

**THE NEWARK PUBLIC LIBRARY
5 WASHINGTON STREET
NEWARK, NEW JERSEY**

**MINUTES OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES MEETING
VIA TELECONFERENCE
JULY 23, 2025, 5:00 P.M.**

MEMBERS:

Aisha Cooper	Co-President/Chair
Lauren Wells	Co-President
Rosemary Steinbaum	Vice-President
Havier Nazario	Secretary
Robert J. Austin II	Trustee
Miguel Rodriguez	Trustee (from 5:14 p.m.)

STAFF:

Christian Zabriskie	Director
Zuhare Meri	Building Superintendent
Scharron Little	Interim Director of Finance

ABSENT:

Jason Ballard	Treasurer
Sharnee Brown	Trustee
Jacqueline Quiles	Deputy Mayor
George Williams	Assistant Director, Capital Planning

Minutes prepared from a recording by Shazia Ahmad of Minutes Solutions Inc.

1. CALL TO ORDER

There being a quorum present, and the Trustees having been given adequate and proper notice of the meeting, the meeting was called to order at 5:04 p.m.

2. APPROVAL OF PUBLIC SESSION MINUTES

On a motion made by L. Wells, seconded by H. Nazario, it was resolved as follows that:

- All Board documents be provided to the Board no later than the close of business on the Thursday before a Board meeting; and
- If there are any changes to the agenda, the Administration engage the committee chairs so that the Board can support the Administration in getting information out to the rest of the Board.

Motion carried.

L. Wells noted that the meeting materials were provided less than 48 hours before the meeting and in a manner that made them difficult to review. Therefore, she would be abstaining from voting. H. Nazario reiterated this assessment, also noting that the short turnaround time between receipt of the package and the Board meeting did not allow for a proper review of the materials. He also noted that the May 28, 2025 meeting minutes did not reflect some of his questions.

The Board agreed to table the minutes of the May 28, 2025 to the September, 2025 meeting.

The Board further discussed setting an appropriate deadline for meeting materials so that there is enough time to review them before meetings. After some discussion, L. Wells recommended a deadline of the Thursday before a Board meeting, by the close of business on that day. H. Nazario explained that a deadline would give the Board the weekend to review the materials. This would also facilitate any changes to the agenda.

H. Nazario also recommended that committee chairs be contacted if there is a change in the agenda, as this will assist the Board in its discussions and deliberations. As well, this will give the Board input in agenda changes.

3. PRESIDENT'S REPORT

On a motion made by A. Cooper, seconded by L. Wells, it was resolved that:

- **Director C. Zabriskie contact the New Jersey State Library for resources about purchasing in order to create a purchasing manual.**
- **In the event that this is not possible, legal counsel will be requested to draft a purchasing manual.**

Motion carried.

ACTION – C. Zabriskie will contact the New Jersey State Library about purchasing manual resources and report back to the finance committee at its August 21, 2025, meeting.

A. Cooper discussed the need for a purchasing manual and for legal counsel to provide a comprehensive memorandum on the requirements of the local public contracts law. This information can then be used to create the purchasing manual and incorporate language from the comprehensive memorandum. A. Cooper noted that this may be a costly project and that this issue pertains to both the finance and facilities committees. L. Wells also noted this request pertains to the personnel and policy committee.

There was discussion about the resources available through the New Jersey State Library to assist with public contracts law requirements, and also for purchasing manuals. A. Cooper noted that issues such as professional services, emergency contracts, the bid threshold for the Library's designated qualified purchasing agent, and the difference between a request-for-proposal and bid should be clarified through this process.

4. DIRECTOR'S REPORT

ACTION – C. Zabriskie will provide a summary of the strategic planning bids, following the request-for-proposal (RFP) process, and send this to the Board for its review.

ACTION – C. Zabriskie will put the strategic planning bids in the shared drive for the Board's review.

ACTION – C. Zabriskie will send the Board the ratified staff agreement with the modifications, the salary guide, and the steps, in addition to the Director's report, by email.

C. Zabriskie informed the Board about several initiatives underway since the last Board meeting. He attended the American Library Association conference with a delegation of thirty representatives. There was a staff townhall as well and there were difficult but honest discussions about the new contract. This issue will now move forward.

