



NEW HANOVER COUNTY

PUBLIC LIBRARY

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Dana Conners, Director



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Local Government Commission Members,

I have proudly served as the Library Director for New Hanover County since late 2022. I have spent almost 30 years in public libraries – primarily in North Carolina. I have been influential in public library building projects in Union, Cabarrus and Mecklenburg Counties.

Project Grace is one of the things that attracted me to moving to New Hanover County. The County's interest and investment in a new Main Library as well as a new branch in the northern part of the county are exciting and demonstrate the County's passion for building a thriving community. I know there has been a lot of information shared with you about Project Grace and I want to make sure you have accurate information about our services and the library ahead of your vote on the debt issuance – after all, one of the roles of the public library is to provide accurate and factual information to the community.

The current Main Library building does not meet the needs of a modern public library. Library services were installed into a building that was designed as a department store in the 1950s. Over the last forty years the library has struggled with providing evolving library services in a space that is not flexible and was not built to support technology.

When the library opened at its current site in 1981, public library service was very different than it is now. At that time, public libraries provided access to books, helped find information and answer questions, and offered storytimes to children. This was a time before the internet, before online databases took the place of reference materials, and when people were expected to be silent and self-sufficient in the library.

Although the current Main Library is 100,000 square feet, much of that space is unusable for library services. The basement, which accounts for approximately one-third of the space, is not conducive to library services. Despite water intrusion issues, a small portion of the current basement is used for storage of archival materials, but because it is not climate or humidity controlled, the materials are vulnerable since the space does not meet any archival standards. The rest of the building is uninviting with no natural light and a challenging floor plan. Services for children, teens and local history have been shaped to meet the constraints of the architecture rather than the needs of the community. The third floor does not have the structural integrity to house books. So because of those space limitations, we only use about a third of our total square footage for books and programming spaces.

A modern public library is a welcoming space where people can gather and feel inspired. There are spaces for children and teens that focus on their different developmental and learning needs. There are spaces for quiet study and group collaboration. There are ample ways and places to use and learn about

technology. Local history collections have the infrastructure to be protected for future generations. Most importantly, a public library can change to meet the needs of a growing community. Project Grace has been purposefully designed to be that modern library for New Hanover County and the largest in our system.

Project Grace was designed based on a space needs analysis to provide comprehensive library services now and allow for flexibility for the future. The new space is well designed to ensure effective and efficient services in a welcoming environment. Service and resource placement is intentional to ensure spaces are right sized and in the right places. Books are browsable using modern library shelving and display practices. Exciting spaces for children make up a large portion of the first floor of the new Main Library. Project Grace provides planned spaces that meet the needs of teens.

Project Grace, unlike the current Main Library, has abundant windows throughout – which are an important and needed feature. Research (available through the public library) proves that natural light is instrumental in creating a welcoming environment, enhancing productivity, and improving mood.

A significant aspect of Project Grace is the Local History Room. The amount of space allocated to the preservation and sharing of local history is amplified in the new building. We believe local history to be a vital educational and cultural resource for our community for future generations. Project Grace allows us to store all of our archival materials together and in proper archival conditions.

There has been a misconception that Project Grace has not been planned to meet the needs of the community due to lack of things like makerspaces, recording studios, and calming rooms. While these trends can be found in some other libraries, the New Hanover County Public Library works to provide the services and resources that fulfill our mission and meet the needs of our community. In our work with the community and in asking for their input, we have found that fads like makerspaces and calming rooms do not resonate with them. Our residents have indicated that readily accessible books, children's areas, quiet spaces, areas for plugging in and using technology, teen spaces, and social spaces are the most important things to them in a new library. All of which can be found in Project Grace.

There is an aspect of Project Grace that sets it apart from and above other public libraries. The co-location and partnership with the Cape Fear Museum offers the library opportunities to build on innovative history and STEAM programming for children, teens and adults. The focus on Local History is only enhanced by collaboration between the museum and library on exhibits, collections and programs. Together the library and museum create a destination for visitors and residents alike.

I am excited about the ways that Project Grace will serve the community – through the library and through the museum. These services are transformational for a community. I and the rest of the team at the library are in full support of this project.

Thank you for your time and attention.



Dana M Conners
Library Director