

Last week there was a guest editorial with the headline, “Is library expansion justified?” That is an excellent question, and one the Library Board of Trustees has been working to answer over the last several months.

A quick recap for those who may not be aware of what is going on... The Elk Rapids District Library received a generous bequest from the estate of Mr. Charles Heffer. We recognized that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and we needed to plan carefully to ensure it was used the best way possible to improve the library for the benefit of the community. The board took on the hard work and expense of developing a strategic plan, and in the summer of 2014 commissioned the library consulting firm of Hartzell-Mika to help. The process involved gathering information from and about the library and the community, examining comparable libraries and best practices, and involving the library board, staff, and the community. This multiple month project resulted in a plan for both immediate and longer term improvement in library services.

After focus groups with the staff, the Friends of the Library, and the board; interviews with six key community leaders representing government, education, and business; a survey of the general public that was available online and in paper versions throughout the library district for over a month; and two day-long strategic planning sessions with community members, ten goals were identified. They represented areas including Building/Facility, Collections, Staffing, Funding, and others.

The Building/Facility goal is, “EXPLORE OPTIONS FOR ADDRESSING SPACE NEEDS OF THE LIBRARY”. Several deficiencies in service due to space limitations were identified. Based on the research that was done, and the ideas, suggestions, and desires that were expressed by people who engaged in the planning process, we felt this was a goal we had to pursue. Over the past two years we have identified and explored utilizing other available program space in town, moving to another location, adding a branch library in another location, and building a new library in another location. However, because of the overwhelming sentiment we heard to stay on this beautiful hilltop, we are now exploring the option of adding to and reorganizing the current building. One of our top priorities is maintaining the charming character and historic integrity of The Island House. We chose the team of architects from Hopkins Burns and Daniels & Zermack because of their combined experience with historic renovation and preservation and library design.

What could that mean for our patrons? Elk Rapids could have a dynamic and vital library that changes and grows to meet community needs. We could have a more comfortable and inviting space for kids to spend time, for programs of interest to those of all ages, and for the community to gather. We could demonstrate to our kids and grandkids that we value literacy, education, and community, and that we support our libraries. Public libraries are a great equalizer, and vitally important to a free society.

The Funding goal is, “ASSURE ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR CURRENT AND LONG RANGE NEEDS”. After thorough analysis of our financial situation, including tax revenues and millage rates, income and expense projections, and our other goals to improve services, the consultants recommended that the library board authorize collection of the full voted millage allowable. Voters originally approved .6 mil, which has now been reduced by Headlee to .528. The increase from .35 to .528 cost a taxpayer with a \$200,000 home an additional \$17.80 a year, less than the cost of one hardcover book. That millage is for operations only, and cannot be used to fund construction of an addition. The decision to collect the full voted millage was an important fiduciary step that will significantly improve the financial health of the library for the next several years.

What the library board’s decisions and actions over the last two years clearly show is their commitment to doing their due diligence and exercising their fiduciary responsibility as trustees to ensure that the library is the best it can be, is financially secure, and that it meets the ever changing needs of the community.