

24 June 2024

Johannesburg Central Library Closure – Handover of Petition and Meeting with MMC

The Johannesburg Heritage Foundation (JHF) in collaboration with the Johannesburg Crisis Alliance (JCA) recently held a protest action outside the Johannesburg City Library (JCL) to petition against the closure of this valuable facility since 24 May 2021.

It was a very successful event attended by a diverse cross-section of Joburgers. Speakers included: Neeshan Balton from the JCA; David Fleminger, JHF Chair; Rethabile Ratsomo, Anti-Racism Manager at the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, academic and historian Prof Achille Mbembe, Flo Bird, Founder and Life President of the JHF, and several authors who joined our ‘Petition in a Book’ campaign.

In total, our petition to re-open the JCL got over 900 signatures (both physical and on-line). We sincerely thank everyone who participated in this important public action. Your on-going support is most important and much appreciated.

Since the protest, there have been several developments:

As per our demand that the authorities issue a response within 7 days, a media statement was released by the City of Joburg (COJ) on the 20th of May recognising our concerns about the JCL and stating that budget would be allocated for the library in the upcoming financial year. It further specified that contractors are working on the soldering and waterproofing of external gutters, with further work on ‘much-needed’ compliance issues to commence from July 2024. The release was issued in the name of COJ Member of the Mayoral Committee for Community Development, Cllr L Magwentshu.

A further release was issued on 24 May 2024 stating that a meeting had been held with various COJ entities to discuss the JCL. Key updates included: compliance work has been stalled due to budgetary constraints. Emergency Management Services (EMS) could not issue a partial fire clearance certificate as this needs to be ‘issued for the actual stand’. And an ‘integrated, interdepartmental Committee has been established to oversee the project planning and implementation. Bi-weekly meetings will be held to monitor progress until the project is completed.’

Following these two media releases (neither of which were sent directly to the JHF or JCA), we approached MMC Magwentshu to officially hand over the petition at an in-person meeting. This meeting took place at the MMC’s office on the 12th of June, 2024.

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It was a very positive and constructive engagement, with a free and honest exchange of ideas. We are grateful to the MMC for making himself and several members of his team available for our meeting. We look forward to working together with the MMC and his team in the future.

A number of significant points were raised in the meeting:

- It was clarified that the library was originally closed on the instructions of the Emergency Management Services (EMS) due to non-compliance with fire regulations. This begs the question: what has been done to bring the fire control and HVAC systems up to code over the last few years? We acknowledge the claimed ‘budgetary restraints’ but thus far, we have only seen repairs being done on the gutters and the roof (which are necessary but of secondary importance and not preventing the library from being re-opened). Preliminary site reports from our experts indicate that to date there has been considerable expenditure with little to show (for example, three different contractors were paid to repair a problematic section of the roof but it still continues to leak). Although it is our intention to look forwards rather than back, there are questions here that need to be asked.
- In general, we expressed our opinion that the performance of the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) as the implementing agency has been opaque and sub-standard. They have failed to live up to their mandate of care and as the ‘client’ the MMC was encouraged to hold the JDA accountable and put pressure on its officials to do their jobs more effectively and efficiently.
- Despite promises to provide regular updates to the public and stakeholders, these have not been forthcoming. For example, we have no feedback from the bi-weekly JCL committee meetings mentioned above. It has been resolved that the JHF will be added to the official stakeholders’ mailing list to ensure more transparent communications.
- After consulting with the various city entities, Stanley Mlambo, Director of Capital Projects in the Department of Community Development, has determined that the timeline for re-opening is still 10 months after the tender is awarded. Considering that the terms of the tender has not yet been formulated and distributed, this means the JCL will remain closed for at least another year or two. Upon hearing this, the MMC expressed his concern that such an extended closure was unacceptable and the library should be re-opened by the end of 2024. Yunus Chamda, from the JCA, thanked the MMC for displaying an appropriate sense of urgency.

Upon completion of the meeting with the MMC, we insisted that JDA, as the implementing agency, must provide a detailed schedule of works with specific timelines that can be monitored by the Department of Community Development and other stakeholders. We also expect to be invited to any Stakeholder Forum meetings and expect reports from the bi-weekly committee meetings so we can track expenditure (past and present) and monitor progress.

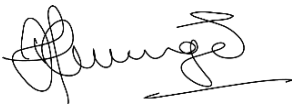
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Once we have received the JDA's timeline and other supporting material, we will make a determination on the best way to move forward and a briefing with all our JCL stakeholders will be held. We once again note with thanks the broad-based support that we have received from civil society, the media and the public. Clearly, public libraries are a precious communal resource and we are gratified that so many people have raised their voices in defence of the JCL.

The JHF and JCA remains committed to working with the Department of Community Development and associated agencies to get the Johannesburg City Library re-opened as soon as possible.

With thanks



David Fleminger – Chairperson, Johannesburg Heritage Foundation