

Rationale for the Construction of a New Public Library for Waterboro, Maine

The Waterboro Public Library (WPL), located in the former East Waterboro Elementary School, is a popular place for community members of all ages and interests.

Waterboro is a rapidly growing town in York County, in the southwestern part of the state of Maine. Moderate prices for land and homes make it a highly sought after bedroom community for commuters to Sanford, Biddeford-Saco, and Portland. The most rapidly growing segment of Waterboro's population is its young families, as shown by the extreme overcrowding of the schools at every level. The WPL is offering services and programs for these families, and all others in Waterboro. However, it is limited by its current location. It is far from containing or offering what is suggested for a community of its size in the Maine State Library Standards.

The Maine Library Standards set forth what communities should seek to provide for their citizens.

"Libraries should be attractive, functional, flexible, barrier-free, and expandable" (MLS p.21).

A visit to the current library allows for visits with patrons who love their library, and would not want to lose its "cozy atmosphere." The flip side of "cozy" is, however, that it is crowded and cramped, both for people, and for the collections.

Space

Lack of space is a major issue in the library. Between the high stacks in the adult room, the aisles are quite narrow, just short of three feet, so that patrons with mobility limitations have difficulty browsing without assistance. The area in front of the Adult Room desk is so small that when even one patron is checking out books, it is difficult for another to pass by.

Table space is so limited that if staff or volunteers are doing routine book processing (covering, repairing, etc.) there is little area available for sitting and reading, playing with games or puzzles, or visiting with the guinea pig, Skippy. When young patrons take to the floor to read or do puzzles, they block others from getting to audio books and video tapes. There is no space or furniture for reading in comfort.

Shelf space is also inadequate. The staff engages in continuous "weeding" of books and materials that have not been used in some time, to make place for new purchases. Even so, many books are stacked horizontally on top of shelved books, and there is a large pile on the librarian's desk, with no space for them to be shelved.

Accessibility

Related to space is the matter of accessibility. The adult room shelves are too high for all adults, requiring frequent climbing on a stepladder. The basement-level meeting room and toilet are inaccessible for anyone who is not fully mobile. The upstairs toilet is equipped with hold bars, and therefore accessible for adults who need additional support, but it is also too high and even frightening for some small children.

Technology

The WPL has made great strides in creating stations where patrons in both the Children's and Adult Rooms can gain computer and Internet access. These work stations are mostly located either in the middle of traffic paths, or tucked into small corners in the stacks. Two Internet-enabled computers are in a separate room, which affords no staff supervision of users.

Privacy is non-existent in the library. Electronically, the contents of databases contain personal information that is vulnerable to view or to theft by library users. Physically, there is no place for study that includes technology for word processing or Internet access for research or personal communication.

Atmosphere

Heat/cold and humidity have a negative effect on library materials, technology operation, and on the health and comfort of patrons and staff. Two window-box air conditioners have been recently installed in the library. They are of some help, but inadequate during warmer summer days. During springtime, there is a pervasive and sickening odor that persists for weeks. As the cause has not been pinpointed, no one knows how to intervene. In winter, the roof over the back of the building leaks badly, and the weight of snow threatens to cause a collapse, so that immediate shoveling is necessary after all storms.

The crowded, cramped atmosphere is a result of every bit of space being used for patrons, staff, books, other media, and services. However, even if there were to be any free space, the presence of asbestos and lead paint would prohibit renovation. Thus the Maine Standards of "flexibility and expandability" will never be possible in this facility.

Physical Safety

This issue is inherent in a number of the others discussed already. In addition, an architect who studied the building as the question of expansion was being explored a few years ago deemed that the floor supports were never

intended to hold the weight of the wooden stacks filled with books.

And In Spite of It All...

The programs, services, and collections of the WPL continue to grow and thrive. Seniors, children, families, story-hour attendees, summer book-camp enthusiasts, homeschoolers, mystery buffs, literacy volunteers, e-mailers and researchers come through the door during all open hours. Patrons repeatedly clamor for more open hours.

The WPL Mission Statement

"The mission of the Waterboro Public Library is to offer the citizens of Waterboro library services and programs - that provide access to information, diverse forms of literature, and a variety of cultural and artistic resources - in a positive and enriching environment that promotes literacy and lifelong learning."

The members of the board of Trustees of the WPL are committed to the process of creating a new facility that will give a great boost to this Mission, and will become a loved resource for the entire community.