

Petersburg library looks to turn the page

By LUZ LAZO

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PETERSBURG Ernest Shaw has been using the public library downtown since long before he was allowed beyond the basement floor, which was reserved for blacks only.

“There is history in this building,” said Shaw, a retired sports radio announcer and newspaper writer who continues to visit the library six days a week.

Since 1924, this 13,000-square-foot house at 137 S. Sycamore St. has been home of the William R. McKenney Branch, the city’s central library. The library system has two other small branches: the A.P. Hill Branch at 1237 Halifax St. and the Rodof Sholom Branch at 1865 S. Sycamore St.



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

Counselor Janae Johnson helped 8-year-old Miracle Scott last week at the Petersburg library, which could soon be in a new, larger home.

The central library has gone through many changes, including an addition in 1958 and its desegregation in the 1960s, which Shaw vividly recalls.

Its services also have evolved, he said. But the library has struggled to accommodate the changing needs of residents, including the need for free access to computers, job-search resources and training.

The structure is too old and too small to keep up with the demands of a growing, more diverse community, Shaw said, and library director Wayne M. Crocker agrees.

Shaw and Crocker share a vision to see construction of a new library within two years.

For Shaw, a new library would mean greater educational opportunities for the youths who now benefit from the fight for desegregation.

For Crocker, the library’s director since 1980, it will mean educational opportunities and a dream come true.

Crocker envisions a 56,000-square-foot library -- nearly four times the current library space -- just a few blocks from the South Sycamore site. It would have plenty of space for reading, studying, research and training, and it would have plenty of parking, a separate area for the media collection, multiple meeting rooms and many more computers than the 14 now available to patrons.

Crocker’s vision has evolved into a \$16 million project that is about \$10 million short of becoming a reality.

The Petersburg Library Foundation, created in 2002 to provide financial support for the purchase, construction and operation of a new library, recently launched a capital campaign to raise the \$16 million in 16 months.

To date, \$5.8 million has been collected, including a \$5 million commitment from the city. This month, the foundation was awarded a \$1 million matching grant from the Cameron Foundation, which will be received as the library foundation raises the match.

“We have been 85 years in the same location,” Crocker said. “A lot has happened in 85 years. . . . It’s becoming harder and harder for us to use a building that was originally built as a residence to be used as a 21st-century library.

“We have gotten our usage out of this building, but now is time to look at the future and look to being able to provide the citizens of Petersburg and surrounding areas with the kind of services that pretty much people demand these days,” he said. “People are now beginning to see what libraries can provide . . . and are asking, why can’t our library provide the same kinds of services, why can’t we have off-street parking, or more computers, or more meeting spaces.”

Cheryl Collins, who was hired in February to lead the library’s fundraising effort, said the foundation over the past few years has been putting in place a strategy. The goal, she said, is to have raised \$8 million by October to be able to start the 18to 24-month construction process.

The foundation has purchased -- with a \$400,000 donation from the city -- a nearby property for the library at Washington and Market streets. The property, the former Crossroads Motors, could be torn down this year, Collins said.

She said she is hopeful the community will respond to the cause over the next few months.

A new library, which will be operated by the city, would serve the current 11,000 library members -- the highest ever in the system’s history. Crocker projects a jump in membership at the new location because many residents have complained about the current location’s lack of parking.

Once a new library opens, the old central library and the two small branches will be consolidated into the new facility. Crocker said a few hires would be added to the system’s current 20 employees, including four professional librarians.

Shaw, who reads newspapers and socializes with friends in a small area of the main library, hopes a new library will boost education in the city.

“I have so many memories of this building,” Shaw said. “I enjoy this one, but a new library will be more advanced. . . . We will have more things.”