



Library employee Sue Archambault shows off a thick binder containing a log of calls made to the management company that handles maintenance at the library, located in an old store at the Premier Lanes mall, originally built as a shopping mall in the mid-1970s.

New building, cooperative among library options

BY JEFF PAYNE
VOICE ASSOCIATE EDITOR

With a retention pond surrounding the audiovisual area, a strong smell of mildew in its administrative offices and a collapsed ceiling above an employee restroom, the latest

chapter in the Chesterfield Township Library's ongoing building woes has again raised the need for a new building.

The library, located in the Premier Lanes mall on 23 Mile Road, was ordered closed by

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City to pick up Bay-Rama overtime police tab

BY JEFF PAYNE
VOICE ASSOCIATE EDITOR

New Baltimore officials have decided not to bow to legal pressure brought by a resident as they cancelled an expected bill for the city's largest annual event last week.

At the Feb. 9 council meeting, officials went back on a previous decision to bill the Bay-Rama Festival for overtime paid to police officers during the annual five-day June event. Their previous decision came after Robert Thomas, who has directed at least 25 suits at the city since 1994, filed an action claiming taxpayer funds were misspent on overtime incurred at past festivals.

Initially, city officials changed their policy in response to the suit. However, after a plea from Bay-Rama, and with irritation at Thomas mounting, council

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township building inspectors Tuesday, Feb. 3. It reopened the next day. Workers said conditions have been bad for years but worsened just before the library was closed.

"We can't reopen until the building department says it's safe in here," director Marion Lusardi said as employees scrambled to cancel programs and move valuable materials out of harm's way.

As they did so, patrons arrived at the facility to find the front doors locked with bright orange and yellow signs announcing its condemnation.

"I'm amazed," township resident Phyllis Mack said last week as she came to return books and check out others.

When asked whether a new building is needed, she said cost is a concern but also pointed out the library's function in the community.

"I'm always concerned about cost. But the library is a good deal. It's great for kids and old ladies. I guess they need a new building," Mack said as a mother and her young son arrived hoping to return videos that were due back that day.

"We're turning people away," Lusardi said. "We've had to cancel programs. The issue is we need a new building. But where are they going to put us? There's no place to go."

Library employees have said for several years the facility the building is not only too small but structurally inadequate. Lusardi said after the Feb. 3 closure a lawyer is taking a close look at the lease the library has with building owner Joe Sgroi.

"There are structural issues here," she said, pointing to roof leaks and damaged gutters as contributors.

Library employee Sue Archambault, who shared a thick binder of past calls to the mall's management company, has documented those



"Everything we have attempted to purchase is beyond our reach."

Marion Lusardi,
Library director

claims. From Jan. 20-27, seven requests for maintenance attention were made.

"I told them yesterday this library is going to flood," said Archambault, relating a phone call made to the management company the day prior. "I called back today and told them 'I told you so.'"

The closure came as supporters of the library quietly continue to say a new facility in a prominent location is needed. Lusardi said the library has managed to put away a significant amount since 1998 toward that goal, but not enough to acquire land for new construction or to buy an existing facility on a main street, preferably 23 Mile Road.

The library recently attempted to purchase land at 23 Mile and Calens roads, Lusardi said, but was outbid by Presbyterian Village East, which is looking to expand its adjacent 44-acre senior citizen retirement community.

"Everything we have attempted to purchase is beyond our reach," she said.

The situation is forcing the library to look at other alternatives.

"If we're able to find a community to district with, we would like to go to the voters and ask to build a district library," Lusardi said.

In the area, the likely partners may be few. The township is bordered on the west and south by Clinton and Macomb townships, which are together in a cooperative that has produced three branch locations. New Baltimore, to the east, has an established facility operated by a millage with the seed money coming from the late Stuart MacDonald nearly 20 years ago.

To the north there is Lenox Township, which operates a small facility in downtown New Haven. To the southeast, there is Harrison Township. The condemnation was not the first time township inspectors have shut down a municipal building. In 1999, the former police building, located on Gratiot Avenue in front the current department of public works was closed. In that case, former Police Chief Ron Smith and township officials moved officers to a new site, the existing headquarters on Continental Drive in the Kehrig-21 Industrial Park. The condemned building, owned by the township, was razed a few

months later.

In this case, it is unlikely a new structure will be the result of the closure.

"We'll have the owners repair this building so this isn't an ongoing part of our daily existence," said Lusardi.

After meeting with library employees recently, Supervisor Jim Ellis said work was being done to repair the building. Long-term fixes may be more difficult, he conceded.

"There's no question that whole complex is in need of repair," he said.

Is construction of a new facility possible? He said it has been discussed but finances remain an issue.

"I think we need to look at it," he said. "We've said we would be willing to give the library space on the township grounds behind the township hall. They didn't want that. A new building would be a good thing but it's expensive."

Of the possibility of a cooperative, Ellis said it is difficult, although he did say the possibility

of one anchored by a state-of-the-art main branch, like the Clinton-Macomb system has, would be appealing.

"I wish Chesterfield had something like that," he said.

The Clinton-Macomb main branch, located at Romeo Plank and Canal roads, opened this fall. The cooperative also operates branches on 24 Mile Road in Macomb Township, and South Gratiot Avenue in Clinton. The Chesterfield library is one of the most active township-owned facilities. Lusardi estimated 100 patrons, on average, come through its doors every day. In 2002, 169,000 materials were checked out. It has a collection of 60,000 books and related materials, such as tapes and DVDs, and is open 2,600 hours annually. Special programs last year drew more than 7,400 participants. In 2003, over 2,000 new library cards were issued.

A governing board of six elected board members is responsible for oversight of the library's millage and operations.