

THE JEWEL OF OUR COMMUNITY

by Virginia Rose



At the Monroe County Public Library we were out of space to conduct library business. Lengthy lines at check out, boxes under desks, double-decked book stacks, and installation of extra shelves meant fewer chairs than ever. Browsing was almost impossible at certain times of the day and week. In the midst of diminishing space, our Friends of the Library held a very popular book sale every week. Parking the bookmobile, and loading and unloading it, was difficult at best. Quiet space for anyone, including staff, was non-existent. Public use of meeting space was so constant that scheduling a room for trustee meetings was tough. Handicap accessibility, a priority issue, *had* to be addressed far more fully than it had been. We had a leaking flat roof problem, and parking was at a premium.

Trustees were very aware of the problems, and they knew that the community would be the most important component to any contemplated move, expansion, or renovation. Our concerns were several. The current building in downtown Bloomington was less than twenty years old, dedicated in 1970; it had been too small almost from the day it opened. Those readers who have been in the library business for a while know of, or have heard of, a Randtriever—an enormous piece of metal, rails, tracks, and book-size boxes that was installed in the 1970 building and was supposed to be the answer to compact storage, to save space, and promote easy retrieval. It wasn't. It didn't. Soon, it worked only in jerks and spurts, with coaxing and constant tinkering. It looked like the inside of Space Mountain! For years our librarians had been known to climb in amongst its gears and rails to retrieve books. Thankfully, this machinery was in the lower level of the building and not in public view. I don't think there are many Randtrieves, if any, left in the country. As it became totally useless, it was unloaded, and added bookshelves became necessary. Finally it was removed in an attempt to capture much needed space, but it really meant just reshuffling work spaces, and allowing some programming to continue inside the building. One of these, the Volunteers in Tutoring Adult Learners (VITAL) program, is a state and national award winning library program with more than 350 pairs of tutors and learners.

The store-front room serving as a library in Ellettsville, opened in 1968, was also completely inadequate; it too needed to be replaced.

How should we begin to solve these space needs? As board members of most

Indiana entities know, negotiations and discussion about land purchase is an item allowed in executive session. We discussed these issues both in executive session and in public meetings. First, in 1985 it was suggested we could alleviate space problems by building a one-floor addition out over the 37 space parking lot. That was eventually rejected as a short-sighted and expensive quick fix for a much larger problem. Then we directed our board attorney to approach adjacent property owners on the block to see if they would be willing to sell so we could plan an adequate addition. Negotiations in this effort went on for about a year. An overlapping suggestion by several board members and the director was made to trade properties, a few blocks away, with the City for the Municipal Building. That idea evolved to the possibility of an outright purchase of the park property behind the Municipal Building. Unfortunately, news of these discussions became newspaper headlines before the idea was thoroughly researched. The park property had been given to the City for use as a park only. Any other use would cause the property to revert to the original owners. That was an embarrassment for the library trustees, and an unnecessary situation for the land donors to address. Discussions with owners of property adjacent to the library were put on hold.

The need to address space problems was urgent and had become a several year process. We had a building fund and with a small bond issue of \$1.5 million, we could turn to what became our first priority. We agreed the Ellettsville Library could be built immediately. Our county community recognized that need, and planning and building a new facility progressed smoothly. The building was placed where the people most wanted it, near schools, and as an anchor for the town. It was dedicated in 1989.

We then turned back to the main library. More than two years had passed. Space problems were at least 15 years old, and talk of resolution had been going on for at least that long. As these problems compounded; a wonderfully competent and patient staff worked even harder because there seemed to be a light at the end of the tunnel. We were not giving up. As membership on the board of trustees changed, new members came up to speed quickly. They did not always agree, and discussion was closely monitored as history was reviewed and revisited. All library board meetings are on cable access television, com-

munity meetings are rebroadcast three times, and then as often as viewers call in for rebroadcast and time permits.

Our building was land locked only four blocks from Indiana University's main entrance, Sample Gates. If we expanded, many board members thought we would have to move from this location. This was a major controversy for our patrons. I had letters from so many patrons and I remember clearly their faces as they spoke to us. They talked of the necessity of the library remaining a downtown library, *and* they spoke to us about moving the library to another place because of the need for parking space. Some told us there was no need to change a thing. Great concern was expressed about *any* bond issue.

We appointed three local realtors in 1992 to find suitable, available property for us to consider in the event moving the library location became the choice. They formed a list of more than 25 parcels to look at, in and around our community. Many of us, both trustees and community persons, were very interested in finding property that would allow adequate parking, with green space for outside programming. Others wanted to stay in the immediate downtown area for the walk-in traffic and the familiarity of a well-loved library. This information was exchanged during lively discussions heavily attended and extensively followed via television. The parking problems and the total expected cost were foremost in the minds of the majority of the board members. After the trustees had visited at least ten of the proposed properties, they narrowed the sites to three. At a public meeting we voted 5-2 to move from the current location, sell the building, and begin planning a new library. Our realtors brought us a bona fide offer to purchase the current building at a very favorable price.

