



Statement by Dennis M. Walcott, President and CEO, Queens Public Library

Oversight Hearing: Court Square Library Closure Status

February 12, 2020

Good afternoon. I am Dennis Walcott, President and CEO of Queens Public Library (QPL). Thank you for inviting me to testify today on the status of the Court Square library. While the library's scheduled last day of public service at its current location is February 15, Queens Public Library will maintain a presence in the community while securing a new location in the neighborhood that will serve its residents and customers throughout Queens for generations to come.

I appreciate the Committee's desire to learn more about QPL's response to the termination of our lease, the challenges involved, and where we are today.

With that, I am happy to answer any questions the Chair and members of the Committee may have. 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 am also a mother, public education advocate, proud resident of Queens, and former public librarian. All of 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 my mom could bring me and my sisters while my dad worked 24-hour 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 bristling with glass residential towers. Court Square Library is our community center.

As a public librarian, I could tell you countless stories of conducting storytimes 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 can we fix it. I am here as a canary in a coal mine. 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:

1. What events and decisions led to the closure of Court Square Library?
2. How can the closure be prevented?

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. We have been rebuffed and ignored at every turn. We are outraged as we have watched opportunity after opportunity squandered 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 Citi building lease is expiring, which we all knew over a year 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, 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, make no mistake, it can absolutely happen in your district.

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 Amazon's 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 and 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 its savior. Today is the day we get to save this library. I am looking at all of you to be the ones 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. Public library service is so deeply important to me and this community that I will gladly put my ego and anger to the side and ask you to, please, help our community find a solution today. Please join me in the creative problem solving and deal making that should have been done two years ago. Please add your voice to the chorus of encouragement to Savanna in asking them to extend the library's lease. Please ask the City Planning Commission to tell David and Jerry Wolkoff that their 5 Pointz development cannot open if they do not work with the community and site a library. Please ask the School Construction Authority and 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 the question I leave with you today is this: How can we save Court Square Library from the inaction and ineptitude of Queens Public Library?

Feb 12th, 2019, 1pm, Council Chambers

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations

Oral Testimony:

Hello, my name is Frank Wu and this is my first time testifying at City Hall.

I am here today, and not at my day job, working at a software company, or spending time with my four year old son, because the City of NYC and Queens Public Library have failed to prevent something that was preventable: the closure of a local, highly utilised library in the fastest growing parts of NYC.

My intent in testifying is for the Council to consider two items, and act its role as oversight:

- 1.1. Investigate formally how this happened, despite many in the community from CB2, local civic groups, to LIC Partnership, and others notifying QPL about the potential for this, years in advance, if it could happen in LIC, why not any other Library in NYC? Should a task force be created to look at this City-wide, what legislative mechanisms could be considered for structural change vs ad-hoc hope the 'squeaky wheel' gets the grease and things will be "fixed" when there is a problem.
- 1.2. Oversight on QPL for their status in actually locating a new branch in Court Square as promised by Mr. Dennis Walcott. In our community, cynisms has grown as a separate but related issue, where the School Construction Authority (SCA) has tried valiantly the last two years to situate a new school, but for all intents has failed and continues to look for space today, despite budgeted funding and the ability for not one but three separate private educational facilities to open in the neighborhood as reported by the WSJ and others. The SCA mandate is to locate and negotiate real estate, and if they have struggled, what chance do you give QPL whose mandate is not real estate related but the maintenance of libraries?

The interim once a week book mobile service is shameful, offering extremely limited hours excluding working parents and patrons for weekend service which was in place before at LIC while Hunters Point Library was under construction.

It is extremely urgent - despite the obstacles I believe QPL faces - that they situate a new interim and permanent location quickly - to restore the confidence in NYC public organizations and in comprehensive planning, which has failed in LIC historically.

Today, NYC is investing \$4M in the Park across the street, \$60M to build a new school, and \$90M to renovate LIC sewers, yet we are closing down a Public Library in the middle of it all, where is the coordination and planning by QPL?