Due to an unforeseen health issue, C. Zabriskie was unable to prepare a breakdown of the strategic planning RFP results. Libraries Without Borders contacted Newark Public Library

(NPL) with its proposal, in addition to another firm that presented a more expensive proposal. Another firm also submitted its proposal but it has more experience in not-for-profit organizations, and not with libraries. R. Steinbaum recommended a summary of the bids which C. Zabriskie will provide to the Board. He will also save the received bids in the shared drive for the Board's review.

Upon a question from H. Nazario, C. Zabriskie confirmed that there were only three respondents to the RFP. The Board reiterated the need for access to the bid submissions.

Regarding the staff discussions about the new contract, C. Zabriskie confirmed that the staff ratified the proposal on July 21, 2025. The main changes to the contract were as follows:

- 2.5% salary increases per year for three years
- Salary adjustments for lower titles, for example Library Assistants starting at \$37,000, Senior Library Assistants at \$39,000, Principal Library Assistant at \$42,000, and Clerk at \$45,000 in 2025.
- Further salary adjustments in 2026, for example the Principal Library Assistant will increase to \$46,300, Supervising Library Assistant to \$54,000, Library Associates to \$48,250, Librarian I to \$62,500, Librarian II to \$68,000 and Librarian III to \$76,168.
- There were some modifications to compensatory time in order to formalize the current practice.

L. Wells noted that it is difficult to vote on the staff contract when the ratification materials were not sent to the Board. C. Zabriskie responded that the staff contract has been under discussion at past Board meetings and that he had previously discussed the main points of contention. The Board reiterated that it needs to see the contract in order to ratify it and the summary previously sent to the Board is not sufficient. C. Zabriskie responded that he wanted to provide a quick update, as it is summer.

A. Cooper explained that the Board cannot approve contracts without first reviewing them. Other Board members concurred. H. Nazario noted that there is an issue of courtesy for the staff and Board in reviewing and approving the contract at this Board meeting. The staff have been waiting for this contract and it must be approved.

L. Wells expressed concern about the Board's position with regard to the staff contract ratification, not having any materials to review before voting, and therefore appearing as if the Board does not have the staff's best interests in mind. She noted that the Board has been put in positions on other occasions where it did not have the requisite information to make a decision. The Board agreed to continue this discussion in the Executive Session.

Upon an inquiry from the Board, C. Zabriskie confirmed that a member of the HR staff prepared the Board meeting package, and that it would normally be prepared by the Director's administrative assistant. C. Zabriskie confirmed that he reviewed the meeting package on July 23, 2025, as this was his first day back at the office.

There were no further questions.

5. TREASURER'S REPORT

On a motion made by R. Steinbaum, seconded by R. Austin, it was resolved to approve Bill Sheet 1360 for May, 2025, in the amount of \$2,743,562.69 and Bill Sheet 1361 for June, 2025, in the amount of \$2,984,311.90. Motion failed.

R. Steinbaum reported that there was a higher cash balance at the end of June, 2025, due to the receipt of endowment distributions in the amount of approximately \$612,000. Grant income

was also received in June, 2025, in the amount of \$303,000 pertaining to history-related programming and the reimbursement for the *Newark Evening News* digitization project. Cash disbursements for capital expenditure projects in support of the Hispanic Research Information Center (HRIC) were lower than anticipated. The remaining budget for the HRIC project is expected to be spent over the summer period, and the Center is on track for completion by September 30, 2025.

Capital expenditures pertaining to the Springfield branch have been delayed at this time in order to ensure adequate cash flows. These disbursements are expected to commence in the fourth quarter of 2025.

R. Steinbaum noted that NPL is expected to receive a full reimbursement for the HRIC project upon completion from the New Jersey State Library in the amount of \$1.25 million, and \$480,000 from the City of Newark's Bond Ordinance. It is expected that there will be enough money to commence with the Springfield renovation after the HRIC is completed.

R. Steinbaum explained that there is an expected forthcoming decrease in the cash balance during the year due to capital expenditures. The Springfield branch renovations have been delayed until the HRIC renovations are completed. She highlighted that there would be adequate funds available for these expenditures.

The Board discussed whether it had quorum or not to vote on the bill sheets for May and June, 2025. M. Rodriguez is having technical issues and his vote cannot be recorded. H. Nazario explained that he could not vote to approve the bill sheets at this time because the itemization of checks is not included in the report to the Board. S. Little agreed to send this report to the Board. C. Zabriskie noted that this is usually discussed in the Executive Session, although Board members noted that it was not included in that portion of the meeting package.

The Board agreed to discuss the cash activity report in the Executive Session.

