

Submitted by Alham Saadat, TMM P4 and Pat Hanlon TMM P5

May 11, 2024

Dear Colleagues,

We are writing in support of the Finance Committee's recommended vote on Article 55, which would appropriate \$75,000 for library assessment, planning, feasibility and design of the Fox Library. This appropriation would be contingent on the raising of \$75,000 of additional funding by the Board of Library Trustees and a grant from the state Public Library Construction Program.

We are both members of the Board of Directors of the Arlington Libraries Foundation. The Foundation is a Section 501(c)(3) corporation whose mission is to raise private funding for the Town's libraries. The Foundation currently supports a range of library functions, from electronic materials to the popular "speed reads" collections at both Fox and Robbins. We anticipate playing a significant role in the eventual financing of a rebuilt Fox Library, accessible to all, and designed to provide the 21<sup>st</sup> century services that town residents need and deserve.

The current Fox building was constructed 55 years ago. It has never received a substantial renovation. It provides not only a range of library services, especially for children, but also a community room that is a major venue for civic meetings in East Arlington. The community room is used more than 300 times per year.

It was clear almost a decade ago that the Fox Library needed to be rebuilt. Studies have been ongoing since 2015, with a brief hiatus during the pandemic. The Fox building is not accessible to many in our community, and the community room, in particular, can only be accessed via a steep staircase. There is no elevator, and while the community room is heavily used, it is not accessible to Arlingtonians and others with mobility challenges. For this reason the Disability Commission has strongly endorsed Article 55 and the improvement in accessibility that rebuilding of the Fox will make possible.

Beyond accessibility, the Fox Library was never designed to provide the services that we now expect from public libraries. There are, for example, insufficient spaces for students from the nearby Gibbs school to complete school assignments. Our libraries have been working on a needs assessment - including extensive community engagement - that will guide design studies for upgrading the Fox. The goal will be not only to make it accessible, but to enable it to meet our community's diverse needs. Much needs to be done.

The state is beginning a new round of funding as a part of the Massachusetts Public Library Construction Program, and Arlington now has the opportunity to access state funding both for design and construction. This spring, the town filed a notice of intent to seek such funding, and a formal application will be filed later this month. The first stage consists of design studies. Under state regulations the town will be eligible for state funding only if it provides matching local funds. The Board of Library Trustees have committed to providing \$75,000 in funding. However, the town will be able to access state funding only if it provides an additional \$75,000 to match the anticipated state contribution. The Finance Committee's recommended appropriation under Article 55 will make state design funding possible. Ultimately, the state may provide up to 60% of eligible construction costs.

If all goes well, the design stage will lead to a Fox that will continue to be a lively hub for library services, but will be accessible to all and redesigned to meet current needs and standards. The Library

Foundation has begun planning for community fundraising, and we look forward to being part of this important project. Arlington's libraries are among our most treasured institutions. They aim to be inclusive and welcoming to everyone – for after-school study and remote work, for relaxing over a traditional book, or maybe an electronic one, for lively discussions, and especially for children to play and learn.

The Fox has been a big success over the last 55 years. It needs our help to meet the challenges of the next 55. The article before us proposes funding the first step. Under the Finance Committee's recommended vote, the town appropriation is contingent on receiving a state grant and additional funding from the library trustees.

We urge you to approve the Finance Committee's recommended vote. The state funding that would make a new Fox possible is available only in funding rounds, and there is no telling when the opportunity before us now will recur. It's time to move forward.

Alham Saadat, Precinct 4

Pat Hanlon, Precinct 5