



The Main Street view of the proposed new library wing, at left, shows it set back from the original 1903 E.W. Morris building, at right. The plans are by Newman Architects of New Haven.

Library launches \$20-million building campaign

by **Macklin Reid**
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With a vision of the ornate 1903 Elizabeth W. Morris building serving as a gateway from Main Street into a new “21st-Century library,” supporters are out to raise \$20 million to double the library’s size with new space that’s open and flexible, green, efficient, and accessible to all.

Most of what they call the town’s most used public building would be torn down and replaced with a new structure designed around the evolving information technology revolution. There’d be a technology resource center, abundant Wi-Fi access, more room to accommodate the growth of diverse book, CD and DVD collections, as well as live programs aimed at adults, teens, young kids, midlife job-seekers and retired senior citizens.

“The Ridgefield Library must transform itself into a new 21st-Century library, one that meets the needs of our thriving community in a new and dynamic way while continuing to provide exemplary service based on traditional values,” the library’s

vision statement says.

“Our plan, seven years in the making, creates a beautiful and functional new library while retaining the heritage and history of the original 1903 structure.

“The new Ridgefield Library will be a vibrant center for the community, not only by providing comprehensive collections, but by providing welcoming, bright and flexible meeting spaces, and access to ever-changing, state-of-the-art information delivery systems and educational materials.”

The project proposed by the library board would retain the original E. W. Morris building but replace the 1962, 1984 and 1990 additions with a new three-story building that enlarges the library from 26,000 to 50,000 square feet.

The former bank and movie-house building next door — still owned by the library — isn’t involved in the plan at all, neither preserved and reused nor torn down.

The renovation addresses a laundry list of “deficiencies” in the current building: no sprinklers, no security system, limited

handicapped access, leaky roof, crumbling ceiling tiles, an outdated heating and air conditioning system.

It is most practical, the library board says, to simultaneously correct the old building’s worsening problems and remake the library to meet the challenges of the future.

“Information delivery systems are constantly changing. Internet, e-books, wi-fi, technology are all dictating the need for a library to be able to adapt to these new information systems,” said Phil Lodewick, chairman of the project’s fund-raising campaign.

“In the future you’re going to have libraries that are going to be able to access information from throughout the world,” he said. “... The whole role of libraries is changing. Libraries are not static, they re-invent themselves on a constant basis.”

While the means of information and communication are changing, supporters say, the need for the library is not.

The Ridgefield library averages 1,200 visitors a day, the library board said, and has nearly half a million items — books,

videos, music — checked out a year. That averages to 16 or 17 items borrowed for each person in town, over the course of year. There were also 30,000 computer sessions at the library, and 4,000 wireless log-ins.

“Remarkably, over 75% of households in town have at least one library card holder,” the library board said. “Our usage has increased every year while the size of the library has not.”

A \$12-million library expansion plan stalled in 2008 after town budget-makers declined to put a proposed \$4-million town contribution on the referendum ballot.

Last year the library board created a task force to reconsider the plans, involving members of the Board of Finance, the selectmen, the school system, town planning staff, and the Chamber of Commerce.

“The library has had some feints and starts with this,” Mr. Lodewick said. “... The board made a decision: The library is too small for the community it serves. It’s the most used building in town, 1,200 visits a day, about 400,000 per year.”

Estimates say it would cost \$4 million to \$6 million simply to repair the roof, put in sprinklers and a security system, meet handicapped access codes and modernize the heating, ventilation and air conditioning system. And the library would still be full. “The size of our collection is capped at current levels,” said Library Director Chris Nolan. “If someone made a donation of a set of world-renowned volumes, we couldn’t even put them on the shelf without taking something else off.”

But equal access for the disabled means aisles must be wider, and shelf space can’t be too high or too low. That means less room for books if the building is brought up to code without also enlarging it.

“One of the most important things the task force decided was not just to repair the old building,” said board member Carroll Brewster. “Because even with those repairs, our needs wouldn’t be met.

“And,” he added, invoking the expansion campaign’s slogan, “we should do it once, do it right, and do it now.”

Under the plan, the building would not only be twice as big, but the improved efficiency of the new well-designed structure would mean more of it is usable, public space.

“We’re too small by about half,” said Ms. Nolan. “And then we get 55% space utilization because of the chopped-up nature of the building.”

“A well-designed library typically gets 70% or 80%,” Mr. Lodewick added.

Improved efficiency would allow the larger library to be managed by the same size staff, and operating costs would also be held down with LEED-certified energy

savings.

The library board visited state-of-the-art libraries built in other towns — like Wilton.

“We’re not alone in realizing old library buildings don’t serve current needs,” Ms. Nolan said. “Because with the development of sources of information, whatever we do is going to have to be very flexible. The reasons people use libraries, the ways people use libraries, is changing.”

Library advocates challenge the notion that with the coming of giant bookstores, the Internet and computer-based information-seeking, libraries will become obsolete.

“Instead of the death knell, these sources of information, both bookstores and the Internet, have caused enormous increases in library usage,” Ms. Nolan said.

“Libraries have never been just about books,” Mr. Lodewick added. “Libraries — from the great civilizations to local communities — have always been the center of community. It’s a gathering place. They have informally always provided unfiltered access to information.”

Of the \$20 million needed for the project, the library board says it already has \$3 million pledged.

Most of the cost is to be covered by private fund raising. But town taxpayers, who pay about 75% of the library’s \$2-million annual operating cost, will be asked to kick in.

“It’s a public-private partnership. We’ve gone before the Board of Finance, the Board of Selectmen,” Mr. Lodewick said.

“We know donors to the campaign are looking for the town to be part of the project. The amount we raise on the private side will inform the amount we ask the town for.”

A clambake for 80 at Mr. Lodewick’s house on July 8 kicked off the fund raising.

“We’ll be starting to talk in-depth to a number of constituencies,” he said. “There’ll be a number of events that are part of the campaign.”

The library board envisions a referendum vote on a town contribution in early 2011. It hopes construction will begin in that fall.

A good library gathers together so many diverse intellectual and artistic resources, Ms. Nolan said, that a visitor can comparison shop through the depth and breadth of civilization’s cultural achievements, making a library more than the sum of its parts.

“All the offerings that are available at the library, all these authors, all these DVDs, music selections — the serendipity of letting your mind uncover stuff,” she said. “It’s sort of like a candy store for your mind.”