How did that happen?

For a City that is known for its disagreements on many things (housing, what are streets look like, what the best restaurant is), one thing all groups and individuals agree on, whether you're rich, poor, young, old, or speak any language - all people appreciate and know the importance of Public Libraries & Public Space.

And nothing said here today it seems will prevent the closure of our Library, essentially pissing off multiple folks, local businesses that need foot traffic, old long time residents that lived in LIC for 20 years, new residents that just moved to LIC, and individuals across the political spectrum.

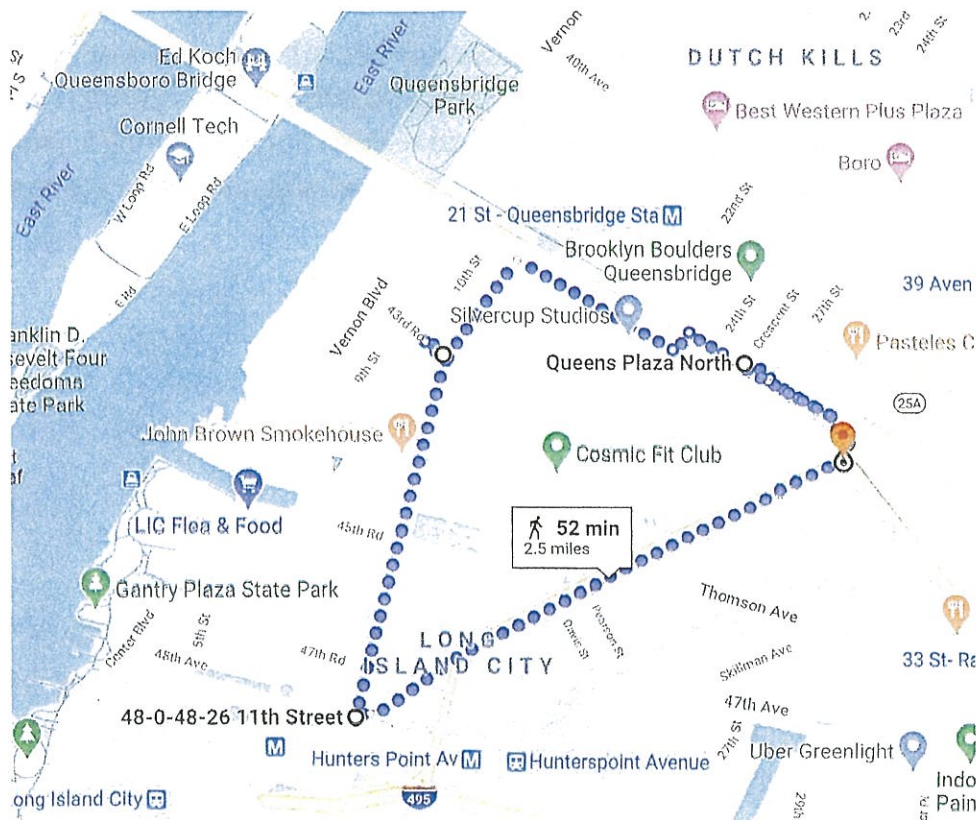
And that is a real shame.

Thank you.

Addendum FAQ

1. Where is Court Square in LIC?

Court Square borders are made up of Queens Plaza South, 11th Street & Jackson Ave, and includes some of the largest developments in LIC today including Skyline the largest Condo Tower in Queens and JACX, a new 1.1M+ Commercial Office Building with increasing population density and housing stock made of tens of thousands of new residential units.



2. How did this actually happen?

In 1986, the New York City Planning Commission approved Citibank's special permit application to build a 42-story office tower and five-story annex building at 1 Court Square. As part of its application, Citibank agreed to, among other things, develop 16,000 square foot of landscaped outdoor public space and build a public library and provide it rent free to the Queens Public Library for 20 years.

