

JOHANNESBURG



HERITAGE FOUNDATION

22 May 2024

The Johannesburg Heritage Foundation (JHF) notes the City of Johannesburg (COJ) media release dated 20 May 2024, issued by MMC Lubabalo Magwentshu, responding to the demands outlined in our public petition to Re-open the Johannesburg City Library (JCL).

We are gratified by the COJ's speedy reply and their acknowledgement of our protest action on the 18th of May, which demonstrated the public's concern about the extended closure of this vital civic resource (which has now been shut for over 3 years). Additionally, we are happy to note that the COJ has allocated R25 million to the JCL in the next financial year.

We further note the acknowledgement of receipt from the COJ's Department of Community Development (received on the 21st of May) and appreciate their commitment to give the matter further attention. We look forward to additional communications in this regard and will issue a response once their input has been received.

For now, however, we are disappointed that the COJ has still not engaged with us regarding the two main points of our petition. Namely:

- According to MMC Magwentshu, the library will still only be re-opened sometime in the next financial year. This is the same timeline the city been punting since May 2021 and doesn't take into account our conclusion, based on findings from independent experts, that it is safe to partially re-open the library with immediate effect while repairs are on-going. In other words, we believe that the safety risks due to "civil, structural, electrical and mechanical services" are being greatly overstated by the COJ. Additionally, this seems to be part of a pattern by the COJ to hastily and indefinitely close down entire facilities (such as the Metro Centre in Braamfontein) pending extensive and expensive repair work, which may or may not be warranted.
- The gas-driven fire suppression system in the Stacks must be commissioned, and the building brought up to the current and applicable code, as a matter of urgency to protect the invaluable collections held in the library. Since most of these systems have already been installed as part of a previous renovation, it is our opinion that getting the building up to fire code is a relatively straightforward process that should not have taken this long.

As such, we request an additional response from the city that directly engages with the two issues raised in our petition. It is not good enough to keep trotting out the same old story that the entire facility is unsafe and must remain closed – especially since library staff and support personnel are currently working inside the building.

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We further note the COJ's commitment to improved communications about the JCL and we trust that this will be forthcoming, especially regarding the progress being made, timelines for completion, information about the contractors involved in the repairs, transparency on how the money has been spent so far, etc.

To this end, we encourage concerned citizens of Joburg to speak to their ward councillors and ask that they push the issue from their side. Furthermore, we call on members of the media to keep asking questions that hold the COJ to account regarding its mandate over the JCL and other civic resources.

As we have repeatedly pointed out, the Johannesburg City Library is a very valuable facility. Not only does it promote learning, literacy and reading-for-meaning (all of which South Africa desperately needs), it also contains an irreplaceable research archive, computer workstations with free wifi, and many other resources. By denying the public access to these facilities for longer than is necessary, the COJ is infringing on the rights of its citizens and creating tremendously negative knock-on effects for scholars, students, researchers and the local community.

Furthermore, the JCL is located in the heart of the inner city – which is in a considerable state of decay. How can we start regenerating downtown Joburg when there is a dead spot right in the centre? As such, the COJ and the JDA should be doing their job by finding ways to partially re-open the library as soon as possible, rather than drag their feet and keep the entire facility shut for another year or more. Libraries are not a luxury!

The JHF and our partners in civil society (such as the Johannesburg Crisis Alliance) would like to thank everyone who has shown their support for this important cause. The response from the public and media has been broad and overwhelmingly positive. We will continue to step up our engagements with the COJ and use any legitimate means at our disposal to get the Johannesburg City Library re-opened as soon as possible.

For more information and links to media articles about the protest action, please visit our website: <https://joburgheritage.org.za/public-protest-re-open-our-library/>