

*After directors clash with the board
and white librarians win a discrimination suit,
signs of progress may be overshadowed*

Can Atlanta-Fulton PL Emerge from Turmoil?

By Norman Oder

IF THE WORK PROCEEDS on schedule—and some doubts remained in early May—the green-sheathed fencing around the main entrance to the Central Library of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library (AFPL) will be gone when the American Library Association (ALA) annual conference begins this month in Atlanta.

Still, a revamped entrance plaza and an improved interior (notably new carpeting and new computer centers) can't obscure the enormous turmoil at the library in recent years. The litany includes:

- two directors (Julie Hunter and interim head Ella Yates) leaving in 1998, after blasting the 17-member board for micromanaging;
- tight budgets fostering racially tinged board disputes over resource allocations in a county with lopsided growth and disparate library needs;
- and, in January, a \$23.4 million reverse discrimination lawsuit won by eight white librarians who were preemptorily transferred from jobs at Central, allegedly at the instigation of black board members.

Nevertheless, asserts Mary Kaye Hooker, the director since August 1999, "We're doing very well." In an interview in late April, she cited the library's belated move last year to graphic Internet access, a circulation increase of six percent last year, many more computers, and new professionalism in formerly open positions like collection development and human resources. Board Chair Clinton Johnson praises both Hooker

and her deputy, Carolyn Garnes.

Then again, Hooker (who is white) was liable—along with three black board members but not the system as a whole—in a potentially costly lawsuit. (The county would have to pay.) While the verdict and amount of the judgment—two-thirds of which is punitive damages—are under appeal, the lawsuit provides a window into a library in painful transition, ventilating questions of board influence, cronyism, retaliation, and the proper way to change service.

Open hostility

Criticism of AFPL is gathered at the web site afplwatch.com, produced by anonymous dissident staffers and their allies (the number is unclear). Linked from it is an online petition, full of harsh comments, calling for a smaller library board. Signatories include several former board members, the last two system directors, and several recently retired staffers.

Hooker (and to some extent Garnes) is disliked by dissidents for heavy-handed management. As if validating those concerns, AFPL's chief technology officer and third-ranking staffer—who was lauded by a board member at the April board meeting—announced

his resignation in early May. "It was a culmination of unpleasant conditions," says Ted Koppel. He left just as the library was completing an RFP for a much-needed new automated system.

History meets politics

The turmoil is rooted in a mix of history, demographics, organizational structure, and politics. The Atlanta Public Library was one of the last Southern libraries to integrate service, in 1961. As the city gained a black majority, the library was a rare unifying institution. When Maynard Jackson, the city's first black mayor, sought a four-part bond issue in 1975, the voters—still mostly white, though the city population wasn't—rejected all but the bond to build a new Central Library. The library opened in 1980, its blocky concrete design one of Marcel Breuer's last works.

The city had provided contract library service to libraries in the county, but, given suburban growth, voters approved an expansion in 1983. The money would come from Fulton County, but the legislation gave extra board representation to the city. The board consists of nine members appointed by the county commission, two by the Atlanta mayor, one by the city council, and five by the board itself.

Since the mid-1980s, growth has since accelerated in mostly white north Fulton County, straining the system, which has 31 branches along with Central and the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History (AARL). Twenty-two mostly small branches are within city limits.

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AFPL Director Mary Kaye Hooker (left) and Deputy Director Carolyn Garnes on the refurbished first floor of the Central library; below, the entrance plaza under renovation



North Fulton, with nearly two-thirds as many people as the city, has four branches. They include three of the system's five regional libraries (the largest of four categories). Two were built in 1989, one in 1999.

AFPL's current budget is \$29.1 million (some \$36 per capita), up 2.7%, but in the previous three years it had shrunk slightly. And as foot traffic declined downtown, the board chipped away at staff and funding for Central—its materials budget has been cut by more than half since 1991.

The board is large and active; ex-director Hunter charged that there were so many committee meetings she couldn't do her work. The board tilts to mostly black south Fulton. Some black board members, says Michael Lomax, commissioner of Parks, Libraries and Cultural Affairs under ex-Mayor Jackson and a former library board member, have been "demagogues, interested in addressing old issues of differential service around race." Hence the atmosphere that led to the suit.

Competing perceptions

Ask about the lawsuit and you hear starkly differing views. Library officials maintain that the library has suffered little. Hooker says she's been up-front with funders: "Everybody's been sued. We've received no negative response from anybody we've worked with." Still, the largest recent grant was a \$100,000 Carnegie Foundation award that came as a result of Atlantan Ted Turner's Carnegie philanthropy medal.