There was a great cry from those who did not want to see the library moved from downtown. At a public hearing scheduled to listen to these concerns, the Mayor spoke, the Chamber of Commerce President spoke, handicapped persons were represented, local business owners spoke again, young mothers with children in strollers were represented, a local attorney told us not to forget we could exercise eminent domain to take property and encouraged us to do so (no trustee wanted to do this), and one of our trustees was still very much in favor of not moving from the current location and said so. Even though the parking problem was a major issue yet to be solved, to stay where we were was the resounding request! You *can* change your mind. Know your Robert's Rules of Order. One of the trustees from the previous prevailing vote moved to reconsider the earlier motion to move the library location. We voted again, this time to stay where we were. It was not a unanimous decision, but once made the trustees moved on. We would renovate the existing building *and* build an addition. Our community truly participated in this process.

It was about this time that our library director retired. We interviewed and hired a new director in October

1992 and immediately afterward began interviewing architectural firms. Our board was fairly well fused, the meetings were frequent, and the necessity to understand one another was paramount. We did quite well.

You know about surveys, department needs lists, interviews of staff, charts, graphs, numbers. We had those. Our Friends of the Library asked how they could help. They formed a Focus Groups Project and invited many diverse numbers of people to come together in small discussion groups and talk about their library and how it served or didn't serve them. These were open free discussions facilitated by Friends members. Notes were taken and compiled for trustee use. It was a good tool for us and a good process for those who participated. Not all the information was complimentary as you may expect.

In 1993 an architectural firm was chosen and the footprint of the building took shape. It necessitated buying the rest of the property on the block. It was more expensive this time, and other property owners were added to the list of those first approached to complete the purchase of the total city block. The parking problem was not going to be solved by buying property for parking. The community was not interested in that prospect; those who attended the meetings and hearings made that very clear. In 1994 the library trustees contracted with a parking garage consultant who had worked for the city earlier, and they completed the first phase of a parking study for the library. It confirmed trustees' concern that parking was going to be an issue that would not go away, but as it turned out, one they could not resolve while solving the space needs problem. We worked with the City and some relief was found. For blocks around the library, on-street all-day parking had been allowed. That was changed to two-hour parking to promote turnover. Parking was rented for some staff in a near-by church lot and in other areas further away. The parking issue was acknowledged by everyone at the time of the reversed vote. Downtown parking continues to be a concern, and a new Mayor's task force, including some library board members, continues to work on that issue.

Advertisements for the job brought a good number of solid bids. We found ourselves in the pleasant place of being able to award the job to a local contractor. We could keep the work at home, the workers were close to their homes, and we could add to the local economy.

We employed a just-retired Indiana University architect from our community to be our "man on the job." He interviewed at the same time other firms were interviewed. You might have hired a construction manager, or in the old days a clerk of the works. He was on the job every day, working closely with all aspects of the project. He attended all the meetings and helped resolve issues between sub-contractors as needed. He was aware of most current codes, of course, and we avoided many potential problems before they became realities. He was with us until the last day. He worked closely with library staff and reported to

the trustees at each meeting. We had trust in him and we were kept abreast of the project.

We set aside a small amount of construction money for art. The Friends of the Library took our challenge and organized a Midwest art competition. The winning piece has been wall-mounted above the elevators and can be seen from three levels. I often see patrons, young and old, pausing to look, and look again, as the changing outside light changes the design and character of the work.

The main library was a \$18.6 million bond issue, and the bonds were sold on a very favorable market. It turned out that buying the rest of the block was considerably more expensive than selling the existing building and starting anew. But compromise is healthy, and the strength of the total community was taken into account. Not everyone is pleased to this day. The Ellettsville Library bonds are nearly paid off and the current trustees have investigated the possibility of refinancing the bonds for the Main Library. The addition was twice the size of the existing building, and because the grading was lower for the addition, joining the two structures was a challenge. It has been met well; a newcomer would not know where the old and new joined.

A former trustee president has called our library the "jewel of our community." Circulation has increased more than 10%. We have space for new books and materials, growth well in the next century, programming, much needed public meeting rooms, and public access television studios. The latter has been in the library for more than 24

years, existing in two closets and a file drawer, it seemed. It is the oldest library-based public access television in the country. The television staff transport their equipment to as many public meetings as there are staff and students to manage the hours. There is a computer room available for public use with workstations available to all ages. It is so heavily used that there is often a waiting list for times to log on. For many newcomers it becomes their first anchor in the community. There is a drive-up window to drop off things or pick up reserved material. *And* there is a real old-fashioned quiet room overlooking the front entrance with lots of glass and comfortable seating.

The total project was dedicated May 13, 1997, after a twelve-year process. Glass and stone wrap around this busy home of information gathering, processing, and disseminating. But I know, as we all know, that it is not the building that makes the library, it is the people inside who make it work. At the hearings we heard from patrons over and over again—we love our library! What patrons were really saying was that they love the people who work in the library, who serve them willingly. The stone and glass are only the structure, prepared for the next millennium.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Virginia L. Rose was a Monroe County Public Library Trustee from 1981 to 1997. She served six years as President, including the last several during construction. She is also the Immediate Past President of the Indiana Library Trustee Association.

MONROE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Architects: K.R. Montgomery & Associates, Anderson

