

OUR VIEW

Bravo to Rochester library's listener-leader

Great leaders have a lot in common.

They surround themselves with talented people. They spend more time listening than talking. They learn from the past while planning for the future. They accept criticism with grace and receive compliments with humility. They don't take careless risks, but they aren't afraid to break with convention. They share credit when things go well and take more than their share of blame when things fall apart – and they never forget that leaders who serve themselves aren't really leaders at all.

For more than two decades, the Rochester Public Library has had such a leader.

Audrey Betcher joined the library staff in 1996 and became its director in 2000. She retired Friday, and it's not an overstatement to say that she played a huge role in transforming the library into a 21st-century facility. Even more important, however, is the role she played in helping library users embrace unfamiliar technologies and creating a new vision for how a library can serve its community.

The library's transformation under Betcher's watch is startling.

Twenty-two years ago, libraries were largely seen as repositories for books, music and periodicals. The vast majority of library patrons entered through the front doors and left with books in their hands. The tech-savvy users were the ones who had mastered the online card catalog system and understood the process for interlibrary



Traci Westcott / Post Bulletin

Rochester Public Library Director Audrey Betcher is pictured Feb. 22 at the Rochester Public Library in Rochester.

loan. Today, the library offers an astounding variety of services and ways to access a dizzying array of books, music and information. It's not just a warehouse – it's an event center. It's a gathering place. It's an ever-changing art gallery. It's a point of access for social services and medical screenings.

Senior citizens come to the library for help creating a will. Musicians make recordings in a sound booth. Teens who feel marginalized elsewhere gather to write, unite and grow together. People who don't have internet access at home

can checkout Chromebooks with built-in WiFi. And, of course, thousands of users electronically "checkout" materials from the comfort of their own homes – an ability that came in very handy when the pandemic turned us all into hermits.

Betcher, of course, isn't solely responsible for this transformation. As she prepared to leave her post, she credited the entire team at the library for "make sure we change intentionally," and she also said that she simply guided the library in the direction the community wanted to go.

Still, we think it's worth noting that Betcher came to the library with a background in automation. She saw change coming and didn't fear it – she embraced it and helped Rochester stay ahead of the curve.

But Betcher's tech savvy would have meant little without her basic humanity and her desire to help the marginalized, the at-risk and the underserved. She made it her mission to open the library's doors to all comers, to listen to their needs and goals and provide potentially life-changing services and programs to people of all

incomes, ages, races, creeds and orientations.

That inclusive atmosphere is main reason the Rochester Public Library received the National Medal for Library Service from the Institute for Museum and Library Service in 2018. Only three other libraries in Minnesota have received this award – and it is a huge feather in Betcher's cap as she departs.

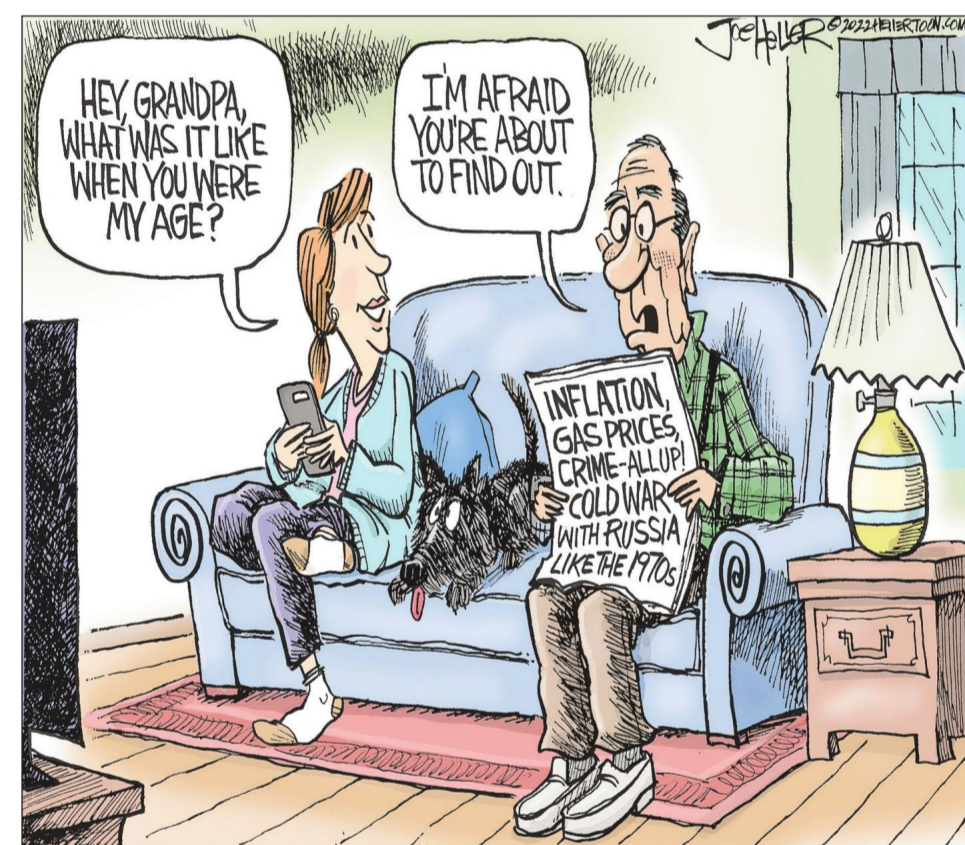
But what now?

