

A New Springfield Library?

It was only a decade ago that pundits forecast that the internet meant the end of public libraries. But, according to Emily David, Director of the Springfield Library, the prediction of the death for libraries is vastly exaggerated.



Speaking to the Springfield City Club on Thursday, February 7, Ms. David said there were over 150,000 visits in 2017. The Library still has its treasure trove of books, but she reeled off an impressive list of new services and programs that are drawing even more people to the Library. “We are busier than ever,” she said. Ms. David was joined by Sheryl Eyster, a member of the Library Foundation Board and Linda Mears, the Chair of the Library Advisory Board.

Now, patrons can not only check out books and music, they can download it directly from home. Over 75,000 downloads happened last year. The Library, she said, is becoming a community living room, with uses of technology growing rapidly. Language learning, occupational exam preparation, resume preparation, on line tutoring, even a virtual reality lab are drawing more and more users of library services.

Programming is also drawing more patrons. Program attendance has soared by over 500 percent, as the Library offers programs for children, teens, young adults, adults and seniors.

The Library is also taking up the slack caused by the decline in school libraries. Funding issues have sharply reduced the ability of the school system to provide library services; students need to use the Springfield Library as an alternative. The Library has now developed programs of grant funding so that students who live outside the city, and teachers who live outside the City but work in Springfield schools, can have free library cards, rather than pay the non-resident card fee.

The Library is also helping to bridge the digital divide. Ms. David pointed out that 22 percent of Springfield students are at or below the poverty level, and do not have access to advanced technology or the internet. The Library provides connectivity through its own computers and also provides network and power access for individuals who have their own devices. The Library also provides a small business center, where aspiring entrepreneurs can have access to the internet, to printers, copiers and other devices they need to bring their business idea into reality.



But all these services come at a cost. The 35-year old structure is not only deteriorating, but it is cramped and, in some cases, hard to use. There are few quiet areas, where patrons can concentrate. There is an inadequate supply of electrical outlets for those who have communication devices. Because the structure is concrete, the network on power wiring is placed on top of the concrete, right underneath the carpeting the covers the floor. This was painfully apparent when last year a water heater failed, resulting in a flood that, while it didn't do permanent damage to the collections, did force the Library to close for two and one-half days to repair the damage.

Beginning in 2012, with a Sustainable Cities project sponsored by the U of O, the Library began to look at its future. This was followed up by a community needs assessment in 2017. This led to an exploration of the possibility of establishing branch libraries, but that proved to be much more expensive than building a new facility, so the staff and the City Council began to focus on that option.

Ms. David presented a preliminary design for a new structure. It would be located on City-owned property directly across the street from City Hall, property which held the now closed District Court and a number of other agency offices. The design is for a two-story structure, although at the request of the Council staff has prepared a three-story alternative, with retail space occupying a portion of the ground floor. The preliminary estimate is that such a building would cost about \$37 million. A survey recently indicated that about \$1.6 million of that could be raised privately, and the Council is now considering whether to move ahead with a General Obligation Bond issue of about \$35 million to fund the difference. Ms. David said that the current estimate was that such an issue would add about \$0.50 per \$1,000 of valuation to a property owner's tax bill. That obligation would be in addition to existing taxes.



In response to a question, Ms. David said that the various agencies in Springfield have a long history of cooperating to avoid placing competing bond issues on the ballot. She said that if the measure is on the ballot in November, there will be no competing measure offering by Springfield agencies.

A questioner asked if the City had made adequate preparations to fund the operations of a new Library if the bond issue were approved. Ms. David said that they were continuing to study how to fund the anticipated \$1 million in additional operational spending that would be required. She noted that Lane Community College and the Springfield Chamber of Commerce had expressed interest in being a part of the site, and suggested that those, and other agencies or retail establishments, might be asked to contribute to both the construction cost and support of the operational spending needs.

When asked about parking, Ms. David said that will a traffic study has not yet been done, all the existing parking for the Library would remain available. She also noted that the City has, for some time, considered the possibility of a downtown parking structure, although no definite plans exist yet.