

McMinn County Library Board
1289 Ingleside Avenue
Athens, Tennessee 37303

Board Meeting Minutes
JULY 24, 2023 at 6:00 PM

Present - Chairman Tyler Forrest, Vice Chairman Mickey Blevins, Treasurer Tim Womac, Secretary Tyler Boyd, EGFPL Director Peyton Eastman, Ocoee Regional Library Director Liz Shreck, and MCLB members Everett Gillespie, Tara Carter, Jan Dingess, and John Duggan. Kay Harper was absent.

I. Call to Order, Establish Quorum, and Acknowledgments

Chairman Forrest called the meeting to order and welcome guests. He acknowledged and welcomed new board member John Duggan and Kay Harper (who was unable to attend).

II. Adoption of Public Comment Policy

Chairman Forrest asked the board to adopt a new Public Comment Policy to extend the time allotted each speaker from three to five minutes. John Duggan made a motion to adopt the new Public Comment Policy and Everett Gillespie seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Forrest read a statement addressing the high volume of feedback about the Rainbow Book Month Display that was put up on May 31, 2023 and removed one day later. He noted that the display was one of many displays throughout the year on a variety of topics and quoted from the library's Collections Development Policy. He explained that Athens Mayor Steven Sherlin and Athens Vice Mayor Larry Eaton, acting as private citizens, expressed their concern and displeasure to him and some other MCLB members about the display. He said he shared this feedback with Director Eastman. Given the significant funding received from the City of Athens, Director Eastman decided to remove the display. He noted that the decision to remove the display was not the result of any collective action by the Athens City Council or the MCLB. He reminded everyone that the library is nonpartisan entity and that all board members strive to work together for the betterment of the library regardless of our personal beliefs.

Director Eastman read a statement addressing the display, saying "It is regrettable that a library issue has been the source of a division within our community." She said she appreciates feedback from patrons and community members on any library service or materials, "be it criticism or praise." She reminded everyone of the resources available on the library website and at the front desk that enable patrons

to challenge library materials. She noted that children's access to material has become a "point of concern" lately and reminded everyone of the library's policies and commitment to ensuring "parents are empowered to make decisions regarding the information and materials that are appropriate for their family." She noted that no person under the age of 18 can obtain a library card without parental permission and that some parents closely monitor what materials their child checks out while other parents allow their children to "select materials alone." She said that the library will always support the right of parents to determine the appropriate library services and selection of materials for their family.

III. Public Comments

Begin Public Comments

H.R. Anderson – He passed around a handout for every board member. He said he is a longtime member of the Friends of the Library and donated to help build the current library building. He says he learned about liability insurance while serving on other boards and asked if the library board had such insurance. He discussed threats of pulling library funds and urged the importance of Maintenance of Effort (MOE). He urged the board to talk to their attorney if they plan to make drastic personnel decisions. He said that if any LB members made any post on social media discussing any preconceived notions or plans for this meeting, that they need to remember that someone probably took a screenshot of it. He urged any board member who has already made a decision about tonight and posted about it on social media to recuse themselves from voting during the meeting.

Kelly Kaus – She introduced herself as the founder, along with her husband, of a group known as Citizens United for Political Education. She said the group believes that Director Eastman's spouse committed an act of retaliation against the Athens mayor and vice mayor. She said the library needs to be held account for distributing books with sexually explicit content to children. She disclosed that her son was the staff member who put up the Rainbow Book Month display and that is how she knew what books were on it and where it was located. She said that Director Eastman let her husband file an ethics complaint against the Athens mayor and vice mayor as an act of retaliation. She cited state law and her belief that some of the books on the display were in violation of state law. She discussed the list of the books on the display. She said that her group believes Director Eastman has gone from being an asset to a liability at the library. She said she realizes not everyone agrees with the viewpoint of her group, but that she believes state law is on her side. She said her group strongly disagrees with the notion that anything less than disciplinary action against Director Eastman will prevent her or future directors from repeating this violation. She said that there has been a sharp increase in attention across our country to protecting children from societal degradation, sexual grooming of children in classrooms, sexual predators online and in the community, and sex

trafficking. She said the act of putting up a display with such books was scandalous and reprehensible. She said the good residents of McMinn County deserve better attention for their community. She said she planned to submit a Materials Reconsideration Forms soon.

