From: Jeff Lee
Sent: Monday, April 21, 2025 1:26 AM
To: doge@mail.house.gov; oig@neh.gov
Cc: mmcdonald@neh.gov; ldavis@neh.gov; rbrundage@neh.gov; jcox@neh.gov; APiesen@neh.gov; Bockelman, Paul <bockelmanp@amherstma.gov>
Subject: Waste in NEH Infrastructure grant CHA-292057 Jones Library Humanities Center

I write to call attention to a wasteful $1,000,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant to the Jones Library in Amherst, Massachusetts that reportedly remains in force.

NEH Infrastructure and Capacity Building Challenge Grants project "Jones Library Humanities Center" (CHA-292057) was awarded in April 2023. The proposal contributes funds to a much larger undertaking to renovate and expand the Jones Library in Amherst, Mass. Project construction has not yet begun.

Since the award was announced the project has suffered from mismanagement and serious cost escalation. The estimated project cost has risen from $36.3 million to $46.1 million, requiring cuts to sustainability measures and a pivot to cheaper materials. Data has also come to light that casts doubt on the need for such a large and expensive project, paid for primarily with public taxpayer dollars.

The proposed Humanities Center which includes a climate-controlled Special Collections facility and related spaces has been estimated to represent 10% of the total project at a cost of $4.6 million. The Jones Library grant application reports 600 visits per year to the current Special Collections room, or fewer than 2 per day.

The library building already has a well-functioning art gallery and a large meeting room seating 100 and equipped with a galley kitchen, calling into question why these need to be rebuilt with NEH funding.

The Humanities Center will include dedicated exhibit space for five 600-pound marble tablets with the names of Amherst's Civil War veterans inscribed. It would be more appropriate to build an outdoor display for these war memorials as is typically done in other communities, allowing the tablets to be viewed at any time of day, seven days a week, including holidays when the library is closed.

I personally do not object to all-gender restrooms but question the cost justification of transitioning from existing gender-specific restrooms to gender-neutral facilities in the Humanities Center.

The Jones Library Humanities Center will have no free on-site public parking. This will hinder access to the new space.

The NEH grant application describes the current library as "an impenetrable warren of nooks and crannies." However, in a 2015 patron survey, 79% of respondents reported being "extremely likely" to recommend the Jones Library. The emphasis was on books. 48% reported attending library programs "not at all often."

The NEH grant would enable an overall 15,000 sq. ft. expansion of the library that is vastly oversized. The Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC) reports that Amherst has a library population of 40,059, which is 39th largest in the state. The current Jones Library is 48,000 sq. ft. in size making it the 24th largest library in the state. Adding 15,000 sq. ft. will create the 9th largest public library in Massachusetts.

Moreover, Amherst's population is conservatively estimated to include 23,000 students who attend the University of Massachusetts, Amherst College and Hampshire College. All three of these institutions have large campus libraries used by students. The Town of Amherst also supports two branch libraries and five public school libraries.

Not pointed out in the NEH grant application is the dramatic decline in annual visits to the Jones Library over the past two decades. The MBLC reports annual attendance was 400,000 in 2006. By 2024 visits had fallen to 163,558, a decline of 59%, and considerably less than the attendance figure of 227,291 reported in the NEH grant application.

The Jones Library is privately owned by the 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation, Jones Library, Inc. Its construction in 1928 was made possible by a bequest from Samuel Minot Jones. Before this proposed $46.1 million project, building improvements were largely funded by private donations, not public taxpayer dollars. In addition to $2.1 million in federal funds, this project will consume $16 million in state tax dollars and at least $15.8 million in local property tax revenues. At the same time, Amherst is being forced to lay off dozens of teachers due to budget constraints, struggle with a 42-mile backlog of road repairs, and postpone long-planned replacements of a 1930 central fire station and 1917 Department of Public Works facility.

Due to requirements of the award of a restrictive $15.6 million construction grant from the MBLC, the project may not be scaled down to be more right-sized and affordable. Many flaws in the administration of this grant have been described in a report submitted by the Amherst Historic Preservation Coalition to the Massachusetts Office of the Inspector General in December 2024. The report, titled "Waste, Fraud and Abuse in the Massachusetts Public Library Construction Program-Supported Jones Library Renovation-expansion Project" can be viewed at https://www.amherstma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/76647/Jeff-Lee---Waste-Fraud-and-Abuse-in-MPLCP-supported-Jones-Library-Renovation-expansion?bidId=.

Jones Library fundraising required for the grant match has slowed to a trickle. $1129 in pledges was raised in February and $1605 in March. The Library Capital Campaign's promised contribution toward project expenses remains $8,300,000 short.

The required Section 106 MOA to address adverse effects to the Jones Library which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places omits several recommendations from the Massachusetts Historical Commission, such as reusing four thousand board feet of rare Philippine mahogany millwork that is proposed to be ripped out.

The NEH grant will contribute toward the wasteful demolition of a fully accessible 15,000 sq. ft. addition to the library built with state government support in 1993.

The extent of community objection to the Jones Library renovation-expansion is demonstrated in the Section 106 public comments compiled by the Town at https://www.amherstma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/76509/Public-Comment---Jones-Library-Building-Project-2122025?bidId=.

An Environmental Assessment required by HUD which is overseeing the project's NEPA review is in the midst of a public comment period that cannot be completed until May 13 at the earliest. Yet Amherst Town Manager Paul Bockelman has announced his intention to sign a construction contract before April 28, contrary to HUD regulations.

The NEH award letter describes the $1 million Jones Library Humanities Center infrastructure grant as the largest of the 2023 grant round. Directing such a significant award to such a flawed and excessive project is a poor use of taxpayer funds.

To be fully candid, I do not support indiscriminate cancellation of NEH grants, and I have found NEH staff to be responsive and professional in answering my questions.

However, I urge the cancellation of NEH Grant CHA-292057 Jones Library Humanities Center. It has been based on incomplete information, lacks cost-justification, contributes to the damage of a historical landmark, squeezes out more important spending priorities, and drives a larger and more costly project that will unduly require close to $50 million in federal, state and local public funds.

If the decision is made to cancel this grant, please notify the Town of Amherst and the Amherst public as soon as possible. The Amherst Town Manager has publicly stated that "We have been advised that the NEH grant agreement is being processed and will be released soon." He has used this assertion to argue the financial viability of the library expansion project and defend his intention to sign a construction contract despite serious cost uncertainties remaining.

The potential of a hasty financial commitment without essential funding in place is of great concern to Amherst taxpayers.

Sincerely,

Jeff Lee
Amherst, MA