

Balcony Closing

The Trustees of the Concord Free Public Library Corporation have required that balcony access be limited to Library Staff. In response to questions that have been put to the Library staff, the Trustees are providing the following background information concerning this action.

When the Main Library was renovated, applicable regulations required that public access areas of the building be made handicap accessible. Extensive actions were taken to accomplish this consistent with retaining the historic elements of the building. These actions, among many others, included (a) upgrading the main elevator and moving it from the center of the building to its new location off the Sudbury Road main entrance, (b) adding an additional elevator to give access to the art gallery, (c) building a new ramp at the Library main entrance on Sudbury Road as well as installation of automatic doors at this entrance and (d) widening aisles between book cases and providing handicap accessible lavatories.

However, the rotunda balconies presented an architectural and engineering challenge. Because of the design and structural limitations of the balconies, to make them accessible and bringing them up to code requirements, in the building architect's judgment, would have required balcony removal followed by a complete rebuild and redesign to make them wider and to eliminate steps. In the building committee's view, quite apart from the significant cost involved, this would have materially changed the signature historic look of the rotunda and was deemed unacceptable and inconsistent with the Trustees' stewardship obligations to the Library.

Accordingly, the rotunda balconies were allowed to remain non-compliant with accessibility requirements and the balcony railings were maintained at their historic lower height rather than at the current higher code height. All public areas of the Library are required to be handicapped accessible by the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board ("MAAB") Regulations (521 CMR Chapter 12 Educational Facilities), which apply to libraries. Because the balconies are non-compliant, it was viewed necessary to close the balconies to public use.

Consistent with this requirement, and as part of the renovations, new iron gates designed in keeping with the architecture of the balcony were constructed and installed at the entrances to the second floor balcony from the art gallery and the second floor stacks. The entrance door to the third floor balcony was secured. The gates to the second floor balcony were not secured to allow for emergency egress from the art gallery.

Concurrent with the Library reopening, signs were initially placed on the new gates to the second floor balcony asking patrons to seek help from staff for books located there. These signs were not maintained and failed of their intended purpose and for this the Trustees take full responsibility.

Recently the Trustees of the Library Corporation were reminded of the MAAB requirements and determined to take compliance steps which include notice to patrons that public access to the second floor balcony is prohibited. The staff is also relocating many of the materials from balcony shelves to more accessible sections of the Library. To the extent that materials required by patrons remain on the balcony shelves, members of the Library staff will continue to be available and eager to assist patrons in retrieving items from the balcony areas.

The Trustees' action is motivated by the desire to comply with applicable accessibility regulations and to provide for the safety of its patrons while at the same time providing alternate means to make available the Library collections. We understand that this change is unwelcome to some and regret any inconvenience it may pose. The Trustees ask for your understanding and cooperation.

Trustees of the Concord Free Public Library Corporation