George Tuell – He referenced his experience on the county commission and their efforts to fund the library. He called some of the books on the display “trash.” He discussed the county’s and city’s current funding for the library and referred to the money as our tax dollars. He said he would never let his young grandchildren read the books on the display and that the library needs to “get them out of here.”

Traci Couch – She said she is a city and county taxpayer whose tax dollars help fund the library. She said she enjoys taking her child to the library and that it is a great resource. She said she understands that mistakes are a part of life, and that the library made a mistake by putting up a book display with materials that contain “extremely graphic sexual material.” She said she is not aware of any acknowledgement of a mistake, apology, or plan to prevent it from happening again. She said she checked out the books herself and that they were targeted towards juveniles despite the fact that the library said otherwise. She said that she is concerned that this will happen again and may get worse. She said the library should be a safe and neutral place for kids to learn the joy of reading and not a place for political activism, indoctrination, or graphic sexual material. She asked the library to acknowledge the mistake and take decisive action to correct it.

Dane Bradford – He said he used to teach high school and is a father of several children who use the library frequently. He read excerpts from the book *Here and Queer* that he believes are inappropriate for children. He said the book’s publisher said the book is for children 14 and older.

Karen Nelson – Mother of five children. She complimented Director Eastman. She spent a few minutes discussing a friend who was a victim of sex abuse and rape. She showed a flyer available in the library that is a resource to help victims of sex abuse.

Beth Mercer – Former director of EGFPL. She expressed her support for public libraries and for Director Eastman and all the good work that she has done. She also praised the staff on the front lines as they serve the public each day. She said libraries have no political agenda and that they are there to serve everyone who walks through the door. She said she supported the free exchange of ideas. She said she is also thankful for the work that the library board does. She asked for everyone in the community to soften their rhetoric and come together.

Charlie Senn – Former MCLB chairman. He said he loves the concept of public libraries and that libraries are the most democratic institutions we have. He said public libraries help people learn different viewpoints. He read excerpts from the

book *Caste*. He urged the library to keep the Rainbow Book Month display up and to fight efforts to remove it.

Josiah R. – Father of five children. He said that children benefit from libraries but wonders if that is still true. He discussed the freedom to commit sinful acts and said that pornography has ruined children. In reference to the Rainbow Book Month display, he called it enticement and said that only parents should have the right to introduce sexual topics to their children. He said that children must be protected, that we need guardrails, and that the children are playing with fire.

Heidi King – She says she is a parent who first met Director Eastman at a Storytime event at the library. She said Director Eastman has had a positive impact on children and the community. She said she supports the library and Director Eastman and believes the library should represent everyone. She urged the library board to retain Eastman as library director.

Lisa Bloss-Johnson – She said she is the mother of an adult transgender daughter. She discussed the Rainbow Book Month display and urged Director Eastman to remember the values of the community. She said Director Eastman made a mistake by putting up the display, but said it was intentional, and said the display had some books that caused an uproar. Discussing Director Eastman's job performance review, she said there were signs of concern. She said the some of the books on the display broke the law and crossed the line because they are pornographic.

Don Frank – He said that some members of the LGBT community have said they are “coming for your children” and said the Rainbow Book Month display is hurting kids. He said removing the display was not pushing his views on others. He discussed the grooming of children and said to leave the kids alone.

