

FINAL REPORT
MERIDEN LIBRARY ADA STUDY COMMITTEE
June 25, 2013

(Summary)

Committee Charge, Members, Activities

The Committee's charge (full text attached) was to examine the need for ADA compliance at the Meriden Library; seek any funds needed for the Committee's study in time for action at the Town Meeting in March, 2013; figure out a range of ADA-compliance options and their pros, cons, and costs; and complete this by December 31, 2013.

Committee members were Brad Atwater, Judy Hallam, Bob Kline, Amy Lappin, and Rod Wendt (Chair).

In our 6 months of work, we had 6 meetings. Minutes of each are included with this Final Report. Our work included the following:

1. *Seeking a clear understanding of the legal landscape*, what Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act REQUIRES the Town of Plainfield to do with respect to accessibility to public facilities generally, and the Meriden Library specifically. This involved significant contact with the Governor's Council on Disabilities, as well as the Disabilities Rights Center, and in the end did NOT produce a "black & white" legal framework but rather one of "gray".
2. *Developing an assessment of where Meriden Library stands* in terms of meeting the ADA requirements for full access to all services and programs. We do not meet the standard.
3. *Developing very rough cost estimates of 4 directions* toward ADA compliance, ranging from small (a ramp) to very big (a new building), so that we understood the broad parameters of these directions before investing significant time in any of them. This was done at no charge by John Brown of Estes & Gallup, and quickly showed us that some directions made no sense, while others might be pursued.
4. *Discerning the best way forward for the Town of Plainfield in a "gray" legal setting with some significant costs for full ADA compliance.*

Conclusions

1. **Full ADA access to the Meriden Library requires all patrons being able to access all offerings of the library, either by physical access ("I can get to it myself") or staff access ("staff can get to it for me"). This includes all media (books, tapes, etc.) and programs (meetings, etc.)** Meriden Library falls far short on "I can get to it myself" physical access. The upper floor can only be reached by climbing the outside front entry stairs. Once inside, the lower floor requires descent down a steep, twisting staircase. The bathroom is not large enough for a wheelchair. The Meriden Library does the best it can on "staff can get to it for me" access, with very willing staff that delivers books to homes or to cars waiting outside. Programs are also, whenever possible, offered in physically accessible spaces so that all might participate.
2. **The legal landscape for how we get to full ADA physical access compliance for Meriden Library, and the risks along the way, is gray rather than black & white.** We received two legal/expert opinions that said different things. The more conservative said the moment we do ANYTHING to the Meriden Library, inside or outside, we are committing ourselves to do EVERYTHING to make it fully accessible – access to both floors and an ADA-accessible bathroom. The more flexible said we can add a ramp on the outside to provide access to the upper level WITHOUT triggering the requirement for complete access to everything, BUT the moment we begin interior alterations those requirements WOULD be triggered. However, we see a safety route here -- if we do "partial compliance" now, but are also planning in earnest for "full compliance" in the future, that provides significant legal defense against not being in full compliance with our first step.

Importantly, there are no “ADA Police” who come swooping down on unsuspecting Towns in violation. Rather, someone has to lodge a complaint that Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act is not being adhered to, and then an investigation is undertaken.

3. **Having a fully ADA-accessible library (Philip Read Memorial Library, PRML) on the other side of the Town of Plainfield is either helpful or limiting, and the legal opinions differ on which it is.** The more conservative legal opinion said that if Meriden is open hours that PRML is not, then patrons without disabilities have more access (PRML hours + Meriden hours) than those with disabilities (PRML hours only), which is a problem. And, if programs offered in inaccessible Meriden are not identical to those offered in accessible PRML, that is another problem. The more flexible legal opinion said that having a fully accessible library across town significantly reduces the pressure to make Meriden Library ADA-accessible in general.
4. **Full ADA accessibility for the Meriden Library will be costly to achieve in any way that makes sense.** The options considered are detailed under “Findings” below. The only reasonable ways to achieve full access are either to add on the back of the existing library with full access features including an elevator (a \$400,000 to \$500,000 project), or build a new fully-accessible library facility somewhere else in Meriden (a \$800,000 to \$1,250,000 project). Lesser projects (like adding an access ramp and inside elevator to the current building, \$250,000) have flaws that make them undesirable.