6. COMMITTEE REPORTS

6.1 Development Committee

R. Steinbaum noted that the development committee did not meet during the period. Updates from the development department were included in the Board package.

6.2 Facilities Committee

On a motion made by H. Nazario, seconded by L. Wells, it was resolved that all work with OCA Architects Inc. on the Springfield branch renovation project cease until Administration secures proper authorization from the Board that is in alignment with the law, and that the requested Board package about this contract and resolution language be sent to the facilities committee prior to its meeting on September 9, 2025. Motion carried.

On a motion made by R. Steinbaum, seconded by H. Nazario, it was resolved to freeze the Clinton Hill joint venture project until the Board and facilities committee have had a chance to review the joint venture agreement. Motion carried.

ACTION – C. Zabriskie will provide the Board with a memorandum summarizing legal counsel's response to contracting OCA Architects Inc. for the Springfield branch renovation project.

ACTION – C. Zabriskie will ask legal counsel for resolution language for the approval of the

contract with OCA Architects Inc. for the Springfield branch renovation, and send this to the Board with the contract from OCA Architects Inc. and the two proposals submitted.

ACTION – C. Zabriskie will provide the facilities committee with a memorandum summarizing legal counsel's response to contracting OCA Architects Inc. for the Springfield branch renovation project, the resolution language from legal counsel, and all information pertaining to this contract in advance of the September 9, 2025, committee meeting.

A. Cooper noted that she was not invited to the facilities committee meeting but C. Zabriskie confirmed that L. Wells and members of the staff attended. He informed the Board that the Cultural Arts Facilities Expansion (CAFE) program application has been submitted but there has not been a response yet. There was a discussion about the joint venture partnership agreement and an update is expected from legal counsel.

NPL retained legal counsel to deal with the general contractor and has moved forward on the HRIC project. The project is currently on track for completion at the end of July, 2025. The plan is to open HRIC on October 1, 2025.

The HVAC system has stopped working in JBAAR, and replacing it will be significant cost. The heating system is unaffected but the air-conditioning is not working. NPL is looking at temporary solutions for the rest of the summer, with a plan to repair the HVAC system by summer, 2026. C. Zabriskie noted that the Van Buren branch roof repairs are complete and have been inspected. The Main branch boiler was also recently repaired.

There has been some progress with regard to the Springfield branch, addressing the Board's concerns about the new architects. OCA Architects Inc. was one of the original architects for the Springfield project. The project will cost approximately \$1.425 million and will entail a renovation to the second floor and ground floor.

Z. Meri updated the Board on the Springfield branch project. He met with J. Nelson, the New Jersey State Librarian on July 22, 2025, and assured her that the project was on track. The RFP is expected to be in place at the beginning of August, 2025 and that the contractor for the project would be selected by the middle of September, 2025. J. Nelson noted that the project must be completed by June, 2026. Z. Meri informed the Board that the project should be completed within four months barring any unforeseen issues including with the roofing.

The facilities committee has requested that the Board approve the capital project fund for renovations and improvement at the Springfield branch, in addition to the request from the architects in the amount of \$59,000. This amount will be covered in the Community Center Digital Connect grant.

A. Cooper noted that there was no RFP process for the Springfield branch project, despite the RFP threshold being \$17,000. C. Zabriskie noted that New Jersey Statutes Annotated 40(A) allows for negotiated contracts when services are considered specialized and difficult to fully specify in the bid document. NPL sought input from Genova Burns LLC about this process as well. G. Williams has been part of this process as well.

A. Cooper noted that in the event that there is no RFP for a project, there must a well-documented process for the selected firm. She reiterated the importance of a purchasing manual, which would clarify the requirements and procedures. L. Wells confirmed her attendance during part of the facilities committee meeting and asked C. Zabriskie to send the committee an email outlining the services between both contracts and the differences between both, including costs. C. Zabriskie confirmed that he did not send this email.

L. Wells asked if architects had been paid for the Springfield branch project and C. Zabriskie

confirmed that two firms have been partially paid. She asked for clarification about OCA Architects Inc. C. Zabriskie confirmed that the original architectural firm was unable to bid on the project and could also not do construction management for NPL. OCA Architects Inc. would be doing both the RFP and construction management.

