

# Reading Room Goes Back to the Voters

By Anthony Hall

Admittedly, Lansing has been sour on new taxes lately. The most recent capitol improvement referendum for the Lansing Central School District, pared down by half of the original estimate, was soundly defeated by voters last spring. Along with that, the Lansing Community Library Center failed to find enough votes to create a tax district that would enable it to hire its first librarian and actually call itself a library.

Currently, the former school-house building near the Lansing Town Hall, while containing some 13,000 books and offering high-speed computer service and study

rooms for the public, can only call itself a reading center. It is affiliated with the Finger Lakes Library System, but it runs entirely on donations and volunteers.

To take the next step, they need to create a tax district and they are aiming to do so with a public referendum that they will pay for out of pocket. The vote will occur at the Lansing Central School on Dec. 11.

Having failed the first go-round, the reading room board has decided to take the book budget out of the equation, which brings the tax numbers down by 2 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value. "We'll raise the money for books another way," says Marlaine Darfler, chairwoman of the reading room's

board. "All we're asking for is a librarian and to keep the lights on," she says. The cost of that would be 15 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

They are almost there. Last time the issue, while sitting alongside a school election that included some intimidating numbers, lost by only 34 votes.

It was a setback for the reading room that appears to have community support and frequent use. It also has community support with 60 volunteers on active membership, who keep it staffed. Beyond that, the board raised more than \$400,000 for a capital improvement campaign that began in 2005 and ended, last spring, with a greatly

expanded building and improved services.

But it has been a long haul. When a group of literacy enthusiasts rented the former school house from the town in 2003, for the nominal price of \$1 a year, it was as empty as a shell. It required some tender-loving-care and, of course, books. The desk, shelves and reading material were all donations.

The interest was there, too. Home-school kids came with parents; public school kids came with classmates. The reading center became a hit with senior citizens at Woodsedge, who not only took out books, but took great pride in man

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## Reading

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ning the check out and reference desk. They had authors visit and Saturday morning readings for kids. "We got CDs and audio books. We got movies and high-speed access," says Darfler. "Whatever people wanted us to do, we did."

The board also feels they have defined themselves as a community resource and, technically, as a library. The reading center, for all that, looks and functions like a library. The problem is that no paid librarian is there to oversee the book catalogues, the services and the volunteers. Hours have been expanded to 30 hours per week. The donations, when needed, have come in. But you guarantee a librarian's salary with donations. "I also know people feel very strongly about no more taxes," Darfler says.

But benefits could also funnel into the community by the upgraded status. If it becomes a library, the county would kick in about \$25,000 a year and money would be available from the state, Darfler says. "Only independent libraries get support from the county, but we don't, because we're not a library," she says.

"This is the biggest bang for your buck, here," she adds, "and it goes nowhere but here. This is not a county tax that gets shared. It goes right into the library. This is a legacy for the community. This is a place for kids to study. This is for people who will not go downtown to get books. It's a real community hub. And I think the harder times get, who wants to go downtown and pay for parking and then get a ticket, because you're in the library too long?"

**Volunteers**