News




Doris Cipolla protests in January outside Gannon University in Erie, Pa. She and others have protested there Monday through Friday since November. They oppose an agreement that allows the Catholic university to operate a research center in Erie's public library. (Courtesy of Anna McCartney)



by Dennis Sadowski

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 19, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

An agreement between Gannon University, a Catholic college overseen by the Diocese of Erie, Pennsylvania, and the local government that allows the school to open an education and research center in a county-run library has sparked intense local debate.

The questions revolve around the purpose of a public library, whether a Catholic entity should be part of a deal that allows it to lease public space at a favorable rate, and political differences that illustrate cultural divides across the country.

Opponents of the lease at the Blasco Memorial Library on the Lake Erie waterfront include a former Erie County executive, the library's former director, library users and a loose-knit organization, Keep Our Library Public. They claim a lack of transparency in the process that led to the Erie County Council's approval of the 25-year lease in October.

"One of my first concerns is (that) we are giving up this public space to a private entity, and doing it for 25 years at a cost that is well, well below the market rate," said Kathleen Dahlkemper, a Democrat who served as county executive from 2013 to 2021. She and her husband are members of St. Patrick Church in Erie and active in diocesan Catholic Charities programs.

> 'The fact that they're trying to put a Catholic university in our public library is wrong. They don't belong there.'
> —Anna McCartney
>
> Tweet this

Negotiated by current County Executive Brenton Davis, a Republican, the lease calls for Gannon to pay $1,913 per month, or $22,956 annually, for a 3,280-square-foot area on the library's first floor. That calculates to $7 per square foot.

The lease allows Gannon to build and operate its Great Lakes Research and Education Center in the library, located in Erie's redeveloping Bayfront District. The

center is part of the university's $24-million lake health initiative known as Project NePTWNE, short for Nano and Polymer Technology for Water and Neural-networks in Erie. The county council in March awarded $1.5 million in American Rescue Plan funds to develop the center.

Dahlkamper said that office space in downtown Erie often leases for at least $15 per square foot annually. She called the arrangement "wrong for the taxpayers."



Kathleen Dahlkemper is former Erie County executive. (Courtesy of Kathleen Dahlkemper)

Even more troublesome, Dahlkamper and other lease opponents said, is that university President Walter Iwanenko and Erie Bishop Lawrence Persico, chairman of the school's board of trustees, would agree to the low-cost lease to the possible

detriment of library users.

"The fact that they're trying to put a Catholic university in our public library is wrong. They don't belong there," said Anna McCartney, 71, a Keep Our Library Public leader.

"We don't have a problem with the program. The lake needs all the research that can happen. But we need to keep the library public where anybody can go in at any time," added McCartney, who said she was raised Catholic but no longer practices the faith.

Persico, through spokeswoman Anne-Marie Welsh, referred questions to the university.

Gannon declined repeated requests for an interview with Iwanenko. Doug Oathout, chief of staff, referred inquiries to a brochure posted on the university's website. It discusses the research center, the reasons the school signed the lease, the center's impact on library services and the expected benefits to the community.

The document said the center will occupy about 3.6% of the library's 90,000 square feet. The center will be accessible to the public at no cost, it added.




Members of Keep Our Library Public protest outside St. Peter Cathedral in Erie, Pennsylvania, on Dec. 10. They oppose an agreement Erie Bishop Lawrence Persico approved to run a Gannon University education and research center in the county's public library. (Courtesy of Anna McCartney)

Further, it said, the center will not disrupt library services and programs, especially for children.  It clarified that both parties "are required to abide by the lease for only 10 years, after which it can be renewed at five-year intervals until 25 years."

Davis' office did not respond to multiple emails and phone calls.

Some challenging the lease said it appears that Davis, the county executive, wants to close the library. They said he has cited statistics showing declining numbers of library users since 2019. "We believe the very future of our public library system is at risk," McCartney wrote in a Dec. 22 Erie Times-News op-ed.

Mary Rennie, former executive director of the library and former county council member, told National Catholic Reporter that library statistics show usage has increased significantly in the last year.

