

Library trustees fire director

Farmer says he leaves with no regrets

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS

Staff

Three years after taking the helm of the Smyth County Public Library, Robb Farmer was fired Thursday evening by the institution's board of trustees.

The move came after several months of growing tension between the library and the county Board of Supervisors.

The motion to terminate Farmer was not unanimous. The 4-2 move was opposed



Farmer

by trustees Iris Worley, the only currently long-serving trustee, and Jim Payne.

The fracture between the supervisors and Farmer took a public turn in June when the county published its proposed 2020-21 budget and included an allocation of \$0 for the library. That move caught the attention of numerous library supporters who protested. Supervisors said they did so because they'd been requesting certain financial documents from the library for months but had not received them.

Farmer responded by posting a link to Facebook with 27 different documents he had sent to the county.

That post didn't sit well with the library's trustees, who all but one have been appointed by the board of supervisors in the last few months. Two of the six trustees who voted Thursday were attending their first meeting.

At their June meeting, the trustees reprimanded Farmer and put him on a 30-day probationary period without pay and gave him a list of assignments to complete prior to Thursday's meeting.

A copy of the letter sent to Farmer by the trustees was obtained by the News & Messenger and in part chastised Farmer for his public Facebook post. The letter said, "The post was seen and commented on by many of the public and the County Board

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of Supervisors and Administrator were made to be seen in a very negative light. This is unacceptable and unprofessional and damages the relationship of the Library with the County leaders. The post and the comments have been retained for FOIA purposes but have been removed by demand of the Library Board.”

The letter went on to direct Farmer to “refrain from making negative comments about any of the professional people he interacts with for Library purposes.”

Among Farmer’s assignments was a letter to the trustees, in which he said he was “directed to apologize to the Board of Library Trustees for my three alleged transactions.”

The first incident, according to the letter, was raising his voice to an employee for which Farmer said he had already done so multiple times in private and in public.” In an interview Friday, Farmer said, in a loud voice he asked an employee “In what world do you work?” and then immediately apologized so that everyone who heard the exchange also heard the apology.

The second point was “failing to inform the Board... about a very minor collision between my personal vehicle and the Library van that involved only property.”

The third issue Farmer called problematic.

“Should I apologize for my Facebook post on June 15th, or for any resulting public comment arising from it, I would sacrifice my own honesty, because I have no regrets at all about the post. There is no job description for my position. Unless I have a specific directive from the Board of Trustees, I serve this library and its patrons through reliance upon my experience, education, training, professional literature, professional development, and professional relationships. When I have none of those to fall back on, I strive to operate as a reasonably prudent library director.”

Noting his 20-year work

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Robb Farmer

Former Smyth County Library Director

experience as a librarian, Farmer continued, “I do not do anything in a vacuum. I have reasons for what I do, and I do not act rashly. I seek assistance when I need it. I trust the insights of others. I traffic in information. I rely on evidence. I view everything with a lens toward potential liability.

If I am responsible for the defense of anyone or anything, I zealously represent it.”

He continued, “I am not perfect, and I have never claimed to be. I am, however, a professional deserving of respect. In my prior dealings with the Smyth County Board of Library Trustees, I have received due respect and returned it. I was not treated with respect by the majority of Board members last Thursday. We have a joint responsibility toward this library. My staff and I have diligently represented it. Most of the Library Trustees have also. For this new relationship to continue in a positive manner, respect and commitment to our duty must be there on all our parts. If that’s not what this new Board wants, it wants a figurehead, a puppet, or a scapegoat. I am none of those things. I leave it to the Board as to how they wish to proceed.”

On Friday, Farmer said, “I’m sorry they chose not to get to know me and the library before they made these moves.”

He emphasized that he has no regrets. “If you’re doing what you believe in for the right reasons, you have no regrets.”

Farmer was full of praise for his employees at the three branches and especially of how dedicated and creative they’ve been during the pandemic, introducing online Storytimes, summer reading programs and activities, and providing curbside service.

He expressed concern that none of the new trustees asked him about the staff or library operations.

Farmer is concerned about directives put in place by the trustees, including the addition of “no loitering” signs outside the Marion branch. He noted that when the library closed to the public as a result of COVID-19, it did switch on its WiFi 24/7 for citizens to use. He also noted that the library is open to all citizens, noting that some officials had complained about a homeless man’s use of the institution.

The 52-year-old Farmer isn’t sure what he’ll do next. He acknowledges that he knew controversy swirled around the library when he applied for the job. Family even asked him if he was sure he wanted to get involved with the library system, which was then hiring a new director after its previous one retired amid a series of questions and investigations about its operations.

At the time of his hiring, Farmer said he saw that citizens cared about the library system, that they respected it as an important community institution. “That sold it for me,” he said.

Moving from Sitka, Alaska, Farmer was returning to the library that helped shape him as a child. Friday, he said, “I came to help the library I started out at age 5.”

The library trustees did not announce an interim director or plans for hiring a new director Thursday. The library staff does not include an assistant director.

While confident in the staff, Farmer expressed concerns about reports due to the state library and a federal grant.

On his last day, Farmer helped with curbside service in Chilhowie and with training a new employee, who he said has strong librarian skills. “I was doing the work we do to help people,” he said.

“I will miss helping people,” he concluded.