



# The Future of the Brown Deer Public Library

**Written by Mary Buckley**

Never underestimate the power of a group of determined women and a supportive community. Those two elements gave birth to the Brown Deer Library.

Now the Village Board wants to know what residents would like in a library in the future: a new library, updates to the current library or membership in another community's library. The options boil down to those choices, but the situation is complicated, as it was in the beginning, by finances.

The Brown Deer Junior Woman's Club made a library a club project in 1969 after the Village Board refused to add library funding to its 1968 budget. Aided by the now defunct Brown Deer Jaycees, the women collected 1,000 books donated by the community and started the first library, staffed by volunteers, in the basement of St. Martin's Episcopal Church on Sept. 20, 1969.

The Village Board added \$2,000 to support the fledgling library in its 1970 budget and in August 1972, the library moved to the basement of Village Hall. By 1976, the 900-square-foot library was bursting at the seams with a collection of 12,000 plus books.

By 1976, the library's collection was about 12,000 items and circulation had climbed to more than 30,000 books and other materials. It was evident more space was needed.

In 1976, the village applied for and received a federal Department of Commerce Economic Development Grant of \$745,263 to build the current 15,000-square-foot library. The School District donated the land for the new building.

Now, in 2018, residents need to express their wishes about the future of the library.

Village Manager Michael Hall laid out the options recently.

There are two issues--one tied to the structure, the second tied to operational costs.

The current library has the typical capital needs of an older building, such as carpet, windows, paint and roof replacement. In addition, it is one of only two libraries in the Milwaukee Federated Library system that does not have automated check-out. While it has a large community room, Library Director Dana Andersen said people often ask for smaller meeting spaces where they could work on a project or teach a class.

Hall estimates the maintenance issues would cost about half a million dollars to address. New equipment for the library would cost between half and three quarters of a million dollars. A brand new library would cost between \$2 and \$3 million dollars.

As it did for the now under construction \$7 million Department of Public Works building, the Village Board could borrow the money to either address the maintenance issues or build a new facility.

However, the operational issues are looming larger than the capital expenses.

In 2011, the state froze municipal tax levies. The village levy has inched up since then but only for the reasons allowed under the law, a net increase because of new construction and debt. The law



also allows the village to go to referendum for operational increases to the budget but in the history of the village, there has never been a municipal referendum. The School District has had several.

Both Hall and the Village Board are reluctant to go to referendum to cover the operational costs for the library, fearing a larger referendum might be needed for other expenses in the future.

The village library budget provides a \$385,346 operational budget, the same amount since 2013. That covers about 70 percent of the library's operational costs. The remainder of its funding comes from the Friends of the Library, fines, fees, income from the cellular tower on the site and other donations. The fund balance accrued over the years when income exceeded expenses.

As costs have gone up, the library has cut hours and eliminated staff from 9.85 positions to 6.57 in 2018 but it has reached a critical tipping point.

Every time the library has been forced to cut hours, Andersen said circulation has dropped. The various programs offered at the library become more difficult to schedule.

The village, per state law, has to provide library services, with the minimum requirement 25 hours per week. Currently the library is open 44 hours a week.

Hall said village staff has looked at joining the Milwaukee Library, but that would likely add another \$80,000 to the cost of the library. Joining the North Shore Library is a possibility, but that library is facing large capital costs the village would likely have to share should it want to join.

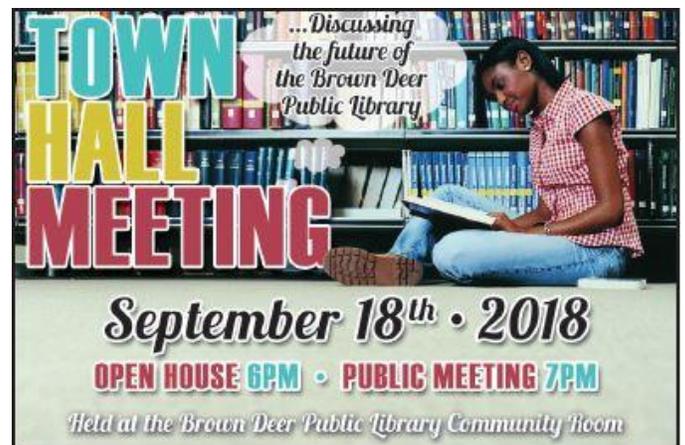
Abandoning the library to join another one would also have an impact on reciprocal borrowing costs. Every time someone who does not live in Brown Deer borrows a book from Brown Deer's library, the village receives \$1.25 per book. Since Milwaukee residents make up half of the library's patrons, that money is an important part of the funding. Andersen said the library received \$92,000 in 2018 because of reciprocal borrowing.

Despite fewer hours, the library remains a popular destination. On a recent Thursday, there were 40 people in the library looking for books or working on computers or at study tables. Another 20 people were in the

community room for a program. That number climbed to 83 by the end of the program.

On a recent Monday morning, there were 11 patrons looking for materials or using computers, plus there was a line of eight people lined up for assistance from the librarian at the reference.

The librarians help with books, but also provide assistance to job or insurance seekers who need library



resources.

Andersen said more than 6,500 people indicated they were interested in attending an upcoming two-day Harry Potter Escape Room two-day program. The library can accommodate 125 for the program.

Because of the interest, she is planning to do a two-week program later in the fall, doing it as fund-raiser with a minimal fee.

While that will help, the bottom line for the library is that by 2023, the library will have exhausted its fund balance, and Andersen said the library will no longer be able to operate as it does currently.

So, what does the community want for a library and is it willing to pay more for it?

The board plans to hold a Town Hall meeting at the library, 5600 W. Bradley Road, on Sept. 18 to gather that information. There will be an open house at 6 p.m. followed by the meeting at 7 p.m.