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Contact: Marla Kennedy

Office: 801-535-7177

Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker's Statement on Funding Proposal for New Libraries

After careful consideration and consultation with the City Council, I have chosen not to block the Council's funding proposal for two additional libraries in Salt Lake City.

Throughout my career as a public official I have consistently supported increased funding to build and operate additional libraries in Salt Lake City. I continue to do so as Mayor. I applaud Council members' commitment to the Salt Lake City Library system, and I share their passion for developing additional branches in our neighborhoods. Libraries are fundamentally important to the quality of life in our city and provide a center for discovery, learning and ideas. The Glendale and West Capitol Hill neighborhoods, in particular, are in critical need of the resources that only a library can provide.

While I support the addition of two new libraries to the City's library system, my concerns remain about the process through which funding for the new branches was approved.

I am specifically concerned the proposal was not developed as part of the overall city budget process, which began with the administration in January and was presented to the Council in May. As Mayor I am obligated to consider the impacts of this kind of proposal in the context of the overall budget and capital project financing environment, and my administration has not had adequate time to conduct such an analysis. In addition, the opportunity for formal public comment on this particular proposal was necessarily limited, due to the compressed timeframe in which the proposal was considered.

A number of important and unanswered questions remain, including:

1. Where will the libraries to be located? Neither proposed library has a finalized location.
2. Are changes to the relevant area master plans, as well as zoning changes, necessary to accommodate libraries?
3. What are the firm costs for building each of the libraries, including land costs?
4. Is the mill levy, which is not subject to a vote by the public, the best method for funding these projects, particularly when considered in the context of other major capital projects

currently in the planning process? Have alternate sources of funding – including private charitable support – been thoroughly explored?

Because of this, I ask the City Council to consider the following actions as it moves forward with the planning and development of the two new library branches:

1. Develop a process that will ensure the Mayor, the City Council, and the Library Board and staff are working collaboratively as these projects progress. This could include a designated set of individuals who are regularly meeting to communicate among the various organizations, along with a schedule for reporting to the Council and the Mayor;
2. Complete a thorough analysis of the financing options for the two branches, including a detailed analysis of the costs associated with site acquisition, building construction, and ongoing operation and maintenance expenses. The analysis would consider a range of other financing methods beyond a mill levy. It would also strive to identify cost-saving measures that could reduce the overall capital costs of the branches to less than the maximum amount currently approved;
3. Encourage the expeditious review of potential sites for the Marmalade Branch in addition to the Glendale Branch, so that both branches may be built within a reasonable timeframe.

Additionally, this situation clearly illustrates the need for a more deliberate planning process concerning the financing and construction of all major capital facilities in Salt Lake City. I propose that the Council and the Mayor's Office jointly develop a Major Capital Facilities and Projects Strategy that would provide a regulatory framework for the development of larger capital projects that are not regularly included in the City's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) process.

I am committed to a system of world-class libraries for the residents of Salt Lake City. It is critical, however, that we carefully and deliberately plan for future development and growth in Salt Lake City, and that we deliberately plan the financing of major capital projects within the context of the larger budget and taxation realities.

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