

Library is safe

Ad prompts official concern

by **Kate Czaplinski**

Press Staff

A Ridgefield Library print advertisement intended to tell people about the library's mission and problems with its aging building may have sent the wrong message about the building's fire safety, the town fire department and first selectman said this week.

A recent ad, "presented with support from the Friends of the Ridgefield Library," said the building is exempt from some safety codes and a fire would be "disastrous" for visitors, prompting Fire Chief Heather Burford and Fire Marshal David Lathrop to meet with library representatives recently and go through the building, from top to bottom.

The problem arose after a paid library advertisement appeared in *The Press* last Thursday, June 3, that mentioned some of the deficiencies of the library building.

The advertisement is part of the library's marketing campaign to "raise awareness" about the library, board chair Peter Coffin said.

The library has discussed early plans for a library expansion with the Board of Selectmen — razing most of the current building — and has said its board is pursuing private fund-raising efforts. Fund-raising and expansion plans were not mentioned in this advertisement.

The ad is split into "up side/down side" sections. On the "up side" the ad lists how many people use the library each day and the resources available. The "down side" of the advertisement lists problems in the aging building including a leaky roof, uneven flooring, crumbling ceil-

ing tiles and that the library has "no security or sprinkler system."

The part of the ad that caught the eye of the fire department reads: "The building operates under a grandfather clause that exempts it from meeting the basic standards of today's safety codes. A fire would be disastrous for the safety of visitors and in the loss of collections. We need a library that is safe and secure for all to visit."

"It was very surprising and we were a little shocked," Chief Burford said.

She said she has not received many calls about the advertisement but wants to be sure that that people don't get the wrong idea.

"The message we want to get across is that this is a safe building for you and your family to be in," Chief Burford said.

She said she is confident the library staff and visitors are in a safe environment, surrounded by protection systems that provide early detection and support safe exiting should an incident arise.

Chief Burford and Marshal Lathrop said the building is not "exempt" from basic safety codes, including Connecticut State Fire Safety Code and the National Fire Protection Association Life Safety Codes. The codes incorporate "the most advanced rules for alarms, egress, emergency lighting, smoke barriers, special hazard protection," the chief said. The library is in compliance with the codes and has been throughout the years as renovations and additions have been made.

While the library does not have a sprinkler system and though the fire department advocates sprinkler systems,

one is not required for the building under state fire safety codes, the fire officials said. If a new library were to be built, a sprinkler system would probably be needed because of a town ordinance on new construction, the chief said.

The fire marshal is required to inspect the building once a year. The library has its fire detection and alarm system checked twice a year, even though it is required to do so only once annually, Mr. Lathrop said.

The alarm system could be activated by heat and smoke and has activation pull stations. The system is monitored 24/7 by an outside company.

The building has a main entrance and exit and also several emergency exits.

Mr. Lathrop said doors in the library are fire rated — built to prevent the spread of smoke or fire. The doors in the main stairway, for example, are held open with magnets that would release if the alarm went off, in order to contain flames and smoke. Since handicapped visitors may not use elevators during an emergency, the main library stairway becomes an enclosed refuge from which emergency responders could rescue visitors who couldn't get to emergency exits.

The building is also equipped with emergency lighting and fire extinguishers. Staff practice evacuation procedures and properly store potential fire hazards.

"On our walk-through, it was clear the staff are conscientious of safety in the building," Chief Burford said. "Doors aren't blocked, everything is kept tidy."

Mr. Coffin, the library board chair, said the advertisement

was not intended to label the building as unsafe for visitors. He said the building meets standards legally but falls short in many ways, including the lack of a sprinkler system and ADA accessibility.

"The idea is not to tell people that we are an unsafe environment — more to say, you know, if a fire happened, there's no sprinklers to stop it and we could lose the whole collection," Mr. Coffin said. "We are just trying to raise awareness about the building."

Library Director Christina Nolan said the advertisement was intended to be educational.

"People have been in this building a long time — they know there is uneven flooring, and narrow staircases, it's not anything new," Ms. Nolan said. "They are just seeing it in black and white."

She worries about the building's ADA compliance shortfalls, especially.

She said the library has not received a single call about the advertisement.

The walk-through with the chief and fire marshal as a result of the advertisement ended up being very helpful, Ms. Nolan said, in that the library is planning for public fire drills and the director learned more about the main staircase's "area of refuge" capabilities.

"That really put my mind at ease," Ms. Nolan said.

First Selectman Rudy Marconi said he understands what the building's shortfalls are, but it is important the community knows the fire department makes sure the building has proper safety measures in place.

"To say the building is unsafe is the wrong message," Mr. Marconi said.