New Library Report Shows Community Interest

By Katherine Chansky, Executive Director, The Libraries of Foster

What does The Snow Queen, a recent children’s program featuring storyteller Clare Vadeboncoeur, have to do with a new library report? Space—space for programming in our small, but charming libraries in Foster. Clare’s program in February at the Eddy building drew a full house of 52 children and adults, and it highlights both the popularity of the libraries and the lack of a meeting area for programming. This is one of several areas where our libraries fall short of both our community needs and of State required library standards.

In July 2016 the Board of Trustees of The Libraries of Foster took action to remedy the problem of access to the buildings, and small meeting areas, by hiring library consultant Kay Bullard to do a community assessment and to propose the optimal library size for the Town of Foster.  Bullard held eight focus group meetings, conducted a survey, facilitated a community meeting, and did an analysis of the Libraries statistical trends as well as research into national library building trends.

The consultant’s report tells us the community is expecting more from their libraries than can be offered in two small buildings. Our community indicated it wants a library to fulfill multiple roles: a place to build and share both community and information; a place to provide spaces and support for reading and technology exploration; and a place for residents to pursue creative activities. Current library services are provided by one full-time librarian and part time staff who operate two separate buildings about 6 miles apart. The libraries together are open 62 hours each week with evening hours. The combined area of the two buildings is 3,400 square feet. The two libraries combined are half the size of comparable town libraries in Rhode Island. What’s more, because our Libraries don’t offer full access to all spaces for all patrons, our state funding is also in jeopardy.

The Library Board formed a Facilities Planning Committee in November 2016 and charged the committee to find a site for a library building to provide services appropriate for the Town of Foster.  The Board is working to blend the best of our current libraries with the needs of 21st century library users. The focus of the Board is on finding a new location and defining the most affordable way to provide modern and relevant library services to all in the Town of Foster.

A new library building will offer space for quiet reading, for programming and will meet ADA requirements granting full access to everyone in the community. With a new building the Libraries of Foster will be assured continued, and essential, state funding as well as continued membership in the Rhode Island library consortium, Ocean State Libraries, which provides access to thousands of materials via interlibrary loan and online access currently enjoyed by Foster residents. Anyone with information about land for sale in Foster suitable for a new library building is encouraged to contact the libraries. We are excited about the prospects that lie ahead for our town!

The first consultant’s report was nine years ago and while Foster seems the same, the library world and services we offer has changed dramatically so the Board needed to hear from the community about what they use now and what they want for library service. In 2008 people wanted more space—today they want an affordable library with multiple use rooms. What’s the same in the older and the new consultant reports? Both reports see the current historic library buildings as too small for the number of users in Foster and both reports see the need for full access, including handicapped access, to make the libraries ADA compliant. Finding a piece of land is the next step.

By Katherine Chansky, Executive Director, The Libraries of Foster.

3/30/2017