

Speech to ACLD Foundation Members
Annual Meeting Sunday, September 11, 2016

Linking Gainesville's Architectural Past to
Alachua County's Future
Presented by: Ann W. Williams,
Former Library Director

Bond Referendum:

Having been appointed Library Director in May 1987, we set a course for planning and building a new headquarters library, the mother ship of the Library District. Then, during the summer months, I received a call from the County Finance Director informing me that after legal review the October 15, 1985 referendum did not include authorization to issue bonds to build library buildings. Another referendum would have to be held to approve the issue of bond indebtedness.

So a second referendum was held on September 15, 1987 asking for approval of a \$19 million bond issue to build a new main library and four branches. A full page ad was published in the Gainesville Sun the day of the referendum urging residents to vote against the referendum. The referendum was approved by a narrow margin. Turnout was 11.7%, with 56% voting for, 44% against.

Bond Rating Agency Presentations in New York December 1987

The Library District was a brand new (October 1985) independent government seeking to issue \$19 million dollars in bonds to build a new main library and four branches. Investors would want to know that this 2-year-old independent government was stable, had a secure, voter approved, dedicated revenue stream, and that the leadership was duly qualified by training and experience to run such a unit of government. So off we went to New York to make bond rating presentations.

We presented our case to Moody's and Standard and Poor's on Wall Street. All I can say is WOW WHAT AN EXPERIENCE! Presentations were made by the Governing Board Chairman, Jean Chalmers, Steve Carr, County/District Finance Director, and Ann Williams, Library Director.

We were very pleased when the District received a favorable bond rating in the A category. Hard to believe I know, but I can't remember the exact rating but I think it was an A-.

Bonds were sold and finally we were ready to build libraries.

Building Location:

The next big decision would center on the location of the new Headquarter Library

- The first library had opened on February 25, 1918 at 419 East University Avenue. This Carnegie Library would be torn down to make way for the next library.
- On January 6, 1956 the new library was opened on the same spot at 419 E. University Avenue,
- Then on December 9, 1968 a new library was opened next to City Hall at 222 East University Avenue, just across the street from the first two libraries.

So where should this new Headquarters Library be located?

- Downtown?
- Follow the center of population and growth of Alachua County and locate further west, maybe the Millhopper area?
- More parking could be provided on a bigger site in the western part of the county.
- Our State Senator, George Kirkpatrick, urged moving the Headquarters Library to the center of population in the western part of Alachua County.

After much discussion the decision was to place the building in its current location, where two previous public libraries had stood.

- The City of Gainesville owned the property and would sell it to the District for a reduced price.
- The 1956 Library building was still standing on this property and had to be demolished. During that process asbestos was discovered in the old building and a special hazmat team had to be called in to safely remove all the asbestos before demolition could proceed.
- The new Headquarters Library would be the east side anchor of the City of Gainesville, be close to the public transit system making access easier for all citizens, and would serve as the east side branch of the county system.

Design Development

Now that we had a site, design of the building could commence.

Architects were hired

- Hunter McKellips Associates, Architects and William Turnbull Associates, Design Consultant

Parking became one of the first design issues

- Not only would cars, bicycles, and other modes of transportation need to park somewhere so visitors could go into the library, but the two bookmobiles would need access to the collection and have covered parking.
- And staff would need to park when coming to work.
- Ideas that created lots of discussion included:
 - Pull the building to the sidewalk and let users park in the new City parking garage, or use metered parking in the downtown area.
 - Construct a library parking garage at the front of the building, **OR**
 - Use available space at the front of the building for a ground level parking lot.

Once the footprint of the building was decided it was moved as far east on the site towards Sweetwater Branch as possible, and the remaining property on the west side of the building would be dedicated to parking.

- Staff were required to park off site. The employee union negotiated with the Library District to supply a certain number of paid parking permits for staff in the City parking garage. Others were on their own to find long term parking in the area. Some purchased permits of their own in private parking lots and

other places, or fed the long term parking meters in the immediate vicinity of the library.

