

Smaller library is such a hit, the county may make more



Wanda Bessa of Osprey picks out a book at the Osprey Public Library at Historic Spanish Point. Bessa says she loves the location and the hometown feel.

STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER

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OSPREY –

As traffic zips by Historic Spanish Point, imaginations are running wild inside a 1920s school building.

The Osprey Public Library, tucked in the north end of the attraction's Visitors Center, is just like any other county library, but in miniature, as in 640 square feet.

With assistance from Pat Alba, the part-time library assistant who has worked there for one year this week, people can check out books and movies, read a magazine, use free Wi-Fi or log on to library computers. Large print books are available, and there is a children's section.

What is unique to Osprey, though, is that a comfortable screened-in front porch beckons patrons to sit a spell to visit with a friend or get lost in a good read.

“We were hoping it would become a meeting space,” said Helen Beggun, a board member of the Friends of the Osprey Library support organization.

And it has. The branch, opened in November 2011, logged 8,268 visitors last year. During season, it gets busy.

“When the weather is cool, all of the seats are taken,” Alba said.

The branch evolved out of necessity. In 2007 and 2008, county officials sought funding to build the library. When the economy collapsed, those plans were shelved.

The Osprey site is the county's first “Connections” library, a concept locals discovered in the state of Washington, said Sarabeth Kalajian, the county's director of libraries and historical resources. It has proven so successful that it may be duplicated because it gives the county the ability to quickly, efficiently and inexpensively place libraries where they are needed and wanted. Only one library operates east of Interstate 75, for example, so county officials are watching the trends of growth.

While Kalajian said she would love to build a stand-alone library wherever one is needed, a key question needs to be answered: Can we afford to operate it?

The Osprey library costs about \$50,000 a year to operate. Traditional branches take about \$800,000 to \$1 million.

“This is just a great model to provide excellent library services,” Kalajian said.

IF YOU GO

- What: Osprey Public Library.
- Where: 337 N. Tamiami Trail, Osprey; enter through the main Visitors Center door at Historic Spanish Point.
- When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday.
- Special events: “Read with the Dogs,” featuring Suncoast Humane Society pet-therapy teams, is offered free to children from 10 to 11 a.m. the third Saturday of each month.
- Information: Call (941) 918-4037 or visit ospreyfriends.org.

Helping offset the costs is the Friends group, which formed when the library was in the planning stages. The 45 to 50 members raise money to buy extras that taxpayer dollars cannot.

“We wanted to be ready when, not if, it opened,” Beggun said.

The group sponsored a book sale, giving seed money to renovate the porch before the opening. They plan and host special events, including an annual luncheon to thank volunteers. Members also help the library add to the print and digital collections. They supply seasonal decorations and fund special programs.

“We see our mission as trying to be there to help with small expenses, but most importantly to appreciate the volunteers,” Beggun said.

When Alba has a request, the Friends respond.

“They've never said no to me yet,” Alba said.

The Friends bought books to give away to young visitors to the Fairy Festival, a collaboration with an event at Historic Spanish Point.

“The children were so excited about the possibility of getting their own book,” Alba said.

Allison Hamley recently started bringing her children, Cameron, 9, and Turner, 7, to the library after a grandmother discovered the branch.

“We've been here every other day in the past two or three weeks,” Hamley said.

Cameron said she likes the library so much because it is close to their home and it is not as busy as the Venice or Gulf Gate branches.

On a recent day, the family checked out the “Good Boy” movie about dogs in addition to the books “All Hands on Deck” for Turner and “Ship of Dolls” for Cameron.

“We have similar tastes in books,” Alba said, referring to Cameron's choice.

One of the reasons the library has such a loyal base is because of Alba's extraordinary service and her keen memory of the library users' reading habits, Kalajian said.

“Pat and this library are wonderful fit,” Beggun said.

Alba praised her patrons, saying they are kind, comfortable in their own skin, very literate and voracious readers with eclectic tastes.

“They are friendly, open and will take time to chat for a few minutes,” she said.