

Library battle for the ages: Teens and oldsters both want their space



Photo by Jeffrey Thompson, Star Tribune

Friends Terrence Daniels, left, and Senai Tesfaldet, both 17, were at the Roseville library on Thursday to do a little browsing on the Internet. The Ramsey County Library system is proposing an expansion that would include an enclosed teen center with computers.

Suburbs are designing libraries with an eye to serving two age groups who make up 70 percent of patrons, but have different agendas.

When the school day ends, the Roseville library comes alive with the sound of teenage voices.

"We, like, whisper and stuff," said Terrence Daniels, 17, who was using the library's computers after school recently, along with two of his high school buddies.

One time, he said, "we were talking and this old guy kept going, 'Shhhh.' Remember that?" he said, nodding to one of his friends. "I was like, 'Are you serious?'"

A generation gap is brewing between two of the most vital segments of library patrons: Older adults want a quiet place to work in solitude. And teenagers crave a place to hang out with friends and work on projects, but also want a quiet study spot.

Cramped quarters in some buildings and the technology revolution that's transforming libraries have added to the tension.

Libraries are responding with changing designs. In Roseville, part of the proposed library expansion calls for an enclosed teen center with meeting rooms for group work, its own computers and individual quiet study spots. On the other side of the metro, preliminary designs for new libraries in Maple Grove and Plymouth call for an area created for the 55-plus patron and separate areas for teens.

"We need to continue to attract the young without offending our older population," said Susan Nemitz, director of the Ramsey County Library system.

Both groups are vital to the library, making up a combined 70 percent of the customer base.

Libraries want teens

In recent years, libraries all across the country have been working hard to draw teenagers into their buildings.

They've expanded their offerings to include DVDs and video games, waived late fines, and created teen zones and teen advisory councils that come up with programming.

Poetry slams, knitting classes and other nontraditional library activities have been added, contributing to the noisier library phenomenon.

"Of course, teens love to be social, they love to be interactive. They like to talk about what they're doing," said Paula Brehm-Heeger, president of the Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association.

That coupled with the infusion of technology in libraries has raised the decibel level from the days when people came to the library just to read.

"With technology, that's a whole new area for libraries, in general," Brehm-Heeger said. "The landscape of the libraries has changed."

The Roseville library, known for its Dunn Bros. Coffee shop, is the busiest library in the state in terms of circulation, Nemitz said. A total of 1.6 million items circulated through the Roseville library in 2006.

"We're so far away from where the demand is that we need to up the computing resources," Nemitz said. "We are also having noise issues because the teens are squished in with the adults and the kids."

The biggest complaint, she said, is the noise level. "We're going to build some quiet study rooms --places where students can work on an assignment in groups, as is the norm now."

Daniels and his friend, Senai Tesfaldet, 17, said they liked the idea for the enclosed teen area. "I think that's smart," Tesfaldet said. "I'd use it."

Giving teens their own space will prevent some of the generational clashes over things like cell phones, Nemitz said.

While many young people perceive their cell phones as tools they can't live without, older patrons often don't want to hear cell phone conversations, much less the musical ring tones in the library, she said.

Lots of people use cell phones

But Ken Behringer, director of the Dakota County Library system, cautioned that teenagers aren't the only cell phone talkers.

"I don't think that noise in the library is necessarily a generational issue," he said. "Adults talk on their cell phones and that's sometimes bothersome."

Behringer has seen more of a demand for programs for teens than in the past. Recently, they established a teen services coordinator position. "It's a growth area for us."

Amy Ryan, director of the Hennepin County Library, said when she started in the field 30 years ago, libraries served children and adults. There was nothing special for teens and nothing designated for adults older than 55.

Today, libraries are turning their attention to both groups while trying to walk the difficult line between satisfying their opposite expectations. "This is a new generation who see libraries as a place to hang out and a place to have fun," she said.

In Maple Grove, the early ideas for the older adult area sound like a cozy den or living room: overstuffed chairs, a fireplace and lamps for lighting.

As libraries continue to evolve from solely information sources into community gathering places, the changes may lead to networking between the generations.

Margaret Gillespie, who is in charge of capital partnerships for the Hennepin County Library, recalled a recent incident at the Westonka library in Mound.

Every Friday, one of the library workers conducts a Gaming for Teens class. One day, a library customer whom Gillespie described as probably between 55 and 60 years old, dropped by the class. He was carrying an iPod and he wanted one of the teens to show him how to use it, Gillespie said.

"Once you see that happen, you think, 'Oh, how can we build on that?'"

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