- The Architects spent many hours with staff, Friends of the Library, and the Library Boards to understand library functions in order to design a building that would be functional, compatible with the cityscape, and would take advantage of the view of the creek and oak trees. They visited many local buildings such as the Thomas Center, Hippodrome Theatre, and others to develop their design concept. They described their final design as “Alachua County’s living room.”
- The Headquarters Library would not only be a public access library but would serve as the central support location for all library operations, meaning:
 - Library Administration
 - Collection ordering, cataloging, and maintenance.
 - Automated services for public library catalog access, office automation
 - And facilities operations.
- Public Meeting Spaces would be an essential element of the design. Not only would we need to provide space for all the typical services such as books, automation, and staff support, our mission required us to provide free access to public meeting space where community issues, special programs, community forums, literary discussions, and so much more could be held. The meeting rooms would provide the space for verbal exchange of any and all ideas, as well as community issues of concern.

Construction

Construction began in 1988 and was completed in January 1991.

As the building began to rise out of the ground many people were surprised by its size and presence. Lots of discussion ensued with letters in the Gainesville Sun about the expense of construction, as well as the long term operating costs. And of course, there was great concern about inadequate parking on the site.

This building is now generating much of its own energy with the solar panels you see on the roof. I commend the current staff for this implementation of such wonderful new technology.

Due to the slop of the site as the foundation was being dug we discovered water. The wet soil had to be removed, French drains installed, and loads and loads of fill brought in. After compacting, the soil met specifications for pouring the foundation and construction continued.

A tile roof was selected not only for its looks, but its durability. The life expectancy can be up to 100 years. I guess we will have to wait and see how that plays out.

When the building was dried in the contractor, Perry Construction, held a “topping out” celebration in fall 1990.

- I learned that the practice of topping out a new building can be traced to the ancient Scandinavian religious rite of placing a tree atop a new building to appease the tree-dwelling spirits displaced in its

construction. A tree or leafy branch is placed on the topmost wood or iron beam, often with flags and streamers tied to it. A toast is usually drunk and sometime workers are treated to a meal.

- In masonry construction the rite celebrates the bedding of the last block or brick. In some cases, a topping out event is held at an intermediate point, such as when the roof is dried in.

Mr. Perry held a lovely topping out dinner in the main reading room of the yet to be completed building and invited some of the construction crew, Library leaders, Library staff, and community supporters. It was a lovely evening and must have done the job of appeasing the tree-dwelling spirits.

Public Art Projects

Public art was incorporated in the library construction plan as an extension of the educational and cultural mission of the public library. The ability to expose library users to actual art pieces, not just books about art, may be the first and only exposure some people have to the world of art.

Doris Bardon was tapped to help the Library District prepare a call to artists, evaluate the responses and judge the final presentations.

Through that process the library is now the owner and exhibiter of two fine paintings: Richard Frank's "Stuart's Dream", and Steven Lotz's "Alachua Dream Column", and the blown glass color wheel that highlights the full spectrum of colors in the cupola of the room we now occupy.

Moving

Once the building was completed staff were given the task of moving the contents of the old library to the new.

In order to make the move the old Headquarters Library was closed at 5 pm on Sunday, December 9, 1990 and reopened in the new Headquarters Library on February 2, 1991. Almost a 2-month closure.

We encouraged library users to checkout as many books as they wanted and to then return them to the new headquarters library when it opened so we did not have to move them. They could also return materials to any branch or bookmobile during the closure.

- Headquarters Library check out periods were extended to 12 weeks. Statistics told us that the number of library materials checked-out during this time doubled.

The library computer system was down during most of the closure, which made library operations almost completely come to a halt. Once Automated Services was up and running in the new Headquarters Library, operations resumed in Technical Services and Circulation.

There was discussion of having a book brigade of library book carts being pushed across University Avenue from the old building to the new building. This would have made a beautiful photo op but due to safety concerns a mover was hired.