Hooker and Garnes tout a 2001 user survey that shows that 97 percent

are satisfied with AFPL—a rating of three or above on a scale of one to five. However, it was not based on a statistical sample.

Other evidence suggests both dismay and progress. Until the library belatedly moved from text-based to graphic Internet access last year, users regularly complained. (AFPL missed out on initial E-rate funds, and staff and the board have alternately blamed each other.)

The library foundation—which has raised only \$2.2 million over 11 years—has been quiet for months. Chair Betty Edge says that funding sources want to see a more focused strategic plan, and the library has begun to respond. Lomax, now president of Dillard University in New Orleans but a part-time Atlanta resident, observes that AFPL has lost some crucial supporters. He was so dismayed by the board that in the mid-1990s he took his papers out of the system's Auburn Avenue library.

Meanwhile, the library's restaurant—asked to vacate in 1998 by the board, which wanted something with lower prices but never found a tenant—should reopen as a coffee bar this fall. The basement auditorium/theater—dormant for six years because of leaks—should be renovated by the ALA conference.

A changing Central

Several formerly significant departments have been downgraded at Central. Former Central head Bill Munro filed grievances saying that the transfers of veteran librarians damaged Central. Hooker testified that Munro's library was a "1960-85 model."

One department at issue was the InfoLine, which does telephone and e-mail reference. Hooker testified that automation had made reference redundant. In 18 months, she said, "We've moved from the 10,000 calls a month you heard about from the InfoLine; our web site now gets a million hits a month." Asked by *LJ* if AFPL has tracked those hits, she said no.

Once a standalone department, InfoLine has been moved twice into other departments, and half the print collection has been cut. Former department head Katharine Suttell now manages a branch but works Sundays at InfoLine. She testified that the unit had lost staff and morale, with the number of incoming phone lines cut from four to one.

Materials and branches

The library's materials allocation, at \$3.4 million, is less than 12 percent of the system's budget. (Salaries, which start at a healthy \$44,903, and fringe benefits make up a relatively high 79 percent.) In a 1999 episode library critics see as micromanagement with a racial tinge, the board reduced the allocation to the Roswell Regional Library in north Fulton by \$20,000—the amount of a state grant awarded specifically to the branch—and redistributed it to three other libraries.

Some see AFPL's complex materials formula as an effort to share system resources and refresh low circulating libraries; others see a board unwilling to support high circulating libraries in the north. Fixed costs are 40 percent, including electronic resources, systemwide reference support, and the Auburn Avenue library. That leaves 60 percent—little over \$2 million—to be divided among 32 libraries. A base budget of \$1 million is allocated according to library size. The other \$1 million goes to various adjustments: one-tenth is linked to per capita circulation and another tenth to per capita in-house use. The top four libraries circulate more than half of the total system (Central is fifth) but get less than a quarter of that \$2 million.

Hooker recognizes that the collection should be boosted. Once AFPL completes a study of its holdings and past circulation, it will try to build an endowment for materials, she says.

AFPL is behind on building branches, acknowledges Board Chair Johnson: he predicts a future bond issue after administrators analyze demographic data

and make a proposal to the board. In the past, the board has squelched talk of closing small branches within the city.

A library and its readers

Given fiscal constraints, AFPL must move toward more of a current circulating library, says Johnson, who became board chair in January 2001. There is no written policy: "To a certain extent, it's been adopted in the weeding policy and because of space."

In a county with deep socioeconomic splits, Hooker, without formal strategic planning, has reoriented AFPL toward the neediest citizens. She's improved the library's literacy efforts and says AFPL will be a model for community outreach and programming. Her 2002 budget document focuses on the library's relevance to "communities without readers." Only on the third and last page are traditional collections mentioned, under the rubric "What Else Does the Library Do?"

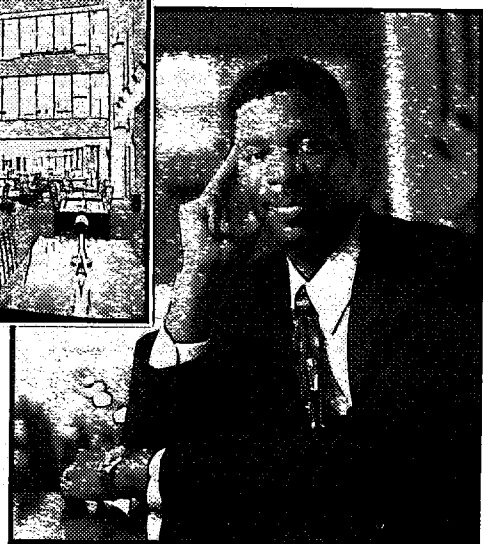
That shift seems based partly on a misread statistic about local literacy, one Hooker widely cites. The budget document declares, "In Fulton County, 53 per-

cent of the residents are at Level 1 literacy" and can't use the library. However, the source footnoted says that only 30 percent of adults—still a substantial number—are at Level 1.

