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Westhampton library begins a new chapter

By CATHERINE BAUM
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WESTHAMPTON - The 13-year campaign for a new public library cleared a critical final hurdle this week when voters overwhelmingly accepted as town property the building and space that will be used for the new library.

"It was the last important vote," said Laurie Sanders, co-chairwoman of the Town Center Library Project Steering Committee.

Shot down for town funding three times in 2005 and 2006, the project was picked up by supporters who have worked tirelessly and tenaciously to raise nearly \$660,000 in less than a year and a half. The decision was made in 2007 to raise funds privately rather than increase taxes to pay for the project. The campaign is just \$35,000 shy of reaching its goal, which is needed to match a state grant.

"It was exhilarating," Euthencia Hancewicz, who is on the Friends of Westhampton Memorial Library board, said of Monday's vote. "One of the best things was to know that all of those people were in Town Hall to support it, and to finally be together and feel the energy in the room was just a real treat. To have all of those people in the same place with their voting card in the air ... it was very special."

Most recently, \$4,000 was raised for the project at the town's Fall Festival. The better part of the money needed has been raised since the campaign officially launched in June 2007, and organizers say the remaining \$35,000 will be sought through private donations and grants.

"We think there's still some folks who could make some donations and haven't yet; we're still working on them," said Janice Tracy, who has put countless hours of work into the project. "We're pretty sure we're going to get a new library."

The \$1.9 million new library is set to be funded by local sources, the capital campaign and state grants.

The town voted Monday to become the owner of the North Road property and parsonage building that will house the new library, a necessary step for the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners to release the first third of its \$1.1 million construction grant for renovations and an addition to the building.

The building and space were presented as a gift from the Friends of the Westhampton Memorial Library. More than 200 people crowded in Town Hall at the special Town Meeting to vote on the matter, which was the only item on the warrant.

"Before the vote was cast I looked at the audience and knew it was going to be an overwhelming majority of support," Sanders said. "I got choked up. It's been a big part of my life and a rewarding part of my life."

The question drew more than 200 "yes" votes and three "no" votes. People cheered after the vote; then one member requested a round of applause and standing ovation for everyone involved.

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"There was lots of applause and hugs - it's a great feeling of community," Sanders said.

The project dates back to its conception in 1995, when town officials and library workers recognized an increase in the library's circulation and in the town's population and projected population. The Westhampton Memorial Library, Sanders said, would no longer adequately accommodate the town's needs. And in Westhampton, as in many towns, the library is central to the sense of community.

"Basically at this point if you don't attend the Congregational Church, the other places to meet people are more or less the dump and the library," Sanders said. "Some people say we have an identity crisis. We don't even have our own zip code. I think this will give us a vibrant center."

The new library is set to be energy efficient yet maintain a historic rural feel. The engineering department at Smith College has kept abreast of the project, offering the latest innovations in energy savings. A carbon-neutral building is what supporters are shooting for.

Tappe Associates, selected to be the architect in October from a pool of 11 applicants, will work with the college's engineering department.

"It's a nice relationship between these two entities, and we're going to be the beneficiaries," Sanders said.

Three acres of open space will be preserved with the project. That space is used for festivals, bonfires and community events.

The existing library will be used for town offices and serve as a safe, dry place for storage of historic documents and legal documents.

"We don't call it the library project, we call it the town center library project because it has all these other pieces to it," Sanders said.

The plan is to put the construction project out to bid in March and break ground next spring.

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