July, 2018 - Savanna announced re-developing 1 Court Square

Nov, 2018 - Amazon announces coming to LIC , 1 Court Square

Feb, 2019 - Amazon announces pulling out of LIC

Given Savanna's plans to redevelop the building, the Court Square Library's \$1 per year sublease has only been extended until March 2020, and despite notice since 2018-early

2019, QPL has struggled to provide transparency to the community and/or put forward any meaningful interim or long-term solution.

3. Why is the Court Square Library particularly important to Court Square/LIC?

Court Square is a meaningful distance away from the Waterfront and is known for its lack of green space. Today the neighborhood doesn't have any vibrant, public open spaces for a robust mixed-used sector to thrive and is made up of odd dead-end streets and walled oases that create a disconnect when walking around the neighborhood.

Many stakeholders (business, residents, elected officials) have worked to re-balance and rationalize our street grids including creating 50,000+ in new public space via ULURP for the LIC Ramps supported by everyone. With the loss of QPL however, we have lost the only meaningful public indoor space that was available for the community including hosting 400+ families last Halloween.

About the Court Square Civic Association

<http://www.courtsquarecivic.org/>

<https://www.instagram.com/courtsquarecivic/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/courtsquarecivic/>

The burgeoning community in and around Long Island City's Court Square is going through explosive growth. Thanks to its unbeatable location and its growing live/work environment, developers, businesses, and families are flocking to the area. Our mission is to *facilitate the holistic development of the Court Square* through community collaboration and civic participation.

Key Accomplishments:

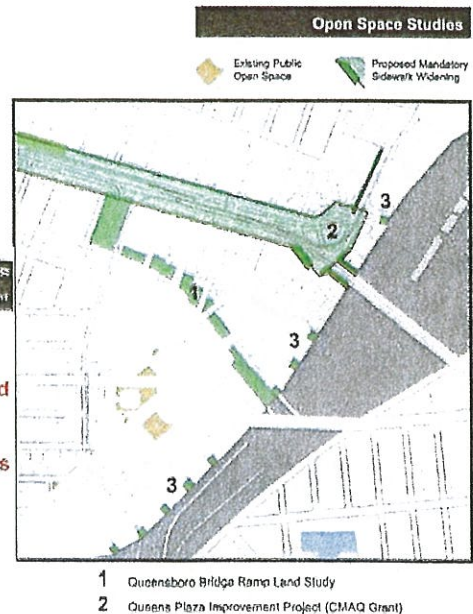
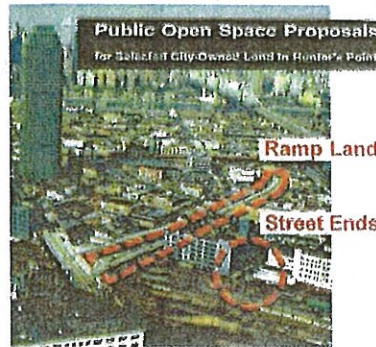
- Secured \$5.5M in funding and freed up 50,000 sf of new public open space
- Secured written commitment of \$60M by the City for a new elementary school in Court Square, which is part of one of the most overcrowded school districts in NYC (District 30)
- In collaboration with Councilmember Jimmy Van Bramer, secured Supplemental Street Sanitation via CleanNYC funds to clean commercial streets outside existing LIC BID route
- In collaboration with the MTA, secured new 'pigeon bird spikes' at subway entrances
- Held "Family Wellness" Day in Court Square with 10+ local businesses participating
- Hosting "pop-up Playground" working with playground:NYC, hosted summer block party

- Strong collaboration & participation with many City stakeholders: EDC, DOT, SCA, DOE, Community Board 2, the Long Island City Partnership, Queens Public Library, and more.