Upon an inquiry from A. Cooper, C. Zabriskie noted that there is a contract in place with OCA Architects Inc. and that the facilities committee is requesting to ratify this. This issue was discussed at the May, 2025, Board meeting and OCA Architects Inc. was approached to address the Board's concerns about better oversight. This issue also came up as the HRIC project required more oversight. OCA Architects Inc. has also provided better designs for the Springfield branch.

Upon an inquiry from H. Nazario, C. Zabriskie confirmed that the scope of work for OCA Architects Inc. was to design the Springfield branch space. The firm focused mainly on the second floor, with ideas for the first floor, a bathroom and elevator refresh. The RFP bid documents component was not included in the scope of work. There was an original bid with an original design but the first architectural firm was not asked to provide a bid document as NPL was not following the bid process. C. Zabriskie noted that this is a learning process due to policy changes. NPL went back to the original architectural firm for a bid document but the firm was not able to fulfil this request. This is when NPL looked at contracting OCA Architects Inc. to prepare the RFP bid document. As OCA Architects Inc. examined the original drawings to prepare the bid document, they provided feedback. The Springfield project is time-sensitive due to funding. H. Nazario noted that it is important to ensure that contracted entities deliver that for which they are paid.

Upon an inquiry from H. Nazario, C. Zabriskie responded that the state grant funds were awarded in November, 2023, and must be used by June 30, 2026. The original architects were contracted in September, 2024. G. Williams had informed C. Zabriskie previously that the original drawings would have been inadequate for obtaining permits. The drawings provided by OCA Architects Inc. meet the requirements for the permitting process.

Upon an inquiry from A. Cooper, Z. Meri responded that the original contract with the first architectural firm was under the bid threshold. However, the drawings submitted by the firm were not thorough enough. Change orders were then required to update these drawings and request more information. Therefore, NPL began to look at other firms.

A. Cooper noted that once the project was over the bid threshold, the Board should have been informed. She also inquired about the possibility of getting a refund, as the original architects did not provide sufficiently detailed drawings. C. Zabriskie explained that this issue prompted more robust discussions about contracts and the RFP process. The contract for the first architectural firm totaled \$8,000, with an additional \$7,000 in change orders for that firm.

L. Wells reminded the Board that it passed a resolution on bid thresholds several years prior and noted that administrative staff should have been aware of this. C. Zabriskie also confirmed that this state grant is one of three large state ones received. VTC and HRIC are the other two projects.

A. Cooper noted that the Board requested more information about the OCA Architects Inc. contract at the May, 2025, Board meeting. This information has not been received. L. Wells noted that there are ongoing concerns about planning, preparation, procurement and accountability for funds. The original architectural firm did not provide adequate drawings and this reflects on the NPL. The grant was awarded two years ago and the project is still at this stage.

H. Nazario added that his concern was about the RFP process, and the scope of work. Despite

the project originally being under the bid threshold, he reiterated the importance of having quotes and assessing the scope of work. C. Zabriskie acknowledged the Board's concerns and explained that NPL is attempting to address those. He asked the Board for an effective forum to resolve this issue and ensure transparency.

H. Nazario and A. Cooper explained that the Board is not happy with the process followed for the Springfield branch renovation project. This issue was also not raised at any of the facilities committee meetings. R. Steinbaum commented about the facilities committee doing its due diligence with projects before the Board can vote on them. She also expressed confusion about the state of the Springfield branch project. C. Zabriskie confirmed that he signed a provisional contract with OCA Architects Inc. in order to meet the project deadline. S. Little confirmed that contract for \$59,000 covers design, drawings, bid and construction administration. Upon an inquiry from the Board, C. Zabriskie confirmed that he signed the contract but did not know it would be for \$59,000.

L. Wells raised the issue that the manner in which this contract has been pursued puts the Board in a difficult position. It creates the impression that the Board is not in favor of the Springfield branch project. This also goes back to the staff contract issue. The Board serves to ensure that the NPL is fiscally responsible with public funds. C. Zabriskie acknowledged his missteps. A. Cooper noted that OCA Architects Inc. were first brought up at the May, 2025, Board meeting. C. Zabriskie confirmed that NPL was already working with the firm at that time.

R. Steinbaum spoke about the Clinton Hill joint venture agreement and noted that there was a meeting on June 6, 2025. She recommended that this project also be paused until the facilities committee and Board have seen the joint venture agreement.

6.3 Finance Committee Report

R. Steinbaum noted that as per the midyear actuals at the end of June, 2025, income is on budget or under for most accounts, with the exception of capital project reimbursements, which are behind schedule. These revenues will continue to lag until capital projects are completed and then reimbursed. Expense totals are slightly underbudget and cash flow is healthy.

