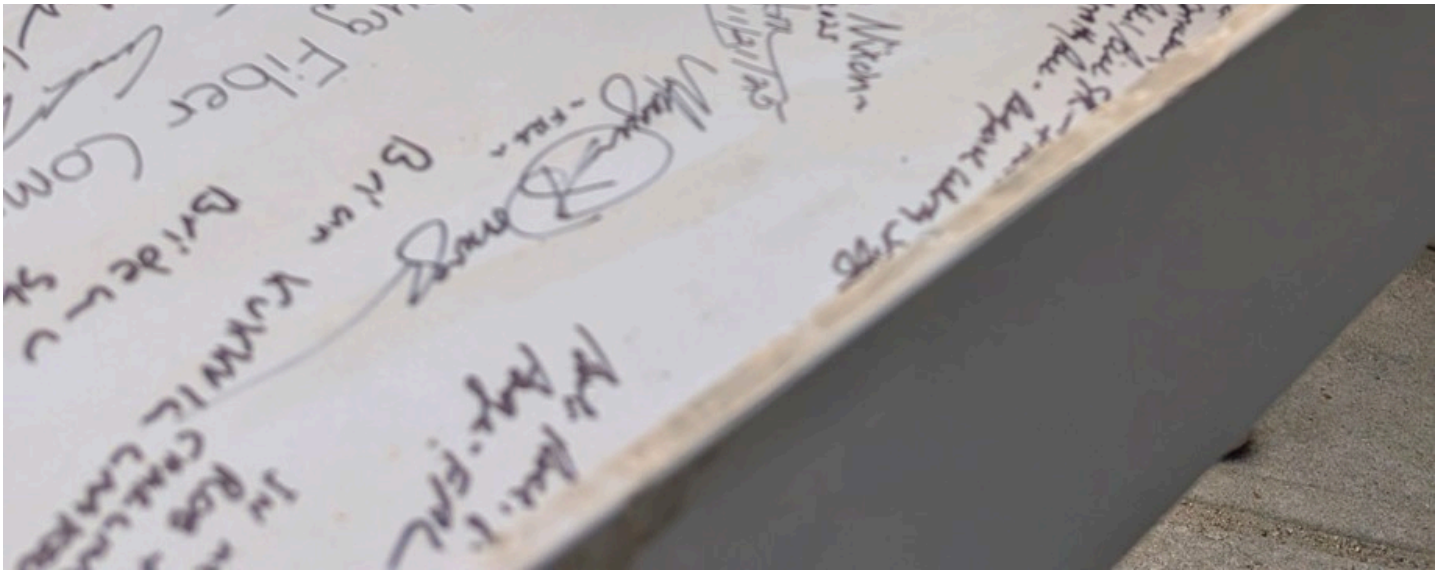


DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

‘A truly tangible moment of progress’

Signed steel beam placed in Fitchburg Library under construction





Fitchburg Public Library Director Deb Hinkle signs the steel beam that was put into place on Nov. 21 at the new library construction site. DANIELLE RAY — SENTINEL & ENTERPRISE



Two young Fitchburg Public Library patrons and their family members watched as steel beams were put into place on Nov. 21, part of the library renovation project that is slated to be completed by the end of next year. DANIELLE RAY — SENTINEL & ENTERPRISE

BY DANIELLE RAY

DRAY@SENTINELANDENTERPRISE.COM

FITCHBURG >> Friday's momentous occasion in the city marked another chapter in the library renovation project.

State and local officials, members of the library project's campaign committee, members of the business community and others were invited to sign a steel beam that was then lifted by a crane and put solidly into place at the construction site of the new library that is scheduled to be completed next year.

"The beam raising and topping-off ceremony represents a truly tangible moment of progress for the entire library community," Fitchburg Public Library Director Deb Hinkle said of the Nov. 21 event. "It highlights the teamwork, dedication, and collaboration that have brought the project to this point, from the construction crew to the library staff. It was a day to honor everyone's commitment to this vital community project." NewVue Communities Executive Director Marc Dohan praised Hinkle, saying "you're doing this right giving people a lot of time to sign it," and the vibe was celebratory as people wrote messages of congratulations and such on the beam with sharpies. Dozens of steel beams, most of which were already in place by Friday, were dropped off on Monday and the construction crew should be wrapping up that section of the project this week.

"We're making headway and we've been making a lot of progress," said Luis Rodriguez of Collier Project Leaders, the project manager for the \$40 million library renovation project who was also involved with the Crocker Elementary School renovation project that was finished earlier this year.

The library moved to its temporary location at 166 Boulder Dr. in October of 2023, a groundbreaking for the new library took place in October of last year, and the timeline for it opening to the public is by the end of 2026. Once completed the 610 Main St. library will be approximately 55,430 square feet in size, consisting of the renovation of the existing 29,700-square-foot Wallace Building and the addition of a new 25,730-square-foot youth library wing.

The new, state-of-the-art library will dramatically improve the space for children to learn and the community to engage, create, and study while offering a world of learning for all.

“The renovated and expanded facility will give staff the space and resources needed to meet the community’s growing expectations for expanded programs and services,” Hinkle said. “Libraries have evolved from book repositories into community hubs, and this new facility will empower staff to offer what patrons, community partners, and colleagues are asking for — welcoming spaces to gather, learn, and connect.”

After the beam was signed, Fitchburg Public Library Board of Trustees Chair Matthew Bruun welcomed everyone to the topping off ceremony and recognized the key players who made the library project possible, including State Sen. Cronin, State Rep. Mike Kushmerek, Mayor Sam Squailia and the city, fellow trustees and steering committee members, and others involved.

“There is a spirit of collaboration among our leaders,” Bruun said.

Squailia spoke about the library being “a true community center in the heart of the city” and thanked everyone there for “helping us bookmark this day,” noting “our names will be added into Fitchburg’s story.”

“Your work has taken the plans off the page and into the field,” she said to those gathered, adding that the ongoing revitalization of the overall downtown area that includes the new library is “people first infrastructure...building foundations for the next generations.”

Cronin echoed her sentiments, saying the library project has been “a true public and private partnership” and it represents all the growth the city has seen in recent years.

“This is not our last beam raising, this is not our last groundbreaking. There is momentum that truly cannot be stopped,” he said. “Let’s keep the progress going.”

Bruun then introduced Kushmerek, who he said is “another close friend of this project” who along with Cronin was able to secure a large chunk of state funding for it. Kushmerek shared that his mother would frequently take them to the library in his hometown of Saugus and read to them for hours.

“Those are some of the best memories,” he said.

He called the library project “an exciting point in our downtown’s future” and said it will be “a building for all people.”

Elizabeth Warren’s Regional Director Laura Byman said her mother has been a public-school librarian for decades before reading a congratulatory letter from the senator that said the library is a “center for knowledge and culture.”

Before the beam was raised, Bruun spoke about the various funding sources for the library building project that includes the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners through the Massachusetts Public Library Construction Program, a combination of the city’s

American Rescue Plan Act funds and money from the city, state funds, and generous donations made through the OWL Capital Campaign, which aims to raise \$3.5 million for the project.

“The campaign is designed to allow for the entire community to take part,” he said before announcing that the Fitchburg Public Library Board of Trustees was pledging \$1 million towards the “transformative project.”

Hinkle conveyed that thanks to the “generous contributions from individuals, organizations, and foundations, the OWL campaign has now surpassed the halfway point toward its fundraising goal” and as their community giving program Legacy of Learning that is supported by the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts gains momentum, she is “especially moved by the inscriptions and messages donors submit.”

“Their words are a powerful reminder of the essential role public libraries play in bringing communities together.”