(2001) LIC Rezoning, NYC City Planning Study



Efforts are also underway by the Department, the Queens Borough President's Office, the departments of Transportation and Parks and Recreation, and the Economic Development Corporation to identify potential sites within the rezoning area for public park land, and to improve unused city-owned property, such as land adjacent to the Queensboro Bridge upper deck ramp and street ends along the Sunnyside Yard. Funding is needed for acquisition,



(2001) LIC Rezoning, NYC City Planning Conti-



The city-owned lots under the ramps would be beautified and improved to provide public open space for this community.

The areas exposed to the sky would be improved as landscaped seating areas with elements such as trees, plantings, benches, game tables and lighting.

The areas under the ramps would be temporarily fenced off when needed by D.O.T. for maintenance. Otherwise they would be part of the public space. If enhanced with interesting paving and ceiling treatment with lighting the covered areas would complement the open areas. They would be designed to provide through block access for pedestrians only with elements which would preclude their use as vehicular streets.



(2013) "Eagle Park" Conception Proposal



(2018) "LIC Rampland" Funding | Plan



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****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**** October 24, 2018

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*****PRESS RELEASE*****

COUNCIL MEMBER VANBRAMER SECURES OPEN SPACE VICTORY, NEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COMMITMENT FOR COURT SQUARE

The newly approved deal secured open space for a new public park, funding for a new elementary school, 150 affordable housing units, and a guarantee for union jobs.

TODAY, October 24th, Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer secured a significant win for the Court Square community with the approval of a deal to convert land under the Queensboro Bridge ramps into open public space as part of a new development project at Jackson Avenue and Dutch Kills Street. Along with the deal, the City has committed to allocate funding for a brand new UPK-5th grade elementary school in Court Square.

The developer for the project has signed an agreement with SEIU Local 32B1 to ensure all building service workers hired are unionized and guaranteed good wages and benefits.

This deal is a victory for the community that has advocated for years to convert the land under the Queensboro Bridge ramps into public open space. The deal includes fully funding the design and build out of the public space. \$5.5 million to complete the redesign has been secured. The City has committed to work with the Long Island City Business Improvement District as a community partner to a dominant in the design, development, and maintenance of the site. An advisory board will also be created with the Court Square Civic Association and other local stakeholders guaranteed a seat on the board guiding the project.

"Our community has long fought for the land under the ramps to be transformed into public space. The plan for the open space that will be implemented is the vision set forth by the Court Square Civic Association. We have reclaimed approximately 50,000 square feet of open space, and I have no intention that the Administration will continue to work on securing the rest of the space under the ramps for public use," said Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer. "By approving this deal, we secured open space for a new public park, funding for a brand new UPK-5th grade elementary school, 150 affordable housing units, and good-paying union jobs. This is a victory that will benefit the Court Square community for generations to come."

Private Developer funds \$5.5M for initial 50,000 square feet freed up by the City. City agrees in 'writing' to continue to try to free up the additional 113,000 sq feet of City-owned land to open, public space next to initial 50,000 square feet

"In advance of the site being made available, we will begin working with your office and the community on re-envisioning this space. The City will also continue to pursue opportunities to identify alternative suitable sites for the current uses of the spaces under the ramps going forward in order to create more public spaces in the neighborhood."

[Oct, 2018], Mayor's Office of City Legislative Affairs to Councilmen Jimmy Van Bramer

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 2.12.2020

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Meghan Cirrito

Address: 217 51 Ave. #1010 LIC, NY 11101

I represent: Friends of Court Square Library

Address: 25-01 Jackson Ave. LIC, NY 11101

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 02/12/2020

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Mary Jovaida

Address: 110-05 21st #30 LIC, NY

I represent: Resident member of the library

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 2-12-20

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Frank Wn

Address: 42-51 Hunter St #CIC

I represent: Court Sq Civic Association

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 2/12/20

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: DENNIS M. WALCOTT

Address: _____

I represent: QUEENS PUBLIC LIBRARY

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms