surely, there is enough political will in this room,  
in this building to keep a public library open. I  
reject outright that Amazon is either the cause of  
the closure or would have been it savior. Today is  
the day we get to save this library. I am looking at  
all of you to be the one's to do it but you should  
ask why Queens Public Library left it to you.

To that end, I want to assure you that I am  
willing to beg today. I will cry, I will implore you  
public library service is so deeply important to me  
and this community that I will gladly put my ego and  
my anger to the side and ask you to please, please  
help our community find a solution today. Please,  
join me in the creative problem solving and deal  
making that should have been done years ago. Please,

add your voice to the chorus of encouragement to Savanna and asking them to extend the libraries lease. Please, ask the City Planning Commission to tell David and Jerry Walcoff that their five points development cannot open if the do not work with the community and site a library.

Please, ask the School Construction Authority and the Department of Design and Construction to consider building a school with a public library on site in Court Square. There are solutions, there has to be the will. Please join New Yorkers in saying, we will not allow public libraries to close in New York City.

Actions speak louder than words, so this question I leave with you today is this. How can we save Court Square Library from the inaction and ineptitude of Queens Public Library.

Thank you for allowing my testimony today.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you Meghan for your passion number one and a few people understand the value of a public library more than you.

MEGHAN CIRRITO: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And you know, I want to thank you for fighting and I think you saw, which I rarely do hear in the Chamber, I have quite a bit of

anger about this as well and in deed, you know, tried to get from Dennis Walcott the acknowledgement that, if there was the will to keep this library open at the Queens Public Library, it could have and would have been done, actually fairly easily.

MEGHAN CIRRITO: I agree.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Because as we increased the budget to the Queens Public Library alone, by \$7 million last year, no one at the Queens Public Library asked me or anyone else for any specific or dedicated funding to keep this library open.

And you know me, if someone had come to me and said, in the face of this record funding, we need \$200,000, \$400,000, \$600,00, whatever it was to keep this library open, you know I would have done it.

MEGHAN CIRRITO: Yeah, I think every elected official at this point that you know, that covers Court Square Library has offered support, offered to reach out to Savanna like yourself, to Tavros to make those deals and also, has offered money.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: But they didn't ask for it.

MEGHAN CIRRITO: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And seemingly didn't want it.

MEGHAN CIRRITO: One can only assume.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And it's outrageous and I share your outrage and we are talking to all of these people that you outlined here, looking at all of these potential solutions to but we need a willing partner in the Queens Public Library.

MEGHAN CIRRITO: Exactly.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: So, thank you. Frank.

FRANK WU: I'm a big believer in civil discourse but I feel like at times like this, there's a reason why New York City in great hordes of people, shouting, yelling, having signs and I think the narrative of this is clearly a lack of leadership and aptitude of Queens Public Library.

The other Council Members left but you know, I pay a lot of money in taxes, a lot of people in Long Island City do and they have jobs and you know, I privately asked Dennis, Mr. Walcott, saying Long Island City is a privileged community, we could easily raise money. We've raised I think what, \$30,000, \$40,000 in less than six weeks for New York City Rise Up and he basically said, it's not needed.

Right, he privately said, we don't need the money right.

So, the legislative body has clearly done their job but you know, the Queens Public Library has not and real leadership is about solving problems and the fact that his testimony was so short, he is still not here today, speaks volumes. Real business leadership is about take on a solution and not saying whether **[INAUDIBLE 2:22:05]**. It's hard, right, the Queens Public Library is at the head of NYCHA. It's Queens Public Library right and the answers that he gave today, to be honest, were very disappointing and I think it creates a lack of apathy in people and the believe in public institutions and I think as an oversight body the City Council should seriously take a look at that.

You know, from in terms of again, his response today in terms of where we are. You know, I think the solutions that he offered were good but the interim solution is still not acceptable, the once a week and again, this is not a political issue. You know, all individuals of political spectrum, rich, poor, young, old, public libraries are a good thing and the fact that the leadership of the Queens Public

Library cannot seem to get that and he comes off as more of a CEO and talk about financial management as opposed to their formal goal. Which is to create inclusive space for all people, I think there is a large disconnect.

So, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you Frank and I think you saw; I mean, I have been the Chair of the Committee for ten years and two months. Before that, I worked for the Queens Public Library for eleven years and I wrote these things. Right, I was the one who drafted the testimony for whoever was the President and CEO of the library for eleven years. I drafted every single testimony. I have never seen anything like this, never and I'm shocked and I have worked with Mr. Walcott in many different ways but this is unacceptable because we all know what an oversight hearing is and we all know what's expected of folks who testify and that is to share all of the relevant information that you have with respect to the closure of the Court Square Library. This is clearly not all of the relevant information relative to what has happened here.



So, I am equally outraged and we did talk about the foundation and what, if any work had been done to try and enlist any philanthropies or foundations or any kind of support and Dennis said that none of that happened. Right, there was no outreach. There was no attempt to fundraise on the private side at all to keep this going, which again, leads one to believe that there wasn't exactly a full court press here on the part of the Queens Public Library to keep this library open and that is the bottom line and we won't stop fighting because again, even if, and it's a big if, they announce a lease signing next month, who knows. Right, it is just too much to be left and I will also say this.

In all these 21 years that I've been doing public libraries in Queens, we never let a library close. We never let a community go without library service which is why I mentioned the trailers because we have renovated and built new libraries in many different locations but it was always the ethos of the public library system in Queens that we would never strand a library without library service.

We would never force a community to go longer than a few months and in fact, that was sort of the

discussions. How long would a closure take place?

And if it was going to be of a certain duration, for

sure, we would put the trailers out there, because

then the community would have continuous library

service. Because, and Meghan knows this, the tenants

of public libraries and participation in public

library programs and even the loaning of materials,

is habit forming. Right, people get into a routine,

they go to the library on Monday or Wednesday right.

The children go to that particular program on a

Tuesday afternoon or a Friday afternoon and if you

terminate library service all together, all of those

rhythms are stopped. Right, all of those rituals end

and then you risk losing those dedicated patrons.

You risk losing readers. Children who are used to

going to that library and getting the books. That's

why you kept a trailer, so that that child, even

though it was a different space. Even though it was

a smaller space, could still go to that library on

the Tuesday afternoon if they were used to going to

the library, to continue their beginnings of what we

like to call lifelong learning. And that's what is

lost when you terminate a library and allow library

service to stop.

2       So, thank you Frank. Mary.

3       MARY JO BETTA: Good afternoon. Thank you so  
4 much for holding this hearing and giving me this  
5 opportunity to speak. My name is Mary Jo Betta; I  
6 live next to the Court Square Library and I have been  
7 living there for over 18 years. And I will speak to  
8 what the library means to the local community.

9       I came here in 2001 as a visitor, Jenny  
10 McGrant[SP?] who had **[INAUDIBLE 2:31:09]** medication  
11 in Bangladesh and the library opened the door for me.  
12 It just gave me an empty envelop, told me to write my  
13 address and sent it to my address and I brought it  
14 back and I became a member.

15       Since then, it has been part of my growing every  
16 single year. I was a low income household member  
17 married and when I became a mother, without finding  
18 any jobs, I went to college and you know, the low  
19 income student who is already a mother. I would  
20 always borrow the books from the library because I  
21 didn't have enough money to buy the books and that  
22 library is Court Square Library.

23       When I became a mother of two, I was at NYU. My  
24 senior years, I'm in my final days to submit papers,  
25 I was the only member of my eleven siblings and my

parents all who lived in Bangladesh still now. I'm the only one here. I could not afford any babysitting or anything. I used the library as ever place. I would keep my children busy with the children's material and I would study for my college, write my papers, using the library books, materials and computers.

I never expected that this thing would happen to my library, that as my family, my babysitting place, my other resources that develop me from that unknown immigrant young woman to this Mary sitting in front of you.

The other day I was coming from the school picking up my daughter. It was last Friday and all of a sudden, my daughter asked me, mom, when does the library close. I thought actually meant when today the library was closing. So, I told her it's closing at six o'clock and my daughter said, no, I didn't mean that and she started crying.

The library means, you know, we do not have any senior centers in Court Square. We do not have any youth programs. This is the library that serves the Senior Center to. Our seniors go there and use the

computer, books, magazines and they build the  
community and they spend time together there.

Our students go there to study, borrow books to  
prepare their tests and if you go any given time to  
Court Square Library, you can see how many students  
are sitting outside. That shows how many children  
are using that library.

It is totally - I feel like we all failed here.  
We all failed. As the resident I am to all the  
community organizations, you all failed. At this  
time, is there really anyway to keep the library  
going beside our differences and our opinions and our  
political identities or anything. We all should come  
together to save our library, that made huge changes  
in the community. People of color, the immigrants  
and people who do not have families, people who  
aspire to grow. This library is home for all of them  
and I - you Mr. Council Member, I wish this hearing  
would have happened six months earlier, so we would  
have enough time to push more but even though at this  
death bed, is there anyway? Is there any magic  
bullet is there any, any way that we can come  
together to save this library?

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you Mary, for your story and your personal experience with the library and obviously anyone who spent more than 30 minutes in Queens knows how immigrant rich we are and how our public library system is the first place where virtually every new immigrant goes to because all of the services are free. No questions asked. It is the most democratic institution, no one asks if you are documented or undocumented, if you are rich or you are poor, everyone comes equally and that's why it's so important to keep libraries open.

So, I assure you Mary, that there has been a full court press on from this Committee and from my office and the other elected officials for a couple of years but again, if the Queens Public Library isn't as committed to this as they should be, we have a problem because while we will look at the proposed legislation that Meghan mentioned and other ways to increase oversight of this, at this particular moment and time, it is incumbent upon the President and the CEO of the Queens Public Library to sign a lease to enter into negotiation and to guarantee this community continuous public library service. That

1 did not happen. That has not happened but we will  
2 continue to press them to do just that.  
3

4 What we heard today was unacceptable on so many  
5 levels and I would expect more anguish from the  
6 public library itself that something like this was  
7 going to happen but we didn't get that at all. And  
8 you talk about the human story, all of you share the  
9 human story and while everyone here appreciates the  
10 fiduciary responsibilities of the public library,  
11 everyone here wants taxpayer dollars to be spent  
12 wisely.

13 But there are few better ways to spend taxpayer  
14 dollars than on public libraries and then on public  
15 library service and the fundamental obligation of  
16 this public library system to keep this public  
17 library open is paramount and it wasn't here. Right,  
18 a lack of willingness to do what it took is what made  
19 this moment happen and that could have and should  
20 have been avoided. It wasn't and I heard Mr. Walcott  
21 talk about leaving his successors with you know, a  
22 budget question that he didn't want to leave them  
23 with.

24 But if I were President and CEO of the Queens  
25 Public Library, I wouldn't want to have on my record

1 that a public library closed on my watch. Right,  
2 that to me is quite damning. So, I appreciate your  
3 passion and all of you and I know all of us will  
4 continue to work together to make sure that Court  
5 Square gets what it deserves and needs and that we  
6 compel the Queens Public Library to do the right  
7 thing here.  
8

9 No one loves the Queens Public Library more than  
10 me. So, everyone in this room, including the people  
11 who work for the Queens Public Library, know how  
12 difficult this is but I am enormously disappointed in  
13 this organization and this institution and I really  
14 believe in and that I really love and that I've  
15 dedicated 21 years of my life to, that they would  
16 allow this to happen is absolutely outrageous and  
17 disgraceful.

18 So, I want to thank all of you, recommit to  
19 working together with you on this issue but I  
20 appreciate you taking the time out of your day to  
21 come here. Thank you.

22 And with that, we have no further witnesses. I  
23 believe I have made very clear what I believe has  
24 happened here and what needs to happen. So, with  
25



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that, I want to thank everyone for coming today and  
this hearing is adjourned. [GAVEL]

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date April 1, 2018