

Let Libraries Lead the Way

The following article was submitted by Colleen Mahr, the Mayor of Fanwood, to "New Jersey Municipalities", the Quarterly Publication of the New Jersey Conference of Mayors (NJCM), and was included in the March 2008 issue (Volume 85, Number 3).

In today's increasingly difficult fiscal climate, municipalities continue to be challenged to do more with less, to look for creative and innovative ways to capture potential savings, reduce costs and provide tax relief. Faced with these issues, including the new cap levy legislation, Fanwood and our neighbor, Scotch Plains, have embarked on a daring, forward-thinking plan to maximize the effective use of funding and to provide cutting-edge library services to all of our residents by considering the dissolution of two independent, long-standing municipal library operations and merging them in one new joint operation and facility.

Currently in New Jersey there are over 300 municipally funded public libraries (86 of them serving communities of fewer than 7,500 people as in Fanwood) but only six joint library systems. If successful, the merger of library operations in Fanwood and Scotch Plains would not only be the first new joint library system in the state in more than 40 years but also the first ever to dissolve two existing independent operations and merge them by public referendum.

The two communities have a good track record of cooperative shared services, not the least of which is a long-time shared school district. The Fanwood and Scotch Plains Libraries have used Interlocal Shared Services Agreements and \$84,638 in SHARE grants since 2005 to:

- Share a common library automation system and support reciprocal borrowing
- Save money by effectively maximizing the use of existing funds through cooperative efforts
- Forge a collaborative relationship with the existing joint school system
- Improve and upgrade both libraries' materials, shared policies, programming and staff development
- Support electronic connectivity and promote public awareness of joint services
- Expand a joint digitization project of historical materials now available on the web.

Fanwood Library Director Dan Weiss and Scotch Plains Library Director Meg Kolaya had the idea for a joint library a year ago while discussing impending renovations in their respective buildings. Both were moving forward independently with some rather expensive plans to expand, renovate and conform to ADA requirements. In light of the cost and potential disturbance to services in both communities, it seemed prudent to consider a mutually beneficial and cost-saving solution which took the existing relationship to the next level. The two library boards formed a committee to look into the idea. Because of the cooperative spirit of the two library directors and the project's bi-partisan support by both Mayors and both library Boards of Trustees, the project team was awarded a \$149,750 DCA SHARE grant for a feasibility study.

With the SHARE funds in hand to support the feasibility studies that a project of this magnitude and complexity demanded on a wide variety of issues associated with the establishment of a joint library, the project engaged the services of three professional consultants: a library consultant to

assess service and physical space needs, an architectural consultant to examine the suitability of potential sites and develop a broad footprint of space to match the service needs, and a financial consultant to assess the potential for fundraising and grants to support the project. . The results of this study will confirm whether this project can move successfully forward towards the implementation phase. In an effort to keep everyone abreast of the progress, all results are posted on the web at www.thejointlibrary.org.

A key component of the feasibility study is the wide involvement of the public in focus groups and public meetings to clearly hear their needs and concerns. The increased use and support of the two existing libraries was evident; and while the focus group sessions, completed in November of 2007, did highlight a variety of concerns such as location and impact on individual taxes, clear support was shown for a proposed consolidated library project in the proper site. Building one new library to serve the residents of both towns will achieve economy of scale in providing high-quality library services for all 30,000 residents without duplication of staffing, materials, and all fixed costs associated with building and maintaining two library facilities.

The goal of the Feasibility Study will be to allow the two Library Boards and the two towns to smartly assess the best course of action, taking into consideration not only cost savings but also the potential for more effective and expanded library services. At all stages of the study, the public will be kept informed of the findings and options with the ultimate decision being determined by voters through a referendum at a general election. The idea of a cutting edge, destination library, with opportunities for all citizens of all ages in both communities, has resonated strongly with the public and has lifted both municipalities above normal partisan politics. It is clear that this project has the potential to be far more than just a library, but a compelling community focal point for both towns and a source of local pride as a 'poster child' for shared services. The Joint Library will be a perfect combination of sharing resources while still retaining the individuality and history of both towns.