Michael Coffee – He praised Director Eastman and said he supports her. He said he is a gay man and that he was born gay. He said there were no LGBT books available in the 1980s. He said that protecting children is important but that we must remember how this will make them feel. He said that he is not sure if he would have included all of the books that were on the Rainbow Book Month display. He read a quote from the Book of Ezekiel in the Bible. He said that he has helped suicidal LGBT children.

Rachelle Howe – She praised Director Eastman for all she has done for the community. She shared her memories of playing doctor with other girls at age three, wearing her brother's clothes at age eight, and going back and forth between being girly and being boyish. She shared something she once did while looking in the adult section of a video rental store and that she used to struggle with a porn addiction. She said she supports her LGBT friends choosing their sexuality once they are adults.

She said she wondered what would have happened to her if gender identity had been so in your face when she was a child.

Dickey Simpson – He stated his support for Director Eastman.

Libby Scourpan. – She discussed her unsuccessful appeal to the Athens City Council to appoint her to the library board. She shared her experiences from many years of teaching, including helping students from broken homes. She said children are not perfect and innocent. She said she did not receive a lot of money to operate the library when she was a school librarian. She said she has been a patron of EGFPL for many years. She said children and books are important and that parents are responsible for keeping their children away from material they believe are inappropriate. She quoted from the Book of Matthew in the Bible: “Judge not, or you too will be judged” and urged everyone to remember the Golden Rule.

Eddie Broadwell – He had a handout and discussed the importance of getting involved local government and libraries. He praised Director Eastman for being friendly, wonderful, and a great director. He said he loves libraries and that they are a great resource, but says the issue before us is children’s access to certain materials. He expressed his concerns with the American Library Association (ALA) and urged the library to sever its ties with the ALA. He said we live in a republic.

Babs Patterson – She said her concern is for the children and discussed the importance of seat belt laws and child abuse laws. She discussed bad influences on children, grooming of children, and the consequences of sex abuse.

Dave Siklosi – He said he supports Director Eastman and praised both sides so far for their civility. He quoted John Adams and expressed his concern about the tyranny of the majority and how it could potentially lead to oppression. He said he is not a proponent of LGBT causes “per se” and said he opposes biological men competing in women’s sports and refused to use they/them pronouns for individuals. He said the LGBT community has been marginalized and that the Rainbow Book Month display was meant to be inclusive. He said that Will Houston’s ethics violation complaint against Athens Mayor Steven Sherlin and Vice Mayor Larry Eaton blew this up and urged the library board not to punish Director Eastman for the actions of an overzealous husband. He said we need to find a balance between free speech and the protection from pornography.

Josh Livesay – He runs the Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) games at the library. He sarcastically referred to D&D as “the devil.” He said he is a conservative Christian minister. He said he supports Director Eastman and the library. He said he has read several controversial books. He said the library must serve the community and that it must be a safe place for everyone. He said we must love one another.

Anna Miller Grobowski – She said she loves the library. She is from Meigs County but is very active in the EGFPL. She said to remember that it is a public library and that it is the responsibility of parents to choose the books their children can check out. She said we need the Rainbow Book Month display. She said that LGBT people are born that way and that a book will not make you gay. She said the books on the display were information and not pornography. She discussed her experiences as a teacher helping LGBT kids. She said she supports Director Eastman.

Olivia Cook – She said she loves the library and that her first job was at the library with Director Eastman. She said the criticism of Director Eastman breaks her heart. She said the library helped her in many ways. She said she is a gay youth minister and teacher. She said we need to stop blaming each other. She urged people to talk to “poor queer kids in the South.”

End of Public Comments

Chairman Forrest thanked every speaker for their comments and expressed his gratitude for the respect they showed during the Public Comments section. He noted the importance of the library board not making a rash decision, especially before hearing comments from the public. He said the MCLB will look closely at the petitions and the challenges that were filed.

