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Allow privatization of public domain at your own peril

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The civic calendar is increasingly occupied with public meetings where citizens come to beg for public services jeopardized by funding shortages. Officials listen solicitously, cry crocodile tears, and go on to play their usual political games.

Consider the library system, threatened with branch closings and cutbacks of services in the central library. Hundreds of people showed up at the City Council hearing on June 4 for another mass lament. But what is really going on?

Well, it's not a money shortage. The evidence:

1. Insurance giant Liberty Mutual Mayor just got a property tax waiver of \$24 million from Mayor Tom Menino and the City Council, and a tax credit of \$22.5 million from Governor Deval Patrick, who is also slashing services to the library. And corporate welfare is just one of many ways city and state funds are being wasted or squirreled away for politically expedient uses, including funded but deliberately unfilled jobs, no-bid contracts, shakedowns of developers (often in return for tax breaks!), cronyism, etc.
2. The city has \$60 million more cash on hand now than it did last year (see city bond [prospectus](#) p. A17). Surely, a couple of million could be found there for the libraries - if the mayor wanted to save them.
3. When Boston Public Library President Amy Ryan was asked if the closings and cutbacks would be avoided if money became available, she said she didn't know how such money would be used, and had to ask the trustees. The president doesn't know if the cutbacks due to budgetary constraints would be avoided by overcoming the budgetary constraints?
4. Mayor Menino has made vague [announcements](#) about "improving" the library services by cutting them, unrelated to funding.

No, it's not about money. And it's certainly not about improving services.

It's about the dismantling of the public domain. Mayor Tom Menino is privatizing the

library system.

At the hearing, President Ryan was explaining to neighborhood residents the planned restructuring of branch services as "partnerships" with local private donors.

Menino already sent the Chinatown residents, bereft of a neighborhood library since 1956, to make deals with tower developers. One proponent of a glamorous new tower promised a "book room" on an upper floor (where surely the new condo owners would welcome all the Chinatown families). So far, none of the library-promising projects were built (not that they would really have built libraries), and Chinatown remains branchless.

The city councilors are following in the same benighted philosophical path, telling residents to look to Boston's fabled philanthropic community of wealth, to corporate donations, partnerships, board fundraising, volunteerism, sale or perpetual lease of public facilities to private businesses, and other ways to shift the responsibility for public services to the private sector. At the hearing, Councilor Bill Linehan praised as a model the Chinatown "storefront library," a temporary installation of donated books set up by a few creative volunteers in a vacant ground-floor commercial space. The Boston Redevelopment Authority saw this "partnership" as a way to "enliven" the area so as to attract business. After its four-month run ended, Chinatown's library situation is no better - indeed, possibly worse, since it is now implicitly expected to continue as a model for do-it-yourself library facilities.

Menino is doing to the libraries what he has been doing for years to parks, schools and even street-cleaning (Boston Shines, the greatest whitewashing trick since Huck Finn). Once he sees that people care, he cries poor (remember, his privatization was going on even in boom years) and dumps the responsibility on them. Go, he says, go chip in, have bake sales, charge people user fees, make deals with developers, beg corporations for donations in return for naming rights, get temporary grants, ask wealthy people for help (and accept their conditions), or ... do without.

Menino thinks we just need enough public library investment to engage private partners. He likes privately managed parks, like the Greenway (he has given over \$1 million to the private Greenway Conservancy, and far more in land and tax breaks to the privatized Post Office Square park), with manicured landscaping, high-end food and only "nice" people, no "undesirables" allowed. The Parks Department actively recruits private partners; the FY11 budget (p. 45) touts 200 private partnerships, and \$6 million private dollars as compared to the City's \$15 million. He expects school teachers and parents to contribute money for supplies and activities, and to volunteer and fundraise. He even set up a donation website, www.givetokids.org (now defunct) to ask for school items.

What part of "public" do these publicly elected officials not understand? Public means for all of us, from all of us. Do they really think private money comes with no strings attached, and will support totally open and democratic services? Do they really think that privatization will provide egalitarian, popularly accessible facilities?

No, they don't, and they don't care. Privatization lets them shed accountability, and divert even more public money to serve their own interests while citizens take on responsibility for public services. They claim credit for being up-to-date in the fashionable conservative ideology of "running government like a business," which remains an ideal despite the spectacular failure of the "business model" - even for business. They hand control to corporations and wealthier people to "revitalize" (gentrify) the city, and sit back to bask in the anticipated transformation, cynically promising a trickle-down to people like those at the hearings.

The neighborhood folks at these meetings who urge private fundraising, either because they've given up on our negligent officials, or they truly believe in the ideology of privatization, will soon find out that the more money they raise, the more they will be expected to raise as the government abdicates further. It's a race to the bottom, with everyone desperately knocking on the same moneyed doors, inequities causing individual deprivation and social unrest, and power accumulating in the private hands that have money to give.

Boston is not alone; we follow a national privatization trend. But we should be leading the country in a better direction, as we did historically. Boston is the home of public services: the first public park, school, library, fire department, and mass-transit system in the United States. Indeed, the state of Massachusetts calls itself a Commonwealth. Now, our elected representatives betray us and our children, dismantling our public realm, and indeed eradicating the fundamental idea of the commons.

These words, carved across the library's stone façade, are an inspiration and a warning: "The Commonwealth requires the education of the people as the safeguard of order and liberty." We ignore them at our peril.

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