Micromanaging?

As to charges of micromanaging, Johnson asserts that "we do not manage any more than is required by our state mandate to approve all personnel changes." Former board member Larry Curry, once head of the Personnel Committee, says he resigned last year in part because the board wouldn't let Hooker fire part-time workers at will.

Board minutes show Hooker had completed recruitment in 1999 for an assistant director of finance but was told by Chair William McClure not to proceed. Observes Joey Rodger, executive director of the Urban Libraries Council, "It is extremely unusual for a library board to have personnel control



Auburn Avenue Research Library interim Administrator Philip Cherry in the library's spacious reading room (inset)

over any position except the director or, once in a while, a deputy director."

Last year, books didn't arrive for nine months after the contract was awarded. Hooker cites a new county bid process and a slow-moving vendor. This

A Curious Reorganization

On May 24, 2000, AFPL Director Mary Kaye Hooker announced a reorganization ostensibly aimed at strengthening the branches, moving 28 employees (15 black and 13 white). She hadn't spoken to the employees involved nor their supervisors. (She testified that she'd lost confidence in her staff.) Sixteen staffers filed a grievance protesting the changes.

When that grievance was denied, eight white librarians sued, alleging their de facto demotions—mostly to vaguely defined jobs with little supervisory power—were made on the basis of race. Joining them was one black librarian, the former head of the staff association, who argued she'd been punished for organizing a 1998 petition, signed by half the staff, asking the board to resign.

Regarding the lawsuit, Hooker says, "You can't expect to have a major reorganization of an institution that has been moribund for about 20 years or more without some differences of opinion." The reorganization—actually just one phase—lacked a written plan. The "differences of opinion" had a paper trail.

Fair warning

Two black librarians testified for the plaintiffs. In 1999, said former Assistant Director Paulette Smith-Epps—the highest-ranking librarian before Hooker arrived that August—then Board Chair William McClure asked her to prepare a document identifying the racial and ethnic makeup of management at Central. (McClure testified that he had no recollection of such a conversation and that his relationship with Smith-Epps was difficult.) He asked her how she planned to increase the number of black managers from one. She said Central had had several black managers and that attrition would bring new staff.

In early 2000, Hooker—at McClure's direction—asked acting Human Resources Manager Debra Branton to compile a systemwide managerial list. Branton warned Hooker it would be illegal to use race or sex for personnel decisions. (Of 44 branch and central unit managers, 27 were black, 17 white, though seven of nine at Central were white. Of 18 administrators, 11 were

black, six white, and one Hispanic.)

At the subsequent board meeting, Vice Chair Mary Ward—according to board member Nancy Puckett—said there were "too many white faces in management" at Central. Ward denied this. Later, according to board minutes, Ward expressed concern about a "white-dominated administration" at Central. One incendiary charge, that McClure said there were "too many old white women" at Central, was hearsay not substantiated at trial.

Hesitancy about transfers

Hooker expressed hesitancy about the reorganization. (She'd left her previous job directing the El Paso Public Library, TX, having been the target of a workplace discrimination complaint and having filed one herself, both over Anglo-Hispanic tensions. Both have been dropped.) On April 11, 2000, according to board minutes, Hooker acknowledged "we have not really created a strategy." Two days later, Hooker forwarded the board an anonymous e-mail she'd received that included three articles about reverse discrimination suits lost by the county.

In a memo to McClure April 13, Hooker recommended that the reorgani-

year, the process was delayed a month because the board chose a different vendor from that recommended by staff; the county later reversed the decision.

AFPL's Internet filtering policy comes from the board, which decided in 1999 to filter children's terminals and, after the 2000 passage of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), to filter all usage. Did Hooker have a recommendation? "I'd have to look it up," she says.

Special influence?

Dissident staffers believe McClure swayed the board to choose Games as deputy in 2000. She was managing an area library, in AFPL's second tier, but it was in East Point, where McClure now serves on the city council. Board minutes show that several members questioned the search process—which led to only three candidates being interviewed—but McClure insisted that it worked. (Hooker was not asked for her recommendation.)

The East Point branch was the first to gain Sunday hours in 1999 and was among the first three branches to get the graphic Internet. According to docu-

mentation not go forward. A day later, she told the county attorney that the county personnel director had warned that the reorganization would likely violate county personnel policies. But McClure told Hooker to proceed, as long as she'd cleared the plan.