For nearly a decade, Rochester leaders have talked about the need to expand or even relocate the public library. The current facility is showing its years, and if the library is to continue to adapt to the community's changing needs, it will require more space and an even greater investment in technology. The pricetag will be substantial, and naysayers will put up roadblocks at every turn.

Karen Lemke has taken the library's reins, and while don't envy her the tasks that lie ahead, we predict that in her seven years as the library's head of marketing and community engagement, she learned from Betcher's example and her formula for success.

That doesn't mean she'll follow Betcher's footsteps, and she shouldn't. We expect the next 20 years will bring as much change as the previous 20, and Lemke will need to chart a new course for the library.

But she will be well advised to do as Betcher did, to listen to the community and to the people on her team who know the library and its patrons very, very well.



Are Western democracies tough enough for 2022?

A week ago, they were programmers and teachers, baristas and farmers – and their elected leader was a former comedian. Their capital city, Kyiv, sparkled with cafes, fancy stores and nightclubs.

To many, this soft existence set the conditions for fast capitulation to a military assault by Russian tanks. As the world now knows, the opposite happened. Rather than provide a fat easy target for Russia, Ukraine's city and country people alike rose up to defend their country with their bodies.

Herein lies a lesson for democracies that don't know their own strengths. The Ukrainians did not cave before the hardened Russian battalions because they didn't want to lose what they had.

The comic in charge emerged as one of modern history's great leaders. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy radiated confidence, determination and calm, in sharp contrast to the histrionic Russian President Vladimir Putin. He spoke from the streets, urging his people to, in effect, fight them on the beaches. And that's what they did.

That high morale changed everything. Suddenly, there was almost nothing most of the civilized world wouldn't do to help Ukraine fight off the Russian aggression.

In 2014, When Russia invaded Crimea and cut it off from Ukraine, the West employed sanctions that were weak and that took a year to go fully in effect. This time, Ukraine's friends activated their economic might in the course of a weekend.

The economic sanctions sent an immediate message. The value of the ruble plunged. The heralded "fortress" of Russia's \$643 billion in foreign currency reserves has been breached. In a scramble for cash, nervous Russians are now lined up in front of ATMs.

Among other astounding developments, Germany boosted its defense budget and canceled the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that was to transport natural gas from Russia. Sweden of all places said it would ship 5,000 anti-tank rockets to Ukraine. (It hasn't sent arms to a country at war since 1939, when the Soviet Union marched into Finland.)

The oligarchs who were scooping up luxury real estate outside Russia now fear losing their French villas, London



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townhouses and Manhattan triplexes. Their panic is such that some have tip-toed into open criticism of the man who made their fortunes possible.

Putin's right-wing fan club, meanwhile, is looking more the fool. When Italian politician Matteo Salvini was asked some time ago whether he was in Putin's pay, he responded, "I esteem him for free, not for money." The oligarchs at least got rich off him.

A new CNN polls has 83% of Americans favoring increased economic sanctions against Russia. And there's almost no partisan divide, with 65% of those who lean Democratic and 62% of those who lean Republican on the same page. For all of Putin's efforts to sow political discord in the U.S., he's finally uniting us, at least for now.

We've heard so much about stresses plaguing our democracies – the COVID-19 restrictions, vaccines, immigration. They are real but are being put into perspective next to the sight of Russia violating an ethnically close neighbor who had done nothing to provoke it.

During World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously visited a working-class London neighborhood after a Nazi bomb killed 40 in an air-raid shelter. Someone in the crowd shouted: "Good old Winnie! We thought you'd come and see us. We can take it. Give it 'em back."

On Monday after a brutal weekend, folks in Kyiv were pushing grocery shopping carts out of supermarkets. They are carrying on, as Londoners did during the blitz.

Putin is stuck, humiliated and probably mentally ill. That makes for scary times ahead. Are Western democracies tough enough for the threats of 2022? So far, so good.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

PARTY OF PUTIN?

Is it fair to call the Republican Party under Donald Trump the Party of Putin? I think not.

True, Vladimir Putin's Russia helped Trump narrowly win an Electoral College victory in 2016. In office, Trump played up to Putin by disparaging NATO and the European Union. At the Helsinki summit in 2018, Trump described Putin's denials of U.S. election interference as "extremely strong and powerful" despite the contrary consensus of US intelligence agencies. More recently, Trump has praised Putin's "peacekeeping" invasion of eastern Ukraine as "pretty savvy" and "genius."

Republicans have mostly refrained from criticizing Trump for condoning

Putin when condemnation was called for. They blame President Biden's perceived "weakness" as much as Putin's unjustified aggression for the invasion of Ukraine.

No, the GOP remains the Party of Trump, with a Putin wing on one side and a few moderates on the other. Most members, including candidates for governor in Minnesota, remain captive to the Big Lie that Trump won the election in 2020. That's the focus.

One hopes that their tolerance and occasional admiration of Putin, so contrary to the old Party of Reagan, is more a sign of subservience to Trump than admiration for a brutal autocrat at war with democracy.

As for Trump's servility to Putin, none dare call it treason.

Norman Senjem, Rochester

grammar, clarity and conciseness.

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