

Study to examine county library system

BY ANDY COMBER

A comprehensive study of the Essex County Library system, including its 14 library branches, is underway to help plan future library service delivery in Essex County.

"It may change the way we do business," said Edward George, chief librarian for Essex County Library, speaking of a library planning study being conducted by dmA Planning and Management Services of Mississauga.

In view of ever-changing technology and social and

economic trends, George said the library study was necessary to help make decisions towards providing the optimum library service delivery model for Essex County.

"It is going to tell us what people would like available to them," George said, noting the study should be ready for public review in May 2007.

Specialists in library projects, dmA has worked with over 30 library systems across North America to address issues concerning technology, hours of operations, expanded services, marketing, and collection

improvements.

The consultants will also examine the size and number of facilities within the library system and could recommend the closure of some branches, George said.

"That is a possibility ... many of the libraries are way too small. Some facilities are not worth expanding – that is to be determined," said George, noting the importance of examining the library system as a whole.

Public input will be a crucial part of the study. Results of an online survey conducted at each of the Essex County branches in October form part of the study. Public meetings will be held in the near future.

The online survey asked library patrons various questions regarding their use of the county library system, including locations used, the frequency of visits, and the type of services they use. Participants in the survey were also asked to make comments on additional services or amenities they would like to see in the library system.

"The survey is one of the tools being used to study our library facilities," said George. "The feedback will help us build a better system for the future."

The new library in the Town of Essex may demonstrate what improvements can do to improve both services and the public use of

libraries in this area.

"Our circulation increased by 55 percent," said Nancy Brown, an Essex branch assistant, speaking of the greater use of the local library. Housed in a renovated space in the former Holy Name School building, the new library occupies one floor and offers improved accessibility.

Brown said the increase in area and separate rooms at the new library have allowed the expansions of both adult and children programs.

With 28 years of library experience, Brown understands the problems inherent in providing adequate service in a smaller facility. She

worked at the McGregor library for 20 years, from 1980 to 2000.

"It takes some inventive ideas to take it to its full potential," said Brown, speaking of the difficulties of working and providing services in smaller quarters. "It is a matter of putting every inch to greater use."

From lessons learned over the years, Brown has initiated a program at the Essex library of displaying the works of local artists.

"Libraries should be a cultural place," said Brown, noting that the Essex County Library mission includes providing "cultural enrichment" for local residents.

"It is good to go beyond the books, magazines and newspapers," she said.

Interestingly, Brown persuaded a co-worker to be the first artist to display works of art at the Essex library.

"I volunteered to go first," said Marg McMaster, an Essex branch assistant who is a self-taught acrylic painter.

"They're mostly rural landscapes," said McMaster, speaking of the works she has displayed, including paintings of local scenes.

Brown said the display encourages residents to visit the library, including new patrons who might not otherwise be interested.



Cultural enrichment – Branch assistant Marg McMaster holds one of her acrylic paintings at the Essex Library. The painting is on display as part of an initiative by co-worker Nancy Brown, also a branch assistant, to "enhance the library experience" by sharing the works of local artists.



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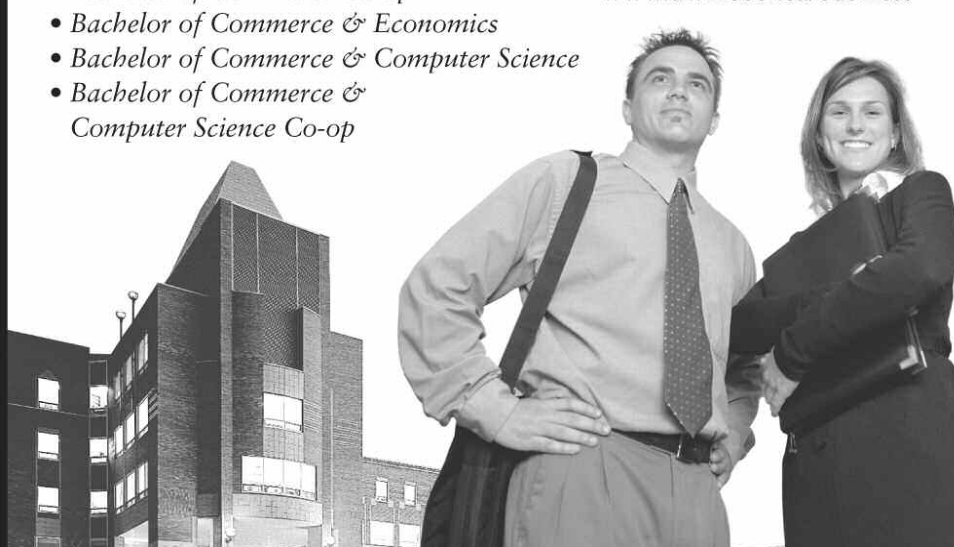
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