Hooker was warned by the county attorney to review the transfers with the personnel director. She didn't, though McClure testified Hooker had told him she'd done so. Hooker testified that the race-based lists had nothing to do with the transfers.

Watching a videotape of the board meeting, jurors saw that board members did not approve anything defined as transfers. Personnel Committee Chair Benjamin Jenkins presented a motion "to approve the new hires." Once passed, McClure declared, "The personnel transactions are approved."

Hostility and retaliation

The trial revealed intraboard hostilities. Puckett, now off the board, testified that McClure once threatened her in a parking lot after he lost a vote. Later, a white board member, Dorothy Blake, testified that Puckett had trouble seeing blacks as peers. Puckett returned to the

ments filed in the suit, in December 1999 it was 20 percent over approved system staffing standards while the AFPL overall was seven percent understaffed. Says former Assistant Director Paulette Smith-Epps, "Special board emphasis was placed on staffing at that branch."

Auburn Avenue

One admired part of AFPL is the Auburn Avenue Research Library, opened in 1994 on the impetus of former director Ron Dubberly. A few blocks from Central, at the gateway to the historic main street of black Atlanta, the building boasts handsome displays and public spaces.

The AARL, however, lags behind other research libraries, with no holdings digitized. The Harold Cruse Collection—garnered by former administrator Joseph Jordan—remains in boxes, uncataloged. The library plans to hire an archivist to "bring this collection into the 21st century," says Philip Cherry, the interim administrator.

Cherry was hired in March to assess Auburn Avenue. He says that AFPL may either rededicate the library to its origi-

stand, telling jurors she'd been the first white teacher in an all-black school.

Librarians also testified about retaliation. Branton was transferred to a slot where "I shelve most of the day." The black plaintiff, Monica Foderingham-Brown, was moved from the Central reference department to a branch, assigned to do outreach to Spanish-speaking and Vietnamese populations, though she spoke no Vietnamese and little Spanish. The judge removed her from the case, saying she couldn't prove retaliation but was skeptical that board members didn't know her identity.

Plaintiff Maureen Kelly said that Games told her she didn't get an open position because she had been quoted in the national press. After the transfer, Kelly also requested a shorter commute—it had increased from 15 to 80 miles—to ease the effect that childhood polio had on her driving, but was refused. As new head of the staff association, she was too far away to attend board meetings, and the group floundered. The judge ordered her back to Central in February and other staffers have begun to resurrect the association. The branch positions vacated by Kelly and two others transferred (who retired) have not been filled.

nal mission or reach a consensus on how to alter that mission. Some community members would like the AARL to be more of a cultural center.

Jordan, now at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, says that because Auburn Avenue is generally revered, the library board has been protective "but not necessarily enlightened" about its future. He thinks AARL needs an independent board and foundation.

Too much politics

For several years, local library critics—mainly but not exclusively from north Fulton—have called for a reduced AFPL board. A bill in the 2002 state legislature would have shrunk it to seven members, each appointed by the seven county commissioners. (The commission is currently split 4-3, black Democrats to white Republicans.) County legislators stymied the bill on a party line vote.

Johnson acknowledges—without criticizing any board members—that a board without politicians would be preferable. Currently, it has four: one is Bob Fulton, appointed by a fellow commissioner from the north as a counterweight to Commissioner Emma Darnell, who represents south Fulton. She has called efforts to shrink the board—as recommended in a 1999 County management audit—an attempt to shift the board balance away from Atlanta.

Bob Fulton says the current board is more cohesive, planning for three new branches, including a new regional in the north. The election of board chair Johnson—a white ally of McClure—suggests that board politics bridge race. Several staffers *LJ* met say the lawsuit doesn't affect their work, though they acknowledge the staff lacks unity.

Though two of the three board members found liable in the suit have left, the issue resonates. Cynthia Tucker, the influential editor of the *Atlanta Constitution's* editorial page, wrote in January that the lawsuit "revealed heaping mounds of evidence that the board is deeply troubled—petty, power-hungry, contentious and probably racist, as well."

Ex-director Julie Hunter, who soon will head the Broward County Library's African-American Research Library and Cultural Center, Fort Lauderdale, FL, says the board lacks accountability. "I don't think it's going to change until the community rises up." That may not happen until (and if) the bill comes due for the lawsuit. ■

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TITLE: Can Atlanta-Fulton PL emerge from turmoil?
SOURCE: Library Journal 127 no10 Je 1 2002
WN: 0215201872009

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