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Writing the book on library saga: How an intrepid Westhampton project won out after three rejections at the polls

How an intrepid Westhampton project won out, after three rejections at the polls, and is about to build

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WESTHAMPTON - You can't kill a good idea. For more than a decade, that was the motto of determined volunteers in Westhampton.

But when it came to building a new library in their town, circumstances certainly tried to kill their idea. Three times, supporters at Town Meeting failed to muster the two-thirds majority needed.

This week, construction is to start on an approximate \$2 million new library in the town center - a baker's dozen of years after the concept first took shape.

How did they do it?

By pluck, community-building, a series of odd-ball fundraisers and what appears to be a Yankee refusal to back off.

Rosemary Waltos, a small library specialist at the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, said she uses the Westhampton Town Center Library Project as a model for other library projects.

"I always tell libraries that here's a library that had to go back several times; they persevered, they never said no and here they are today constructing their public library," Waltos said. "It's an incredible job that they did and one of the remarkable things is they had fun doing it."

The Friends of the Westhampton Memorial Library group is about \$10,000 short of its \$660,000 goal, but that's a drop in the bucket compared to what the group has already raised. In two years, the project raised \$650,000 in order to win a \$1.65 million grant from the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners.

While most town voters signaled their approval of the project at each of three Town Meetings, the project needed to reach a two-thirds majority to pass a Proposition 2½ debt exclusion override.

And so instead of relying on taxation and municipal support, the library project turned to the public - and to the state - for backing. The new building will be a gift to the town, along with three acres of surrounding land, from the Friends group. The current Westhampton Memorial Library will be turned back to the town, providing a dry space for documents now stored in the Town Hall basement.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7



Jim Armenti performs at Westhampton Fall Festival, a new community tradition created to support the library project.



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Organizers are confident the remaining amount will be made through private donations, flamingo lawn ornaments and poster sales, and "Great Pumpkin Roll" CD sales. And the group is confident for good reason. After all, in two years it raised \$650,000 in a town of 1,700 people.

"We knew about two-thirds of the town was happy with the project but not happy to have a tax impact," said Euthecia Hancewicz, of the Friends. "We just plain thought it was such a good idea that we couldn't let it go."

Secret to success

"When you're trying to raise \$660,000 in a small community like Westhampton you can't do it with just bake sales and car washes," said Laurie Sanders, chairwoman of the Westhampton Town Center Library Project Steering Committee. "That's why we created these quirky events. Did they pull in loads of dough? No. But fundamentally my belief is a library is much more than an institution that lends books. It brings the community together."

The Westhampton model is so admired that Sanders will herself share news of it in the fall. She will present a talk called "You Just Can't Kill a Good Idea" to a Highland Communities Initiative conference. Sanders will also mention other projects that came to fruition against the odds thanks to passionate volunteers and donors. A grant-funded program that promotes land conservation and community preservation in the region, the initiative awarded a \$5,000 grant to the Westhampton Town Center Library Project.

"Preservation of the common is directly in line with our goal of preserving the rural character and quality of life of the Highlands," said Wendy Sweetster, program director. "Coupled with the new library and community gathering place, the project will be a valuable asset to the residents of Westhampton for generations."

Quirky fundraisers

Lounging for Literacy, the 24-hour Read-A-Thon, Great Pumpkin Roll, and Flock to the Library are well-known events in the region and throughout the library community.

These fundraisers and more led to the ceremonial groundbreaking this spring, when hundreds of people dug into the land of the library with their shovels. Event flyers read "Libraries Build Communities ... Help Build Ours!"

Held in June 2007, Lounging for Literacy was the official kick-off of the capital campaign. The event was preceded by a 24-hour read-a-thon in which people read all morning, afternoon and night until the sun came up again the next morning. Organizers said Lounging for Literacy was the world's largest gathering of readers, with about 300 people reading on the new library property. People created posters to support their favorite books, and authors attended to recite their own books. The enthusiasm for reading was high, as was the hope for a new place in which to read.

"At that point we had a mountain of money to try and assemble," Sanders said. "Looking from hindsight, the skepticism that a lot of people had was justified. But you just can't kill a good idea."

A few months later and in the same location, residents came out to the Westhampton Fall Festival, a fundraiser that features blacksmithing, woodman's demonstrations, cider making, Indian corn shucking and even a homemade catapult that hurls squash and melons hundreds of feet. The festival has become an annual tradition.

Perhaps the most popular event among festival-goers is the Great Pumpkin Roll, a competition to see whose pumpkin rolls down Stage Road the farthest. Local musician Jim Armenti named a CD after the event, with lyrics that inspired supporters to keep moving the campaign forward.

"The idea at that time was to highlight the value of what that property could be for the community," said Euthecia Hancewicz, of the Friends group. "It was just the beginning of trying to make this whole thing happen."

People came up with other creative ideas to raise money. Town residents Stacey and Tom Jenkins didn't want to know the gender of their third child before he was born, so they had a clinician seal the baby's gender in an envelope and put it up on eBay. The winner paid \$600 for the privilege of opening the envelope at a gathering, where people put money in a collection box. Sam Jenkins, now pushing age 2, helped to generate \$1,500 for the library before he was even born.

A well-known event in the library community, Flock to the Library in 2008 featured nearly 500

transformed pink flamingoes. Each flamingo was unique - from a Rastafarian to loons and dragons to Lady Godiva and Barack Obama. Some are still for sale. To purchase one, visit www.librarywesthampton.org.

Most recently, an Aug. 1 golf tournament raised \$1,500. Town resident James LaBerge came up with the idea as a means of attracting new sponsors, volunteers and participants.

A common thread throughout all the events is the Friends group grew to be better friends. And, as they envisioned, the project built community.

"Through this project we formed friendships for the rest of our lives," Sanders said. "It's not something I took into account at the beginning of this, but it has created friendships that might not have happened otherwise. Strong ones. Long lasting."

Now, Five Star Building Corp. in Easthampton is expected to finish the library renovation and addition in nine months.

"It's going to be incredibly exciting to see this go up and it will go up quickly," said Philip Dowling, chairman of the project building committee. "I think people won't be able to believe it, actually, because it's been something in our minds for so long."

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