Staff did all the packing of the collection. Carefully marking each box with call numbers/letters and description of the contents. A team of staff remained in the old library to coordinate the movement of boxes into the moving truck. Another team was located at the new library to receive and place the contents on the proper shelves. We also enjoyed the help of a team of volunteers throughout the move.

Because so much future shelving space had been planned for, the old collection seemed very small. Staff spread the collection out on the shelves available and we all explained that this was a good thing – we had planned for future growth.

Once in the new HQ and before we reopened, we spent time doing intensive staff and volunteer training such as:

- Security/safety
- Fire drills
- New phone system
- Computer system
- Procedures for patron services
- And more

The Friends of the Library held an appreciation luncheon for staff and volunteers on January 17, 1991 in the new meeting room.

The headquarters library construction and move was completed on time and within budget.

Many library users just couldn't understand why we would have to close, and for so long. I think they had a better understanding when we reopened in the new building and they saw it from the inside.

Opening Celebration

We tapped Richard and Mary Ann Green to plan and execute the grand opening events. Richard also designed and produced the grand opening brochure that was the souvenir for the grand opening.

We had a preview party at the new building the night before we opened to the public. It was a lovely party sponsored by the Friends of the Library.

February 2, 1991 the new library was opened at 401 East University Avenue on the site where the Carnegie and the City Library had once stood. Representative Sid Martin, a long time library supporter and a sponsor in Tallahassee of the special district act that created the ACLD, helped cut the ribbon to open the new headquarters library.

And as the old saying goes. . . The rest is history.

Closing Remarks

After opening the Headquarters Library, we went on to build 4 new branches as designated in the bond issue:

- Millhopper

- Tower Road
- Archer
- Newberry

With capital projects funding we renovated and expanded 5 existing branches:

- Alachua
- Waldo
- High Springs
- Hawthorne
- Micanopy

And even more have been added and renovated since then.

How many of you watch the TV 20 news? If you do I hope you have noticed the montage of photos of local green spaces and local landmark buildings at the beginning of their broadcast, and have noticed that the headquarters library is featured as one of the landmark buildings. I take that to mean that we live in a community that values the positive contributions of our public library system to our community.

All the years I spent in this library system and compared notes with other public library systems in Florida I can assure you that the Alachua County community is unique. Many communities value their local educational institutions but struggle to maintain funding to provide an adequate level of service. When Alachua County citizens voted to tax themselves for better public library service they made a commitment to making their community better.

Although many people at the time did not vote one way or the other for the library district they were a bit surprised at the price tag. Some showed up at our first budget hearings to state their objections to library taxes. They were overwhelmed by the beauty, size, and functionality of the new buildings. But I can report that as time passed and the library system expanded these complaints subsided. Talk of dismantling the special taxing district ended and the majority of citizens began to take pride in their system and the impact it had on their community.

So . . . as I titled my presentation tonight “Linking Gainesville’s Architectural Past to Alachua County’s Future seems to fit what has been achieved. Our system of landmark public library buildings is contributing greatly to Alachua County’s Future. Just look at the use statistics presented by our library director. See how many people use the meeting rooms to share information, exchange ideas, discuss literature and so much more.

See how many people use the public access computers at the library, because even though we tend to think that everyone has access to technology, actually they don’t.

I will always be grateful for the wonderful opportunity you gave me to participate in the development of this unique and vibrant community resource, called the Alachua County Library District. I had the opportunity to work with a staff team that was totally committed to the mission of public library services. Without these people the Alachua County Library District would not have become a reality.

From the facilities staff who oversaw the construction and long term maintenance of all the library buildings, to the staff who managed the library collection and helped library users connect with all the library's resources, they breathed life into what a public library can do for a community.

Great credit must be given to all library staff who over the years have made library services a reality in a system of extraordinary buildings.

And you and all the other library supporters in this community should congratulate yourselves on the gift of lifelong learning you have given your community.