New library facility breaks ground

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GENEVA - About 150 people gathered at the former Sixth Street School site in Geneva for the July 27 groundbreaking of the Geneva Public Library's new $7.7 million facility, which officials expect to open next year.

Eleven shovels tied with bright teal ribbons were set up in a row as library and city officials recounted the history of getting to this point, as well as thanked supporters for backing a new future for the library.

"As I stand here today, I am humbled and grateful," library director Christine Lazaris said. "I can't help but think of our forefathers and mothers and the excitement they must have felt when they built the very first library in Geneva. Times have changed since our library first opened in Geneva in 1908."

Yet, Lazaris said, what has remained constant throughout all the changes in history is the community commitment to the library.

"It's your commitment to realizing the library as a community hub that, as our mission statement says, 'connects people to discover, inspire and grow,'" Lazaris said. "The printed book is the greatest technology for communicating and sharing information. A hundred and 10 years later, it remains one of our greatest forms of communication and serves as an information and learning constellation.'

Lazaris said a library is more than "a home for books," but as Dale Carnegie said, "the people's university."

"A place where everyone can learn," Lazaris said. "A place where everyone has equal access to information. ... We start a new chapter together."

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Though Geneva has 23,800 residents and the library district serves about 30,000 residents, the library logged 272,000 visitors last year, Lazaris said.

"We thank you valuably and helping us commit for literacy for all - early literacy, digital literacy, civic literacy. We all learn from one another and we are so appreciative," Lazaris said. "Thank you for investing in lifelong learning and being with us at every age and stage of life."

Library board president Robert Shiffler recounted the history of the library board's efforts to buy the property, survey the community, hold public meetings and seek the public's input on library design.

Shiffler looked out over the crowd and said, "Wow." Shiffler thanked the voters who supported a $21.8 million bond issue last year to build the new facility and supporters who put out more than 700 vote yes signs on their lawns.

"All you're going to need to know is 227 S. Seventh St., Geneva, Illinois," Shiffler said.

Mayor Kevin Burns picked up on some themes Lazaris spoke of, saying that while Geneva's new library was built in 1966, the work for it began in 1894.

"Eleven decades later, we are here to turn the soil and to welcome with great anticipation and excitement the advent of a new library," Burns said. "And as Director Lazaris said, it is important to reaffirm our commitment to the library's mission - to discover, to inspire and to grow. I believe - and I hope all of you believe as well - that libraries have been, are and will always be America's original and best social networking sites."

Burns said the library is where all people can go to find answers to complex questions and most common questions of the day. Libraries also allow people to disconnect as well as to reconnect, Burns said.

"Paraphrasing library scientist R. David Lankee, Burns said, "Average libraries build collections. Good libraries build programs and services. Great libraries build communities."

"So on behalf of the City Council and the city's professional staff, on behalf of the 22,000 people and 1,000-plus businesses that call Geneva home," Burns said, "I say to the library board of trustees, to the library staff to the volunteers and to you, the patrons: Thank you for sharing your vision and advancing your vision to make Geneva a better and a stronger community that we can all celebrate."

Neighbors Kathy Carey and Patty Hachtel of Geneva were among the attendees who applauded and cheered at the first shovel of the groundbreaking.

"I think the library that we have is a wonderful place and I spend hours there every week - it's very undersized for the size of our community," Carey said.

"They've done a miraculous job updating it and trying to keep it up-to-date for us, but ... they just don't have the space," Hachtel agreed.

"I am excited about the new library because of social media ... I was worried that libraries were going to become extinct," Hachtel said. "And this new exhibit is a new foundation that I have they are not going to be extinct. They are a well and growing and it is exciting. I would hate to think my grandchildren would not experience the love of reading and reading in a library."