Oconee library upgrades expected to attract more users

Additional traffic could draw attention to need for a new Seneca branch

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SENECA — Library officials that hosted the public with refreshments Tuesday to officially celebrate the rolling out of the high-tech upgrades expect the improvements to substantially increase traffic at each facility.

This increased demand will focus attention again on the need for a new library in Seneca, members of the Oconee County Public Library (OCPL) Board of Trustees predict.

The recent upgrades include Wi-Fi capabilities that allow patrons with personal laptops and other wireless devices to surf the Internet free of charge.

For those who still rely on the library's computers to enter cyberspace, they now can get online faster through a new Metro-E connection. The added bandwidth allows users to maximize their time online.

John Adams, chairman of the OCPL Board of Trustees, said he expects more library visits as patrons become more familiar with the enhanced and convenient services.

Adams said that additional demand on services at all branches could be most noticeable and taxing on the outdated Seneca facility. He said the Seneca branch provides support to more than 44 percent of all library traffic in Oconee County, although the Walhalla branch is three times the size.

"Unlike other branches in Oconee County, the Seneca branch also supports a respectable number of patrons from the Clemson area," Adams said.

Also, Adams said that planned new development in the Seneca area makes a new facility all the more necessary.

Adams said the OCPL Board discussed ways to move the project forward in Seneca during a retreat Saturday. He said the issue would be discussed in more detail at the Board's regularly scheduled meeting Sept. 28.

In April, the Oconee County Council accepted from the school district a five-acre tract adjacent to the new Blue Ridge Elementary School on Oak Street (Highway 59) that could only be used for a new library. If nothing is done with the land in five years, the property goes back to the school district.

In a letter Adams wrote to County Council Chairman Reg Dexter in January, he said the Board estimates it would cost $9.1 million for a turnkey facility, including furniture, fixtures and equipment.

Adams said recent talks have centered on the possibility of raising private donations and grants for the furniture, fixtures and equipment, which would reduce the costs to the county.

Also, he said the project has been submitted to the South Carolina State Library as a "shovel-ready" project for consideration under the federal stimulus plan.

The County Council has indicated it would consider issuing bonds to pay for American with Disabilities Act (ADA) upgrades to the courthouse, additional space at the Detention Center and a new fire station with a county Emergency Services presence in Westminster. So far, county officials have excluded funding a new Seneca library from its funding discussions.

However, Adams remains optimistic.

"I have informed our Board that the new library opportunity is 'ours to lose,'" Adams said.