Recommendations

1. **On balance, we believe the best approach to improving Meriden Library access by people with disabilities -- while balancing reasonable legal risk and reasonable fiscal responsibility -- is to put up a simple ramp providing simple access to the upper level NOW, while studying full-access solutions in a broader, town-wide, multipurpose usage context.** There was a strong desire on the Committee to be able to do SOMETHING to improve access for patrons in the short term, even if it stopped short of full ADA compliance. This was underscored by the realization that FULL compliance solutions were very costly, and would take a long time to realize – if ever. This was further complicated by the sense that any major Town construction of new or renovated buildings should consider ALL the needs of the Town, not just the needs of the Meriden Library. We believe building something that could be used by a variety of Town people for a variety of purposes makes more sense than a library-specific construction project, especially when the price tag is in the \$400,000 to \$1,250,000 range.
2. **The “simple ramp” portion of our recommendation will provide only partial access (in a legal ADA context), but will make access easier for many people and increase the use of the Meriden Library while we figure out a broader, longer-term solution.** For the person in a wheelchair, a simple ramp would allow them to get inside the library, talk to the library staff, request books or other media, and participate in community meetings IF they were on the upper level. Importantly, others who do not have a “disability” but find it difficult to access the library via the front steps (especially seniors with canes or walkers) would also benefit from a simple ramp access.
3. **The “simple ramp” could become a Plainfield community project, and we believe be done within the existing reserves in the Town’s ADA Access fund.** While the Committee received estimates for a permanent institutional grade concrete ramp with significant alterations to the front access to the library (\$40,000 to \$50,000), we did not ask for estimates for a simpler, shorter-life ramp that could serve until a broader, more comprehensive solution could be determined. However, we believe that a simpler ramp, if designed by people within the Town of Plainfield community, and constructed with volunteer help, could easily be done within the \$26,500 currently in the Town’s ADA Access Fund. At Town Meeting in March 2013, a woman urged the Town to consider a volunteer project to build such a ramp. Design and materials specifications would require further work, but we urge the Town to use local (ideally volunteer) design talent and consider both pressure-treated wood and synthetic materials (such as Trex or Azek) for the ramp.
4. **The “study full access solutions” portion of our recommendation should involve a broader, more comprehensive analysis of the Town’s facility needs, because we believe that major expenditures on new construction or renovation best serve the community when they look at ALL the**

community needs, not just the needs of one entity (the Meriden Library). Having multiple functions in a single space could be more efficient all the way around, as common needs (restrooms, meeting space, etc.) could be shared and it is fewer buildings to maintain. While we clearly have not studied Town needs (beyond the Meriden Library accessibility needs), the following have come up in conversations over the months:

- a. The Meriden Town Offices need energy efficient upgrades – maybe a new space would work better.
 - b. The Police Station is quite small and quirky, maybe another space would work better.
 - c. The Post Office wants to move away from Main Street, Meriden. Maybe they could be a tenant.
 - d. Seniors like a place to meet. A Senior Center would be wonderful.
 - e. A central place to deliver social services – like community nursing – would be great.
 - f. Community meeting space is limited. Currently we use the Plainfield School or churches for larger community meetings.
 - g. And, of course, the desire to make the Meriden Library fully ADA-accessible.
5. **Studying the broader Town facility needs should involve a broader committee and have a broader charge than the committee assembled to investigate the ADA accessibility needs of the Meriden Library.** The charge should involve looking at the total Town facility needs, including Town offices, Plainfield School, the needs of seniors, the needs for access to social services, and possibly others. The committee chosen should reflect the breadth of the needs being considered. Some members of the Meriden Library ADA Accessibility Committee might be willing to serve on such a broader committee, although each would have to be approached.

Respectfully submitted,

Rod Wendt, Chair