Bree Drapa - Director, Westford Public Library

I love my library building. I love how old it is, how beautiful it is, how it creaks like an old ship when the wind blows, and how there is that one squeaky board – you know the one. I love its charm, its grace, its character. There is so much to love…. but there is also so much to do.

My library building is old! It was built in 1844, something my Midwest transplant brain has a hard time understanding. My building pre-dates the Civil War. It was around to watch the troops muster and drill right across the street on the town green. It was built without electricity, indoor plumbing, the internet and other modern conveniences. It was built before automobiles, so much so that now our front porch sits in the right of way of Vermont Route 128 and the historic windows rattle as the plow and large trucks go by.

This wonderful old building has served this town in so many capacities. It has always been a public building – never a church and never officially a school. It has hosted town meetings, traveling troupes of performers, and even indoor half court basketball in the 1950s. It served as overflow for the school next door and some town residents remember toasting marshmallows on the coal stove in the basement between lessons. It has served as the library since the late 1970s and has been in its current state since the early 2000s. The library is one of the nicest buildings in town and people feel proud to have it in their town.

If you own an old house, you know there is always something breaking or an ongoing project. Running an old library is no different. On top of collection development, budgeting and programming, repair and maintenance take up a large portion of my time. I have learned so much about plumbing, wiring, fire codes, crawl spaces, insulation, preservation and attics.

In the past 15 years or so we have: installed a heat pump, replaced our heating oil tank, upgraded our lighting for energy efficiency and brightness, completely insulated the building, installed a sump pump after the basement flooded, put more outlets in, upgraded our porch and handicap accessible ramp, redid our parking lot – twice, painted the exterior, and fixed every rotten clapboard. I’m sure there are more things I could list, but you get the picture. Of those projects, three stand out as being very impactful.

1. Insulation – before insulating there was a foot of air between the exterior and interior wall of the library. With help from VT Historic Preservation, we were able to insulate and cut our heating costs by 70%.
2. The Heat Pump – we have lovely historic windows that do not open. It would get so hot in the building that the computers would shut off and our lighting started to melt. One time our thermostat flipped from 99 to H. While you can interpret that H as you like, I can tell you it was not a pleasant working environment. With the heat pump, we now have comfortable temperatures and our lights and technology work a lot better. Our staff also works better! People stay and cool off; programming is much more comfortable.
3. The new ramp – secure, pleasing to the eye, and accessible – a win for all our patrons. This accessibility project has spurred us on to look at other ways to make our library more accessible. We have plans!

With all that improvement, you might think we are done – but no – there is always another challenge to keep this old building serving this ever-changing community.

Looking ahead I see three major challenges, and these are things that I think many other libraries in Vermont will also be struggling with:

1. Accessibility – We often say, “Libraries are for Everyone”, but not everyone can get into all the places at my library. Our children’s area is not accessible. Built on an area that used to be a stage, you must climb four steps to get up there. There is no ramp or lift. Not only does this limit patrons with mobility issues, but it also limits access to families with strollers. Our bathroom and entryway have accessibility issues. While they might be legally or ideally accessible, reality is quite different. Accessibility changes like the ones we need are very expensive.
2. Space – Maybe people in 1844 were smaller – but we could certainly use some more space! I just don’t see how we can make it happen. We are right up against VT Route 128 and the back third of our library sits in a flood plain/wetland zone. Adding another story on top would change our historic architecture. We keep the floorplan flexible, but it can be very tight with programming. We also must keep our collection weeded and small in order to fit our space.
3. Water – both for drinking and waste. Our building sits on the site of an old tannery and our well water is not drinkable. It is contaminated with arsenic used in the tanning process. We are also the only public toilet in town. We have an aging shared waste water system with the town office next door. Our leach field is under the town office parking lot. Our community is working hard to develop a community waste water system, but it is challenging. If this system does not pass and the old system fails, we have very few waste water solutions. Thankfully, the state of Vermont has been generous with grants to help out this system, but it still causes division in the town.

And, of course, this is all done by a volunteer Board of Trustees and one full time employee – me. We do not have a facilities manager – no building in our town does! We lack the TIME, MONEY, and EXPERTISE to handle all the building projects that should be done. Writing grants and fundraising take up so much time. Permitting and project managing take up so much time. Researching and talking to experts to know what is needed takes up so much time. Plus, we are supposed to be running a vibrant library for our community!

One other “building” area I would like to talk about is our digital infrastructure. I know that technology is another part of this testimony, but I see our digital infrastructure suffering from some of the same problems as our physical infrastructure. It is not accessible to all our patrons. It needs regular maintenance. It suffers from looking dated and out of touch, just like carpet and furniture. I also have the same problems with being able to “fix” it - I lack the TIME, MONEY, and EXPERTISE. I would like to see digital infrastructure included as part of the library’s facilities.

How can the state help in all of this? I think MONEY is self-explanatory, and TIME might be an issue on our end, but I think the state could get creative with EXPERTISE. Our problems are not unique to Westford – accessibility was the top issue in a recent VTLIB facilities survey. Consultants with preservation, accessibility and construction expertise, architects who are vetted and understand libraries, grouping the ordering of supplies, etc. creative solutions would have a great impact on the library community, especially our small and rural libraries.

Thank you for your time.