



# MLK Library

## Friends

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### **An Open Letter to the DC Public Library Board of Trustees From MLK Library Friends January 3, 2022**

The MLK Library Friends wish to register their objection – in the strongest possible terms – to naming the auditorium of the Martin Luther King Memorial Library for Jeff Bezos, under a proposal from Head Librarian Richard Reyes Gavilan passed by the Board of Library Trustees. The naming should not have been approved and must be rescinded.

MLK Library Friends do appreciate Mr. Bezos's donation, announced last year, for a new children's literacy program *Beyond the Book*, an expansion of the popular *Books From Birth*, publicly funded since its adoption in DC. It's true that Bezos' \$2.7 million donation is the largest ever received by the Library Foundation, but if the cost of the new program is similar to the existing program, it will only cover five years, and pales in comparison to public funding for the library. The ongoing transformation of DC's 26 public libraries, including \$210 million for the recent award-winning renovation of MLK, a project for which DC citizens fought for almost two decades, was paid for entirely by taxpayer dollars. Bezos, we must note in connection with taxpaying residents, is also controversial for paying a lower rate of tax on his income than average Washingtonians pay on theirs.

Further, Bezos played no role in building or preserving the DC public library system. Unfortunately, by conferring naming rights to the auditorium, DC Public Library lost an opportunity for a future larger endowment from any donor that might, for instance, support the auditorium by staffing and outfitting it properly, engaging the citywide community in its use and programming it fully, or indeed any other library needs.

Mr. Bezos is often compared, in terms of wealth, to Andrew Carnegie, who built 2600 libraries – entire libraries -- in the US and Great Britain, including four here in DC. Perhaps Bezos could grow into Carnegie's shoes but one literacy program does not a shoehorn make.

Most importantly, as many have already noted, Bezos' operating principles to date have often been at odds with the values for which Dr. King gave his life.

We think the Trustees knew the proposal was inappropriate and chose to downplay it. At the virtual public meeting last Wednesday January 26, 2022, the agenda item listed simply as “MLK Auditorium Naming Proposal” was passed. No discussion took place, although it was duly called for by Chair Monte Monash. The proposal was not shared on screen as other documents had been. The name Bezos was at no point heard nor seen by attendees such as myself (who were muted anyway). A recording of the meeting, which I requested, has not been made available.

The Trustees are not required to get the consent of Friends of the Library groups, but the Trustees would have been wise to seek their perspective, and should have recognized the role of Friends as fundraisers themselves, who conduct membership drives and book sales, and who advocate for expansive library hours and a budget adequate to library patrons’ needs

Today in the Great Hall of the MLK Library stands a display about how it took a letter writing campaign by DC residents in 1971 to name the new central library in honor of slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King. The exhibition is named *We Are Not Asking Politely*. It is sadly ironic that another letter-writing campaign is now underway, this time to stop an inappropriate naming of the central library’s auditorium.

The MLK Library Friends ask DC Public Library Board of Trustees to rescind their approval of the Bezos naming proposal. It was neither necessary in order to receive the children’s program donation nor acceptable to bestow in a building that bears the hallowed King name.

We are asking politely, for now.

Respectfully,

Robin Diener, *President*  
MLK Library Friends

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