

## A NEW PLACE - THE LIBRARY

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We dedicated our new library in 1997. Our attendance and circulation has increased beyond all expectations. We have more than 10,000 visits per month. This is in a county of just over 28,000 citizens.

Why a “new place” for the library?

We were in an old Carnegie building in the downtown area of North Vernon, Indiana. Many people wanted us to stay in the downtown area. It probably would have been possible if we were not land locked. There was no place for another addition and certainly not enough parking to meet the needs today or tomorrow.

Our first task was to determine why an effort to build a new building in the early 80s failed. This took some time and patience to get people to tell us the “whole story.” This was an interesting adventure for a newcomer to the area. Previously, I had been watching developments in the surrounding areas. Living in Columbus allowed me to follow failed efforts in three surrounding communities.

Early on, I decided the problem might be that everyone was looking at the wrong type of place for a library in a rural community. When I had the opportunity to take the Director’s position in Jennings County I decided to take a fresh new look at the library as a place, the politics of the library community and the needs of the community.

We did not bring in consultants, do a feasibility study, etc. We first asked a lot of questions of every group that I had a chance to identify. We looked at all the studies that had already been done regarding the future of the community. I did not think it was necessary to do another study when so many had already been done. No need to re-invent the wheel when one was already running!

We talked to many farmers in the community. What did they expect from the library? Would they object to a new library building? If so, what would cause them to become supporters?

Basically, it came down to make it affordable, practical, flexible and functional. We did not need a “community monument.” I looked carefully at all the buildings that you see on the farm. What do they build? Pole buildings. You get more building for the dollar with pole buildings.

When in Rome do as the Romans! Therefore, we began to look at the design/construct concept. Why had this concept not been used in public buildings? What are the possibilities? Would this concept work for a library?

We decided that it would work for the library. We wanted to get the building firms to develop a library plan from the corporate offices. No one seemed to understand. So we went to a local distributor and architectural firm to have the building designed. This was a long process. We were not in a hurry.

We had a lot of selling to do. We needed to market the library. We had to work hard to make the old building work as successfully as possible. I decided that it was best to be rewarded for doing a good job and running out of space, than to make things look impossible. If we do not know how to take care of an old building, why should the public trust us with a new one?

We had to sell the library board on the concept that we could get a beautiful building using the design/concept or design systems approach to get a building that the community would support. We worked many hours with a local architect. He took the various requirements that we thought should be included in a library – today and most importantly what it might look like in the future. We focused on the future. It was the future that decided where the building should be located. Where will the center of the community be in the next 25 years? The library, the new place, should be built in the center or near the center of the new community.

Where is this new center? Let the others decide. Where is the new Wal-mart? Where are the new shopping centers located? Where do you find the fast food places? These corporations have studied the community

very carefully to determine if there is a large enough market to support the new services. I decided that these studies would help locate the new library. We are sharing the same market place and the same citizens. If they will come to the new Wal-Mart, they will come to the new library located nearby. Again, why re-invent the wheel?

One of the most important things that we did was have an artist rendition of the building exterior and the interior made. This became the selling tool. This helped the citizens to see the “vision” of the new building. People began to see the potential and what was possible for the community. After a time, we decided to petition for a general obligation bond to raise the money to build the building.

The petition drive was a success. We worked the county fair. The Library Board and Friends of the Library were essential to sell the project. (Having a picture and letting people imagine what the new library would look like and what the community could do in it.) The citizens of Jennings County signed the petition.

We wanted to be known as a “tax friendly place”. This meant that we had to be up front with all that we knew. How much it would cost? What the tax rate might be? Hide nothing. Do not promise more than can be delivered; deliver more than promised. We were able to do it. In fact, we were able to build a bigger building because the bids came much lower than anticipated. What a deal!

The building is unconventional. But it works. And most important of all, the citizens appreciate the building and the services. We have become the “tax friendly place” we intended. We have also become the “community center”.

A “new place” was built. The “new place” is being used. And now we are in the process of making plans to change the “new place” to better accommodate the new needs and requirements of the community.

All library projects must be evergreen. Libraries are always in a state of change, always becoming better. We are always looking for and exploring new and better ways to serve the community. The library is only as successful as the community. Our job is to make sure our community is successful.