

Library expansion may cost \$20 million

by **Kate Czaplinski**
Press Staff

An estimated \$20-million expansion plan for the Ridgefield Library is in the works and the Library Board said it will likely know by May how much the town will be asked to contribute.

The \$20 million is not a solid number, board members said Tuesday, and they are looking to raise a significant portion through philanthropic donations. They are completing a feasibility study on how much can be raised privately, due to be ready by April or May. The library has \$2 million in the bank for an expansion plan.

Board members presented their plan to the Board of Finance Tuesday night. In February they gave a similar presentation to the Board of Selectmen but this week they offered the \$20-million estimate and were confident about the feasibility of taking the plan to a special referendum this fall so voters may decide on the project.

If approved, they want to break ground in September 2011.

The project would not impact next year's budget.

"Previous times we've come to you and said 'can we go?'" board member Peter Coffin said. "We want to keep you filled in and be transparent."

The plan razes most of the current library except for the E.W. Morris building and leaves the old playhouse untouched. It would create a more usable and "flexible" 45,000-square-foot space that is completely handicap accessible, unlike the current building. There will also



Press

If the town and the library board go ahead with plans to rebuild the Ridgefield Library, this section, nearly 110 years old, would be the only section that is not demolished.

be about 8,000-square feet for future expansion, if necessary, in the basement.

Board member Bill Wyman added that additions made to the 26,000-square-foot building in the past don't work together physically or environmentally.

Of the 26,000 square feet, only about 13,500 square feet are usable.

Upgrades to the existing space would cost \$4 million to \$6 million.

The town now pays 75% of the library's operating budget, and board members said they project the budget cost will not go up because of the larger space.

There will be no new staff hired and the building is proposed to run on geothermal energy to save money.

"The fact that we would be growing so much larger and are

able to keep operating costs flat gives you an idea of how much we are throwing away in the current building's inefficiencies," member Lori Dowling said.

The 35-year-old HVAC equipment and 30-year-old roof are major problems in keeping the library operating, Mr. Coffin said. One day in February the library had to close due to heat failure, and leaks have been a problem.

The library is the most-used building in town, board members said. About 5% of the population is in the library each day.

Library use has risen dramatically during the last 10 years. According to the board's calculations, about 400,000 people came through the door in 2009 and took out 428,000 books. Seventy-five percent of the townspeople have a library

card.

Board of Finance member Marty Heiser said he believes the library truly needs to expand but worried the voters may not feel comfortable approving a \$9-million project or however much might be asked of the town.

"When I'm in there, I'll look at the oil paintings of the old patrons and think, 'Gee, we need more of these guys,'" Mr. Heiser said.

Finance Chair Peter Gomez said use of library's endowment will likely be part of the discussion soon.

Library board member Philip Lodewick said the expansion is a necessity and the board is studying an expansion carefully so it is the best investment for the town's future.

"Let's do it once, let's do it right and do it now," he said.