

## Vernon Hills finally will get its library

BY RUSSELL LISSAU  
rlissau@dailyherald.com

For more than a decade, Cook Memorial Public Library District officials — and scores of patrons — dreamed of a branch in Vernon Hills that would complement the historic library in downtown Libertyville.

At noon Saturday, their dream will come true when the building dubbed the Aspen Drive Library opens.

The one-story, brick-and-glass building on Aspen Drive south of Route 60 is the village's first dedicated library.

Book-loving residents have been using a small, temporary facility in the basement of village hall since 2003, all the while hoping a more

appropriate library would be built.

Before then, residents of the sizable district — which serves parts of Libertyville, Vernon Hills, Green Oaks, Mettawa, Mundelein and Indian Creek — had only the library at Libertyville's Cook Park to use.

Current and former Cook Memorial officials are thrilled the time finally has come for the village to get its own library.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the look on parents' and kids' faces when they walk in," former library board President Aaron Lawlor said. "It's one of the moments when you find out if your public service really

See **FINALLY** on **PAGE 4**

Continued from Page 1

made a difference."

The first plans for a Vernon Hills library surfaced in a 1994 recommendation from a citizens advisory committee. The drive to Libertyville was a factor, and so was Vernon Hills' rapid growth.

The town's quest to be an independent community played a big role, too, Lawlor said.

"I think that as the population grew, so did the need for a stronger sense of community and demand for community institutions — schools, park districts and the library," said Lawlor, who now serves on the Lake County Board.

Between 1998 and 2003, however, local voters shot down three construction plans, all of which included some sort of a building in Vernon Hills and either expansion or new construction in Libertyville.

All three plans would have required tax-rate increases, which worked against the proposals.

The public animosity between some residents in Vernon Hills and Libertyville helped sink the plans, too.

"When I ran for this position in 2005, (a Vernon Hills library) was like a dream," library board member Mary Ann Phillips said. "And it was a dream that everyone said would never become a reality."

But in 2007, then-Director Dan Armstrong floated

a new proposal: a \$12 million plan that would fund a new library in Vernon Hills and expansion of the Cook Park site without a tax-rate increase. And because the plan wouldn't affect the tax rate, it didn't need to appear on a ballot.

"I felt that we needed to think outside the box and come up with a plan that was contained within our existing operating budget," said Lawlor, who was the board's president when Armstrong unveiled his proposal. "It's not as large as any of the referendum plans, but neither is the price tag."

After much deliberation, the library board approved the plan and got to work. Eventually the price tag grew to \$14 million, but officials kept their promise and didn't raise taxes to fund the effort.

"It was very important to stick to that plan," said veteran Cook Memorial employee Mary Ellen Stembal, who's been serving as acting director since Armstrong resigned earlier this year. "We had to be creative. We had to make some concessions. But we did it."

Phillips believes the opening of the library will help end the strife between Libertyville and Vernon Hills, which seemingly has lessened in recent years.

"I think this will finalize the healing process," she said. "There was a lot of animosity, but we're all one big

community, and we have to work together."

The new library is within walking distance of all six Hawthorn Elementary District 73 schools and is just north of the Vernon Hills Park District's Sullivan Community Center, which has a water park and other amenities.

The library's proximity to those facilities is expected to help draw patrons — especially young ones.

"I think it's the perfect place for the library," Stembal said. "It is so accessible to kids."

The 20,000-square-foot library sits on more than 3 acres. It's airy and bright, walled on two sides with floor-to-ceiling windows that let in plenty of natural light.

Comfortable chairs will be located throughout the space for patrons. And the

space itself is remarkable; the public space isn't divided by walls, so departments will seamlessly transition into each other.

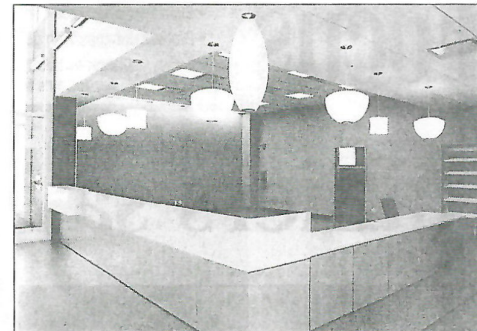
That design element was deliberate, Stembal said.

"The idea was to keep the floor plan open so there's a lot of flexibility to move things around," she said.

The library doesn't only have room for books and CDs and DVDs. It features two study rooms, a large public meeting room that can be split into two spaces, a computer lab and a quiet reading room for adults.

Some of those design elements also will be used in the Cook Park Library project, which is expected to wrap up in October or November.

The same light fixtures, furnishings, fabrics and other aspects will be installed there to create a sense of



GILBERT R. BOUCHER II/gboucher@dailyherald.com

The Aspen Drive Library in Vernon Hills will open July 10 as the newest addition to the Cook Memorial Public Library District.

continuity, Stembal said.

Library board President Bonnie Quirke is excited to see both projects nearing completion.

"(The construction) shows

the district that we place high emphasis on the services libraries provide," she said. "We are as committed to the library as the resident in the district are."