

Library elevator brings new life to community

SKANEATELES, NY (June 2, 2022) - People with strollers, sore knees, and wheelchairs will all soon be able to attend story times, movies, meetings, and concerts in the Skaneateles Library's second floor space.

Thanks to state and local grants and private donations, an elevator is being installed for patrons who are unable to use stairs or for whom stairs are difficult.

It has been a long time coming.

For decades, library patrons, board members, and staff have discussed the need for an elevator, to make the important second floor of the building accessible to all. What has made the elevator construction possible now, in addition to recent grants, is knowing the historic building's future and knowing that taking from current, scarce library space is temporary, said Library Board President Susanne Guske.

For many years, discussion about the obvious need for an elevator was complicated by how the building might expand to accommodate the community. Had the library board decided to do a significant renovation, an elevator would have been included in a totally different place.

In a breakthrough decision in 2019, as a result of many studies, the board voted to build a new library AND to preserve (and update) the landmark building in the center of downtown as important community space. The building will continue to house, and allow for expansion of the Barrow Art Gallery, and other non-profits (including the Chamber of Commerce). The beautiful period setting will also allow for year-round used book sales. The upstairs will remain a desirable meeting space downtown.

The board's popular decision allows the structure to remain within the same footprint residents have loved, while dramatically expanding library space, parking and opportunities with a new building on Fennell Street.

"The plans are very mindful of the needs of our downtown neighbors as well as our responsibility to provide library services and resources to all 9000 residents of our school district, 72% of whom live outside the village," Guske said.

Librarian Nickie Marquis is thrilled for what the elevator will offer starting right this minute. "We are still going to be functioning as a library in this building for at least the next three years," she said, while funds are raised to build at the new location. "This allows us to do the best we can with what we have in the interim."

As library staff and patrons have worked around the construction these past weeks, there has been a lot of enthusiasm, said Marquis. "Most people who come in are happy it is being done. It is not costing us. It is almost entirely funded by grants."

And it is the right thing to do. “Buildings need to be accessible,” said Marquis, “no matter what their age. It is responsible stewardship of the building, and we are fulfilling the library’s commitment to the community to be a usable space.”

During elevator construction, Mary Beth Schwartzwalder held story hour elsewhere (the fire house and the police department at Village Hall) and saw first-hand how larger, flexible and accessible spaces are helpful. “People have attended who would not have been able to attend upstairs in the library,” said Marquis. Schwartzwalder is the librarian for kids and teens.

Technically a vertical platform lift, the elevator will provide access to the second floor for wheelchairs, strollers and those with mobility or health issues that make climbing our long flight of stairs difficult. It will be surrounded by a custom-designed wood and glass enclosure to blend in with the historic ambiance of the building. The project is funded by a New York State Library Construction Grant with support from the Columbian Foundation, Emerson Foundation, and private donors.

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