Darien Library: We Need to Pay Our Librarians Better

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Darien Library wants to increase the salaries of its librarians by 5 percent across the board this year and keep on increasing them at a rate higher than inflation next year, the organization's director told the Board of Finance on Tuesday.

The reason: Darien Library isn't paying salaries that nearby libraries are offering, and it's making it difficult to recruit and retain librarians.

"We're having difficulty in attracting people" to take librarian jobs at Darien Library, Director Alan Gray told the board.

Darien pays librarians a typical starting wage of $52,650 for someone who just graduated with a degree in master of library science. That compares to $60,369 for Greenwich Library and $63,861 in Westport, according to a library budget document. New Canaan Library's starting wage is the same as Darien, and in Norwalk, it's $69,997. New York Public Library is also hiring librarians at a salary competitive with Darien, he said.

The town agreed to a similar wage increase last year for the same reason, and the plan is to increase wages for three years. Darien Library's wages won't catch up to those paid by nearby towns any time soon, even with the three years of increases, Gray said, but it's a start.

The library has long been recognized by town officials who look over its budget as "the gold standard" in operating efficiently, as board member Bruce Orr put it. Orr was chairman of the Representative Town Meeting's Finance and Budget Committee before he joined the Board of Finance.

The library is asking for a $101,919 increase increase in the money it gets from the town this year. That would bring the budget to $3,685,375, a 2.8 percent increase over the current fiscal year. A large part of the increase is for higher salaries, and the library wants to hire a full-time reference librarian.

The cost of hiring another reference librarian would be partly offset by decreasing staffing for two part-time positions elsewhere, Gray said. The part time positions only amount to about 70 percent of the workload of a full-time position, and health insurance and other benefit costs would also increase spending for the town, he said.

The library would like to hire still another reference librarian in the future, bringing up the number to four, Gray said, but this increase in staff would help for now. The level of staffing at the library has barely changed since the library moved into its present building, which resulted in a big increase in the public's use of the library, including the reference desk, he said.

The town's annual budget for the library pays for part of the library's costs, with the rest picked up by Friends of the Darien Library, an organization of volunteers that also raises funds.

Asked by Finance Board member James McLaughlin whether he thinks the 5 percent increases will allow the library to retain staff, Gray replied, "I honestly don't know," but there was only so much the library could do in the short term.

"But the longer we can keep people, the larger return the town gets" for the money it spends on salaries, he said. "What I can say is it will be easier to retain staff. With the 5 percent increase we're still going to be way behind our peers, and our peers know where to look when they want to find a great librarian."

Asked what kind of turnover the library has had in recent years, Gray said, "We've lost four mid-level librarians in the last three years, not counting one who left for reasons not related to this."

Through an agreement going back to the early 1960s between the town government and the voluntary support organization, Friends of the Darien Library, the town has paid ongoing operations costs for library services, including salaries and utilities, and the organization has picked up the tab for capital costs.

Originally, capital costs largely meant books, but in recent years that commitment expanded to a new building, DVDs, audio recordings, computers and all the various types of equipment the library offers to the public or uses behind the scenes.

One way that the Friends of the Darien Library has helped to retain staff is by paying for librarians' attendance at out-of-state library conferences, Gray said. The town only pays for attendance at conferences in state.

"That's how the Friends have supported us" in helping to attract and retain good librarians, Gray said. The staff may not have as high a salary as other libraries pay, but they have opportunities to go to professional conferences elsewhere.