6.4 Personnel and Policy Committee Report

H. Nazario noted that the committee chair could not attend the Board meeting. There is a thriving volunteer program through the development office with a robust policy in place. The committee chair has asked C. Zabriskie for more information about the pre-screening and vetting of volunteer candidates prior to the next personnel and policy committee meeting.

The committee chair has also asked to revisit the naming policy for honorees at the September, 2025, committee meeting. The committee has also drafted the event space policy and will present it to the Board for its review and approval. The committee also discussed job postings for librarians and building maintenance workers, in addition to the next round of interviews.

Local 68 negotiation dates were to be determined and Local 2298 met with the NPL negotiating team and the state-appointed mediator and signed a memorandum of understanding on July 16, 2025. Local 2298 members were to ratify this agreement.

Upon an inquiry from R. Steinbaum, C. Zabriskie confirmed that the event space policy would be part of the September, 2025, Board meeting. He also confirmed that he has compared the draft policy to other event space policies at other institutions for pricing and that the policy is ready for the September Board meeting. R. Steinbaum also explained that as the development office fundraises for NPL, the volunteer program should be reassigned. C. Zabriskie agreed

to look into this issue.

7. **PUBLIC COMMENTS**

The floor was opened to public comments.

B. Cohen, president of Local 2298 at the Newark Public Library, spoke to the Board and confirmed that the staff ratified the new agreement. She noted there are 75 staff members in the union, with 100 staff in total including non-unionized staff. She asked the Board to consider holding an emergency meeting to vote on the agreement. She also spoke about the City of Newark's minimum salary of \$40,000, which some junior NPL staff will not be earning. However, gains have been made in raising salaries. B. Cohen also noted that there are departing staff members and the Board's approval of the contract would ensure that they are paid before they leave.

A. Ross of 125 Pacific Street, Newark and an NPL employee, highlighted that the most urgent issue pertains to NPL staff not making living wages, with some having to access food pantries for groceries. The proposed workers contract would provide immediate aid to staff. They asked what the Board would do if it could not vote on the new staff contract at this meeting in terms of providing immediate relief to Library workers, particularly those earning \$31,000 per year. A. Cooper responded that that the Board intends to vote on the staff contract at this meeting. A. Ross followed up to comment that this is their first Board meeting. They asked if it is standard practice for the Board to see all of the contracts NPL enters into and they asked this question because of discussions during the meeting.

A. Cooper responded that the Board always requests contracts.

A. Ross concluding by thanking the Board and highlighting the priority given to NPL's staff.

A. Cooper reiterated that the Board will be voting on ratifying the staff contract during the Executive Session.

There were no further public comments.

8. **RESOLUTION TO MOVE INTO EXECUTIVE SESSION**

On a motion made by L. Wells, seconded by R. Steinbaum, it was resolved that the Newark Public Library Board of Trustees move into the Executive Session. Motion carried.

9. **RETURN TO PUBLIC SESSION**

On a motion made by R. Austin, seconded by L. Wells, it was resolved that the Newark Public Library Board of Trustees reconvene in the Public Session. Motion carried.

10. **HR RESOLUTION**

On a motion made by R. Steinbaum, seconded by A. Cooper, it was resolved to adopt the human resources resolution during the Executive Session for the Newark Public Library Board meeting held on July 23, 2025, as amended. Motion carried.

On a motion made by L. Wells, seconded by R. Austin, it was resolved to approve the memorandum of agreement ratified in staff union discussions. Motion carried.

With regard to the human resources resolution discussed in the Executive Session, the majority of the Board agreed not to approve Option 1 and approved the remaining options.

L. Wells led the Board in thanking the staff who led the contract negotiations, especially L. Colson and S. Little. Although lower-level staff did not achieve a \$40,000 minimum salary in this round of bargaining, NPL is committed to achieving this in the next round of negotiations.

11. **NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next Board of Trustees meeting is September 24, 2025.

12. **ADJOURNMENT**

On a motion duly made by L. Wells, seconded by R. Austin and carried, it was resolved to adjourn the meeting at 8:25 p.m. Motion carried.

DISCLAIMER

The above document should be used as a summary of the motions passed and issues discussed at the meeting. This document shall not be considered a verbatim copy of every word spoken at the meeting.

Aisha Cooper, Co-President

Christian Zabriskie, Director

Date

Date