

Reimagining our libraries to better serve Arlington

By **Andrea Nicolay**
Director of libraries

The library is currently embarking on a yearlong study of services and spaces, and we're calling it "Reimagining Our Libraries." As we plan for future generations of library users, we celebrate two milestones in 2017: the Robbins Library will turn 125, and the Edith M. Fox Branch Library (originally known as the East Branch of the Robbins Library) has its centennial. The libraries share an incredible history and pride of place in Arlington, within the Minuteman Network and statewide. We rank among the highest in circulation, children's program attendance, e-content circulation and especially teen print circulation. The question is, how much better could we be for current library users and future generations? Arlington residents expect a high level of service from the town, from great schools to efficient public works and thoughtful community planning. The libraries are part of the mix that makes Arlington such an attractive place to live and work.

Why now

It's a given that libraries must adapt and stay relevant to all members of our complex society. In the 25 years since the Robbins Library doubled in size with the 1992 addition, Arlington's demographics have

changed dramatically—and so have public library services across the country. Since 1992 an entire generation of library users has come of age. Digital natives themselves have children who've never known a world without smart phones and tablets. According to the Arlington Master Plan, in the last 15 years the number of families with children has grown to 48 percent and the projected school enrollment increases are well-documented. We hear a wide variety of languages spoken in the library—at least 15 percent of Arlingtonians were born outside of the United States according to 2010 census data. How might wayfinding be improved to better serve those who are brand new to our library or who are just beginning to learn English? Library collections have grown to support non-traditional materials like the "Discover It Yourself" collection in the Children's Room and the "Library of Things" collection for adults. We now offer sewing machines, kitchen gadgets and other tools to support the hobbies and interests of Arlingtonians. The library of 1992 wasn't designed to accommodate these unique collections, nor was it designed with flexible spaces or bookshelves and furniture that can be easily moved.

What could be

Back in the day, the library was a place for

quiet individual study. That need is still there, but increasingly, so is the need for spaces where people can work collaboratively. We see that all over, but especially in the Teen area; the place is jumping once school lets out. Our two study rooms at Robbins are in constant use. So are our community rooms, where people gather to explore arts and culture, promote civic engagement, educate and socialize.

What if our library had...

- More room for gathering and easy-to-rearrange tables and chairs?

- Distinct, expanded Teen space that accommodates studying and socializing?

- A soundproof space for those who seek total quiet?

- A revitalized Children's Room with more space for story times and pop-up programs?

- Optimal natural light on all floors, and brighter artificial lighting?

- Self-serve holds to reduce checkout times?

- A new reference service point to promote efficient customer assistance?

The Fox Library is a neighborhood hub that many consider an extension of their living room or playroom. The Friends of Fox formed to support the facility through a budget crisis over a decade ago and the

branch has seen modest improvements—and a lot of foot traffic—in the years since. The Fox has a nostalgia factor of midcentury modern charm, a great collection of materials for all ages, and the ever-popular Little Fox Shop. Imagine a modernized branch library with a community room you could access in a wheelchair or motorized scooter, or with a stroller.

We look forward to engaging the community to hear what you would like the libraries to look like in the future. The first public meetings will take place on Tuesday, June 13, at 7 p.m. at the Fox Library, and Wednesday, June 21, at 7 p.m. in the Robbins Library Community Room. Beyond attending a public meeting, there will be plenty of opportunities to share your vision and we are excited to begin this journey together. The esteemed firm of Ann Beha Architects will be at the helm, guiding our process.

We are also grateful to have the Arlington Libraries Foundation and many other supporters to help us eventually make these visions a reality. Please visit <http://robbinslibrary.org> to learn more as the project progresses.

Opportunities for community input will be publicized through local media, the library website and social media.