

Carnegie Free Library of Beaver Falls becoming knowledge exchange center

By Kayleen Cubbal For The Times | Posted: Sunday, July 19, 2015 7:00 pm

BEAVER FALLS -- Enter the Carnegie Free Library of Beaver Falls and the sounds can be heard immediately.

Visitors and staff members talking in normal tones, even engaging in an occasional burst of laughter. Giggling children running up and down the basement steps. The tap-tap-tap of a dance class rehearsing on the second-floor landing.

What is wrong with this picture?

Nothing, actually.



Carnegie Free Library of Beaver Falls

The Carnegie Free Library of Beaver Falls is planning a major renovation of the building.

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The days of the "Quiet Zone" are a thing of the past at the historic library on Seventh Avenue.

A new initiative that soon will make the library a "knowledge exchange center" already is underway, and embracing the community is playing a big role in it.

"The 21st century library is so much different than what came before it, what many of us grew up with" director Jean Barsotti said. "The days of a library being a place where you simply come to read a book are over. Of course, the books are still available and there are still people who come here with the sole purpose of doing that, but technology is driving how we do business."

That means, for starters, that the "Shhhh" signs long have since been removed.

"We don't want the first image that people get when they walk into our library to be a negative one," Barsotti said, adding with a laugh, "We don't have people yelling at each other across the library, but I'd like to say we are gently loud."

The Carnegie Free Library opened in 1902 with the help of a \$50,000 grant from Pittsburgh steelmaker and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. As the oldest library in Beaver County, the Carnegie Free Library has been placed on the National Historic Register. Beaver Falls High School owns the building, but the library maintains an option to buy it.

The direction that the library will go in the future is one that board President Ron Main has been studying for some time.

"Libraries are more than just books nowadays," he said. "The knowledge exchange center is the wave of the future and we want to be on the cutting edge of it. We talked with other libraries, even reaching out to a library in Denmark which has started to use knowledge exchange.

"We've known for some time now that we have to get on board with the digital age or get left behind. Our choice is to get on board."

On May 30, months of planning by the board resulted in the release of a comprehensive plan for transformation of the library. It was written by John S. DiSanti, retired superintendent of the West Allegheny School District.

The board has committed to preserve the building's historic status while making significant changes inside its walls. A \$5 million fundraising campaign has begun to create infrastructure, develop programs and provide renovations. Work is expected to begin within a year.

Meanwhile, the library plans to enlighten the public on knowledge exchange, where learners and educators come together, and just what it can do for those who take advantage of it.

"Think of it like the Uber system for transportation," said Main, who is chairman of the board of Questeq, an educational technology management company based in Moon Township. "I have a car, you need a car, so you call me and I take you where you need to go.

"That same concept can be used for the knowledge exchange center. You need information and we have someone with that information, so the two parties get together and make the exchange."

Those "meetings" will be done using such avenues as interfacing, webinars and Skype. Large screens and state-of-the-art computers will be installed to accommodate the process on both the learning and teaching ends.

"The first part of this process is technological," Barsotti said. "You've got to get the

wiring in, make your connections and install servers. And while that is being done, we will literally be collecting people. We are looking for experts in all walks of life to build partnerships. We will utilize social service agencies and hospitals, where we will draw from doctors and nurses and safety people. We will hopefully exchange services with the Beaver Falls sheriff's office, with tax preparers, with computer programmers.

"We want a person to come in and say, 'I need help with a resume,' and we can say, 'we have a person who can help you with that resume.' Then when that's done, they might say that they need help uploading that resume and we will have that person, too. If you want to learn to knit, we want to have the person who can teach you. Some of our learning will be one-on-one and some will be in groups, it will just depend on the situation and the need."

Barsotti said that through partnerships, most of the knowledge exchange will be voluntary, although some funding may be utilized.

Main says Barsotti, who has been with the library for 14 years, is a visionary.

"She has rejuvenated the library," he said. "She sees the future and she's not afraid to take a chance to put these changes into place."

"We need a forward-thinking director right now and Jean is our person."

Barsotti said the changes are a scary yet exciting proposition. As preparations for the knowledge exchange center are progressing, she has expanded both summer and after-school programs, such as story hour and various camps.

"Sadly, a lot of school kids today don't even know how to use a library," she said. "If they want to know something, they search Google. We want to draw these children back into the library, make it a welcoming place where they want to come because they know it's a place to get something they need."

"It's a challenge, but we're embracing it," Barsotti added. "We're hoping that Beaver Falls will embrace it back and come on board."