



Legislation Text

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Authorizing the Committee on Parks, Recreation & Cultural Affairs to hold hearings regarding the governance of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

WHEREAS, The Free Library of Philadelphia is the 13th-largest public library system in the United States and is uniquely governed by both an independent City agency managed by its own board of trustees and a separate nonprofit organization, The Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation, which has a board of directors; and

WHEREAS, Composed of the Parkway Central Library, three large regional libraries, 49 neighborhood libraries, community Hot Spots, the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, the Regional Research and Operations Center, and the Rosenbach, the Free Library of Philadelphia system's mission is to advance literacy, guide learning, and inspire curiosity with a vision to build an enlightened community devoted to lifelong learning, which it achieves through its millions of digital and physical materials; 28,000 yearly programs and events; free public computers and Wi-Fi; and with more than 6 million in-person visits and millions more online annually, it is among the most widely used educational and cultural institutions in Philadelphia, conferring a worldwide impact; and

WHEREAS, A beloved institution borne amidst contested claims, the Free Library of Philadelphia was chartered in 1891 as "a general library which shall be free to all" through efforts led by Dr. William Pepper, who secured initial funding through a \$225,000 bequest from his wealthy uncle, George S. Pepper, but was delayed when several existing libraries claimed the bequest until courts decided the money was intended to found a new public library, but finally opened in March 1894; and

WHEREAS, To enable the Library to receive appropriations from the City, the Board of Trustees of the Free Library of Philadelphia was established by an ordinance of December 31, 1894, succeeding a group privately incorporated in 1891 under a similar name, and composed of the Mayor and the presidents of both then-extant Councils ex-officio, a member chosen by each Council, and eighteen other citizens designated by the ordinance, vacancies among whom were filled alternately by the Mayor and the remaining trustees - the Board of Trustees has continuously administered the City's system of free libraries since its creation; and

WHEREAS, The City Charter of 1951 directed that all twenty-two members be appointive, of whom eighteen are for life terms, and added the Commissioner of the Department of Recreation (now reorganized as the Department of Parks and Recreation); and

WHEREAS, The Foundation is a nonprofit that exists to raise money for the library's programming, capital projects and special collections, but not for items covered by the city, such as salaries, with its own staff and board of directors, which is entirely self-perpetuating and must include at least eight members of the library board; and

WHEREAS, The Philadelphia Research Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts in 2012 issued "The Library in the City: Changing Demands and a Challenging Future" report, which included a section on governance that noted "a confusing governance structure" that combines the two normal models of independent city entity and nonprofit organization into a "hybrid [that] can get pretty complicated", has blurred lines of authority, and "considering that library staff and board members alike find the current structure less than optimal and agree that the institution will need to move with greater agility in the future among other things," suggested merging the Free Library and the Free Library Foundation, eliminating the two-board structure, give the new entity greater control over the library's holdings, with closer or farther yet definite relationship with the City; and

WHEREAS, The report also noted that major governance issues remained especially in light of the library's then-current strategic plan did not recommend any significant changes to the governance status quo; and

WHEREAS, The Free Library's current strategic plan also does not recommend any significant changes to its governance status quo,

but includes “promote diversity and inclusion” among its strategic goals, which are measured as diversity & inclusion training for all staff and identifying five new ideas from its “Diversity Committees” according to its FY20 Dashboard (the most recent available on its website); and

WHEREAS, This Council, including the Chair of the Committee on Parks and Recreation, raised concerns during Fiscal Year ‘20 budget hearings about equity and inclusion in management of the Free Library as it related to staff and the public; and

WHEREAS, A standing pattern of racial inequity at the Free Library, including white employees being paid 25% more, social justice projects being derailed, getting reported to a supervisor for talking about current events, and personal insults, among other things, have led its Black employees to call for justice, including a group of employees organizing themselves as the Concerned Black Workers of the Free Library of Philadelphia, or CBWFLP, who in late June published an open letter calling on Library leadership to address various staffing and protocol inequities linked to the coronavirus pandemic and the Movement for Black Lives, and stating that they would not return to in-person work until their demands were met, which spurred six prominent authors to cancel scheduled Free Library events; and

WHEREAS, After AFSCME Local 2187, which represents Free Library workers, petitioned for her termination, the Philadelphia Free Library President and Director resigned in July after 12 years of leading the City literary institution by submitting a letter of resignation to the chairs of the library’s board of trustees and board of directors after; and

WHEREAS, After concerns over life time board tenure and responses to community and staff calls for equity, and at a time of transition for the Free Library, consideration of its governance structure is timely; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That Council does hereby authorize the Committee on Parks, Recreation & Cultural Affairs to hold hearings regarding the governance of the Free Library of Philadelphia.