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The new library: this is gonna be good!

By Gene Marrano

Some will carp about the money being spent (\$15 million) and say there are other priorities like a new school or two, but south county residents and others who frequent Roanoke County's headquarters library should be impressed when they see plans for the new facility now targeted for the property across from Penn Forest Elementary school.

Picture a two-story glass and steel structure accented with stone, situated to provide views of Mason's Knob as it sits on a rise with its back toward Merriman Road (past the sharp turn near the school and the Meadowlark intersection). See the 250-seat auditorium that can be used for concerts and lectures, and available for rent. There are CD listening rooms and community areas for children, young adults and older folks. A second floor devoted to reference books and non-fiction, a coffee shop that may be run by an outside vendor featuring a drive-through and other drive-through windows for book drop-offs and pickups (you call ahead with requests).

Welcome to the new south county library, where the final design is subject to change of course since the Board of Supervisors has final approval. They'll get another look at the plans on Feb. 13 during a work session update. Director of Library Services Diana Rosapepe is cautious and quick to point that out while showing off preliminary drawings from Peter Bolek and Associates, an Ohio-based architectural firm that has designed more than 70 libraries.

"Quite a remarkable building," said Rosapepe as she shows off drawings. "Nothing else like it in the region."

There is a two story atrium at the front door and traffic patterns inside the building have been tinkered with to provide the best flow of people possible said Rosapepe, a veteran of the library system that rose through the ranks after relocating to southwest Roanoke County with husband Carl, a helicopter pilot who flies the LifeGuard 10 chopper that ferries patients to Carilion Roanoke Memorial.

The best feature of the new south county library for some may be outside: a walking trail with reading gardens that meanders through the considerable wetlands on property once owned by the school board but then turned over to Parks, Recreation & Tourism.

That trail will also be linked to others at Darrell Shell Park and Starkey Park via crosswalks for those that want a longer jaunt or jog. The sharp S curve on Merriman will eventually be straightened out to allow for better vehicle sight lines -- current plans call for the library access road to put cars on to Merriman in front of the school. Rumors of a tunnel underneath the new roadway would allow walkers to reach Penn Forest and Darrell Shell without having to cross a busy street. Four of the libraries designed by Bolek elsewhere incorporates wetlands, including one Rosapepe saw near an Amish

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community in Ohio - where the drive-through window accommodated a horse and buggy. "The horses stick their head in the window," she chuckled, "it was cool."

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Those wetlands may have precluded its use for a school site but the Merriman tract is big enough for the new library and 220-plus parking spaces. Another small outdoor amphitheatre is a possibility for a "phase two" said Rosapepe. As for the current, overcrowded 419 main branch location (at 20,000 square feet, less than half the size of the new building) she's not sure what will happen, although it may remain open as a drop-off point for books. Some will miss the location along a busy thoroughfare "but I think people will follow us over there when they see it," she added.

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The new library is bound to become a hub for the Cave Spring community, a meeting place and a venue for socialization. It could be opened by late 2008 or early 2009 said Rosapepe, if approved as expected and the ground is broken later this year. Did we mention the upstairs fireplace, where one can curl up with a good biography as they do their research? Or flat screen TV's in the business center? "It's going to be an amazing building," exclaimed Rosapepe. With construction costs going up steadily Supervisors appear poised to pull the trigger on a new and long-needed library, even as they consider a recreation center, an expanded middle school, a new elementary school and countless other school upgrades. Personally, I'm ready to sit down with my latte and a good book as I watch Mason's Knob turn all sorts of colors in the fading afternoon light. Community centers and state of the art libraries could be one of the things that keep more young people here to raise their families. Folks want to live in a place like that.

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The Rosapepe file: who is Diana Rosapepe; bound to have a higher profile as the library project unfolds? She sent us this brief bio: "after graduate school I began in academic libraries at Quincy College (now Quincy University) in Quincy, Ill. I met my husband there and began following him around to many colorful places (Indonesia, Singapore, New Guinea). The arrival of children brought us stateside, to the Rockies, where the wandering continued but on a more limited scale. In September 1985, my husband Carl was hired by Roanoke Memorial Hospital to fly LifeGuard 10. We arrived very shortly before "The Flood" [of '85] and it is only a coincidence that the last place we lived had experienced its flood of the century just before we left. In May 1986 I was hired by George Garretson to be the librarian at Hollins Branch Library, which was my first experience in public libraries. In 1990, the system was reorganized and I became assistant director for public services. Mr. Garretson, whose emphasis on customer service we still follow, retired in 1992 and Spencer Watts became director, eventually expanding technology and the Internet throughout the system. After his departure, I was named director in January 2001."

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