Chairman Forrest asked if any board members wanted to share their thoughts. John Duggan made a motion to look into our display policy. Tim Womac asked if there was a copy of the display portion of the Collection Development Policy. Since there was not a copy in front of the board and the lack of a second, Chairman Forrest recommended to table the motion until a copy can be distributed to every board member for review. Tim Womac expressed his agreement to look over the Collections Development Policy, specifically with respect to materials and displays. John Duggan agreed with Womac and noted his belief that the employee handbook conflicts with the ALA. Tim Womac made a motion for the board to review the policy on displays, the Collections Development Policy, and the policy to request the reconsideration of materials. John Duggan seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Tim Womac thanked everyone for coming to the meeting to share their thoughts. He said he is thankful to live in a free country with the U.S. Constitution that ensures freedom of speech and civil discourse and pointed out that not all countries enjoy these rights.

John Duggan discussed his experience at the McMinn County Sheriff’s Office working on statistics and some “graphic incident reports concerning children” that he found very upsetting. He noted that “statistics don’t lie” and read statistics from the ALA revealing that the most frequent challenges to books in libraries are in regard to 1)

sexually explicit material, 2) offensive language, and 3) “unsuitable for age group.” He said that “This is about the kids, and that is why I am here.” He said this is not a new problem, but an “ongoing” one in libraries throughout the United States.

IV. Minutes from May 22, 2023 meeting -

Secretary Tyler Boyd, in his first meeting as secretary, presented the minutes written by former Secretary Robin Arms and noted that he would contact her if anyone had any corrections to the minutes. Jan Dingess made a motion to approve the minutes and Everett Gillespie seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

V. Treasurer’s Report – Tim Womac gave the treasurer’s report and discussed income, including donations, and expenses, including utilities, for the month of June. In reference to many libraries making several purchases in late June, he reminded everyone of the expression “Use it or lose it.”

VI. Library Reports

- i. Calhoun – Tim Womac discussed the library’s summer reading event that featured 275 people in attendance, a book giveaway, and plans to help with their Back-to-School event in August.
- ii. E.G. Fisher – Director Peyton Eastman discussed the busy May and June at the library. Recent high school graduates worked at the library in the summer, all of the staff completed 340 collective hours of state training, one HVAC unit is waiting for repairs, Meleena led a successful summer reading program with over 3,500 participants, various programs were held with the Chattanooga Aquarium and the Knoxville Zoo, over 800 lunches were served to children through the summer, the summer reading challenge had 685 participants, technology training was set to restart soon, the library had booth at the Battle of Athens Festival, and Jerri Hill gave a program at the Living Heritage Museum about the Browning Circle.
- iii. E.G. Fisher Friends of the Library – Everett Gillespie discussed the very successful used book sale that raised over \$9,000 and recruited five new Friends members.
- iv. Englewood – Jan Dingess reported that the library had 155 patrons in May and 144 in June. Jan discussed her plans to host a Story Day at the library and a planned visit to the fire department. The library director asked about the policy on returning books and DVDs because some patrons are not returning items. Jan asked about the “good faith” rule and if each library has their own policy on that issue. Ocoee Regional Library Director Liz Schreck said that all libraries need to look over such policies.

- v. Etowah – Tim Womac reported that the library had great turnout for their summer reading program and petting zoo event for the children. He praised the library director and the Friends group for their work.
- vi. Regional Library – Ocoee Regional Library Director Liz Schreck submitted her written report to the board and reminded library board members of upcoming trusteeship training events and workshops in the region. She reported on the number of checkouts for each library in the region.

VII. Old Business - none

VIII. New Business – none

Chairman Forrest asked if he needed to sign the Service Agreement form that Schreck mentioned. She answered yes and asked him to send it to her. He reminded fellow board members to complete their trusteeship training and reminded everyone of the next regular board meeting on Monday September 25, 2023 at 6:00 PM. He thanked the public for their attendance and respect. He asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. John Duggan made a motion and Everett Gillespie seconded. The motion passed unanimously and the meeting was adjourned at 8:11 PM.