A controversy also surrounded the library in June when a Pride month display was ordered moved to a less prominent location after Davis' office claimed that library visitors complained about it. Librarians removed the display entirely in protest and several Library Advisory Board members resigned after Davis ordered them not to discuss the issue, the Erie News-Times reported in July.

In December, Davis' proposed fiscal year 2024 budget included cutting eight library staff positions along with other cuts in county administration including the Human Relations Commission, which address discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations, local news media reported. The council voted 4-3 to keep the positions in adopting a $580 million budget and implementing a historic 10.9% property tax increase to keep the county in the black.



Mary Rennie is former executive director of the Blasco Memorial Library and former Erie County Council member. (Courtesy of Mary Rennie)

Rennie, a Democrat, resigned from her seat on county council in July. She told NCR she did so because of the "breakdown of professionalism and standards" in county government. Watching the recent events, Rennie said she has concerns about the future of the library under Davis' leadership.

Expressing concern about comments by Davis and Iwanenko that the Gannon project would "save the library," Rennie said. "The truth is the library was never in danger."

Originally, the university explains in its brochure, the center was to be located in an Erie Western PA Port Authority-owned building near the library. When the agency could not guarantee a long-term arrangement, Gannon began looking elsewhere.

Gannon will continue to lease space at the warehouse so it can dock its research vessel, Environaut, there.

Iwanenko wrote Dec. 21 in an op-ed in the Erie Times-News that Davis approached the school after hearing that Gannon was looking for a location for its research center. A timeline assembled by Keep Our Library Public, based on public records and emails obtained through right to know requests, indicates the discussions began in late June, when Davis contacted Keith Taylor, who was set to retire as Gannon's president on July 1. Iwanenko succeeded Taylor and joined the talks.

The proposal to lease library space to Gannon was discussed by the county council's finance committee during a meeting on Oct. 12. The committee sent the legislation to the full council, which approved the measure Oct. 17 by a 5-2 vote.

McCartney said the rapid passage of the legislation surprised her and other library supporters. She expressed concern that the lease discussions had taken place with little public input.




Keep Our Library Public members protest outside Gannon University in Erie, Pa., on Dec. 13. The group opposes an agreement that allows the Catholic college to run an education and research center at a public library, saying that a private entity does not belong at the public facility. (Courtesy of Anna McCartney)

Since then, lease opponents have been organizing. They have attended county council meetings, but have been limited in how long they can speak. They also have distributed yard signs, gathered more than 4,000 signatures in an online and in-person petition campaign, met with journalists and held rallies in various locales, including outside St. Peter Cathedral and St. Patrick Church in Erie.

After the council vote, Dahlkemper said she met with Iwanenko and Persico, but left feeling disappointed. She said both men offered "talking points" rather than address her concerns.

"As I said to the bishop and Dr. Iwanenko, just because somebody gives you a good deal, you always have to look at it as 'Is it the right deal? Is it morally right? Should I be accepting this?' " she told NCR.

Oathout, the chief of staff at Gannon, said the university has a different view of the center's location. "We just think there is a community benefit having it in the library," he told NCR Jan. 31.

Some of the seven county council members have expressed interest in reviewing the lease. Talk of rescinding the deal has surfaced, but it's likely that Davis would veto any such measure. Five votes are needed to override a veto.

Advertisement

Council member Rock Copeland, who was elected in November and took office in January, said he does not support the lease, but that he can count only four council members who would vote to rescind it. He also expressed concern that if it was rescinded Gannon would likely challenge the decision in court. Despite the difference of opinion, he described Gannon as a "great community partner" along the bayfront.

Meanwhile, determined members of Keep Our Library Public, led by McCartney and her longtime friend Doris Cipolla have kept up a one-hour presence at noon Mondays through Fridays at Gannon since November. They gather holding signs on a public sidewalk that read "Keep our library public" and call for county council members to rescind the lease.

Cipolla, 85, said she took up the cause because she considers the matter "a social justice issue" that could hasten the eventual end of the presence of a library in Erie. She called her protest "an appeal to the other side."

"I liken it to this," she told NCR while on her way to a recent gathering, "what a church is to a religious group, so is a library to its residents."

A version of this story appeared in the **March 15-28, 2024** print issue under the headline: Pa. Catholic university's plan to lease public library space sparks debate.