

(image): AN ARTIST'S ILLUSTRATION shows how an expansion of the Newbury Public Library may look. Local residents are undertaking a fundraising project this summer in order to lessen the impact on property owners in the town.

Newbury residents want library expansion

by RAY CARBONE
Intertown News Service

NEWBURY — Regina Cockerill, a member of the Newbury Public Library's board of trustees, says there's a difference between going online for information and going to the library.

"You can Google anything now and get all kinds of answers," she said, "but a librarian can get you the right answer. And she can show you how you know it's the right answer and how to find it yourself."

Cockerill is one of a group of residents hoping to raise funds for a significant expansion to the town's library building. The new single-story space would basically double the workable size of the facility to about 7,485 square-feet, which will allow the staff to greatly expand its services to the community.

The project is estimated to cost \$1.7 million but Cockerill and the other supporters want to raise a significant portion of that through private donations and other financial vehicles.

The library building was constructed in 1963 and expanded in 1998. Cockerill said the staff has kept the operation engaged and "light on its feet," during the technology explosion over the last 20 years, but some aspects of Newbury's geography naturally create challenges for the community.

"Newbury is 35 square miles but there's no real center of town," she said. "We have all these little pocket communities. People don't come together naturally. We have no community center, no senior center. People can be isolated."

Given that — and the town's well-known problems with reliable internet access — the library can become the kind of connective place traditional town centers used to serve.

It's already on its way, she said. "We had 186 programs last year and 2,674 attendees," in a town with a year-round population of only 2,200 people.

Since the beginning of this year, the number of visitors has risen by more than 30% and interlibrary loans handled by the staff has gone up more than 40%. In addition, virtual visits — people accessing downloadable books, the library catalogue, and/or information about current or upcoming programs — has one up more than 25%.

But the library supporters want to do more.

Tentative plans for the expansion include a new, larger space for the children's library, increasing its usable area to about 1,200 square-feet. Right now, kids make up a significant portion of the library's visitors, Cockerill said, and the staff wants to continue serving those youngsters.

"Our children's library is cramped, and people want space where parents and children could plan a comfortable day out to read, relax and learn together," she said. The new room would be at the back of the building so it can easily connect to the public playground through a new rear entrance. "We'll have windows with double doors and a landscaped path that will lead to the children's playground," Cockerill said. "What an easy solution for parents who want to have a nice day out reading and learning and then have some physical play and laughter.

"If you get a kid reading when they're young, you can make a lifelong impact," she said.

The expansion could also include a new 1,000 square-foot program room useable for painting classes, language learning programs, bird watching studies, first aid training, master gardening lectures, after school STEM study, wildlife demonstrations, fiber arts seminars ... even one-time presentations, like author visits.

A new 200 square-foot teenage/tween meeting room will be a friendly safe space with computers and comfortable chairs, while two new smaller 100 square-foot meeting rooms can be used for tutoring sessions, business meetings, webinars, etc.

“With the new technology, we’re hoping to provide more training and workshops that focus on cloud-based or computer programs,” Cockerill said. “This could bring amazing economic benefit to Newbury.”

Cockerill is looking for others to join the all-volunteer fundraising effort. Contributors will have naming opportunities, she said, and one anonymous donor has already taken advantage of that option by giving \$30,000 to fund a new office for the library director.

The fundraisers are also looking for financial pledges, particularly from seasonal residents who are here during the summer, as well as government programs and grants.

Cockerill and the other library lovers want to raise about half of the \$1.7 million price tag through their efforts. “That’s \$850,000 — a big ask for our town, but we want to do everything we can to reduce the tax burden on our most vulnerable citizens, particularly those on fixed incomes,” she said.

The other half of the funding could come in the form of municipal bonds and financing. The board of trustees and its supporters hope to request the remaining balance at the annual town meeting in March 2020, with construction to start the following spring.

If you’re interested and/or would like to support the Newbury Public Library expansion, please contact Cockerill at 857-205-2604 or at FoundationChair@newburynhlibrary.net. Information is also available at the website. www.newburynhlibrary.net.