

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Libraries as Liberators

Libraries of yore were quiet, musty places run by schoolmarms. Today these hot properties pack in the visitors, create economic value and sometimes even help transform human settlement patterns.

By James A. Bacon

If you want to see where the action is in my neck of the woods, go visit the Tuckahoe Library. I dropped by one afternoon, and there were 140 cars parked outside -- at least as many as there were at the new neighborhood Wal-Mart.

The \$15 million facility, which opened last fall, is handsome on the outside, spacious on the inside. Plate-glass windows let in abundant natural light, but they're set at just the right angle so the late afternoon sun doesn't stream through and blind the patrons. Near the front entrance, you can buy espresso, pastries and box lunches at Lola's Library Cafe. There are banks of PCs for surfing the Web, and loads of comfortable chairs where you can settle down with a book. If communing with nature is your thing, you can step onto the gravel trails out back and wander past ornamental trees, flower beds and a mini-wetland complete with ducks.

Every book comes equipped with an RFID chip, so you can check

it out automatically. If you're too busy to go into the library, just pull up to the drive-in window and pick up the books you ordered over the Internet.

Tuckahoe Library connects with the community. There are reading programs for tots and book clubs for grown-ups. A section of the first floor is set aside as the "Teen Planet," where activities are geared to tumultuous tweens. Small businesses and civic groups can use the library conference rooms for free.



The Tuckahoe Library: Handsome, state of the art, engaged with the community -- and totally auto-centric.

The new facility seems to be a hit with Henrico County residents. In June, the library saw nearly 39,000 visitors -- more than 1,000 people per day --

and it circulated 96,000 items. That's about twice the activity of the old library it replaced.

By conventional measures, the Tuckahoe Library is a huge success. But when compared to what it could have been, I deem it a great a disappointment. What a shame. What an opportunity lost.

To understand what Tuckahoe Library could have been -- what the \$15 million public investment could have accomplished -- it helps to visit the Shirlington area of Arlington County, where a new library opened about the same time.

As one would expect from a wealthy, tech-savvy community

like Arlington, the Shirlington bookery has embraced technology: It's got the rows of PCs, the Wi-Fi hot spot, the RFID chips and the automated check-out. But it's got nothing over Tuckahoe. What's more, the facility is considerably more cramped -- 15,000 square feet compared to Tuckahoe's 53,000 square feet -- with space for fewer books. Yet -- get this -- the Shirlington library generates way

more visitors: some 2,000 per day.

The difference between the two libraries lies not in the competence of the library staff or the quality of the facilities. It's the setting. While Tuckahoe stands like an island in a jumbled com-

mercial strip, surrounded by a sea of asphalt and accessible only by automobile, the Shirlington Library is integrated in what Arlingtonians call an "urban village," where half the visitors arrive by foot. Woven tightly into the fabric of the village center, the Shirlington facility helps sustain the theaters, restaurants, shops, office buildings and apartment complexes located within easy walking distance.

Where Shirlington Library both adds value to the village center and draws energy from it, Tuckahoe Library stands alone. Unplugged from the activity all

around, Tuckahoe Library perpetuates the auto-centric culture of Henrico County. People come by car, leave by car and interact with few of the business establishments around it. The economic value it creates dissipates like a stream in the desert sand.

In 2000, Henrico County voters approved a bond issue to construct, among other things, two new libraries. One would serve the new community of Twin Hickories in the far West End, while one would replace the aging facility in the frayed-at-the-edges commercial corridor running along Parham Road.

The county held a series of meetings to determine what citizens wanted in a new library, recalls Jerry McKenna, director of Henrico County libraries. People expressed a desire for a cafe, study rooms where visitors could escape distracting PCs and cell phones, and more varied, more comfortable seating. But most of all, he says, people wanted more parking. "The old library had only 92 spaces," he says. Finding a parking space was a hardship. "People were angry."

So, Henrico County gave the people what they asked for: the cafe, the plush chairs, the meeting rooms, and the parking -- more than 300 parking spaces.

The county purchased two otherwise useless lots on a short, dead-end road leading to the neighborhood post office. Where in some communities the post office functions as a community center, this one was invisible from the main road and accessible only by car. For all practical purposes, it was a social dead zone. You park your car, you stand in line, you conduct your business and you leave.

How could such a precious asset



Above: Attractive landscaping can't hide the fact that the Tuckahoe Library is surrounded by parking lots and accessible only by car.

Right: Tuckahoe Library: All landscaping, no connectivity. The fence walls off the library from the neighboring subdivision of single-household dwellings.



be squandered so? It's not as if Henrico librarians were unaware that libraries have spurred revitalization in other communities. "There's been a lot of research done on libraries," McKenna says. "They're a very vibrant part of the community. They're a draw. St. Louis found that improving a library improves the area around it. [Businesses] see a lot of foot traffic. They reinvest in the area."

A brief conversation regarding the role of the library in the Parham commercial corridor did take place when Henrico was planning the facility, McKenna says. But nothing much came of it. The reason, I would surmise, is that there was nothing to build on. A library can't transform a neighborhood all by itself -- it must be part of a broader initiative. But there was no move afoot in Henrico County to transform the business corridor, a string of disconnected properties linked only by their mutual access to Parham Road, into anything different. There was no talk of creating an "urban village," or of increasing density, or of creating pedestrian-friendly streetscapes to serve that density.

The easiest way to serve library patrons was to shoe-horn the library into the available space, surround it with parking lots and add curb-side pickup for the books. So, that's what happened.

Elsewhere in Virginia, people are thinking creatively about the role of libraries in real estate development. The Fairfax County library board takes the position that libraries need not be stand-alone institutions, says Sam Clay, head librarian for the county. "They can be in leased space, they can be mobile,

whatever meets the needs of the community."

Fairfax County looks to the retail world for business models and best practices, says Clay. "Fairfax is very dependent upon vehicular traffic. We see the CVS [drug store] with a drive-up window. ... We build a branch with a drive-up window."

The county is also open to public-private partnerships. Fairfax developers have latched onto the fact that libraries are major traffic generators -- some of the county's busiest libraries get more than 50,000 visitors per month. A people magnet of that magnitude has economic value to real estate developers.

Developers now routinely initiate proposals that allow the county to construct new libraries without the need to issue bonds. Says Clay: "We have been approached in four different instances by developers interested in swapping property and building a new library."

As an example of the kind of deals that Fairfax County is closing, the Dvoskin Development Company is providing 15,000 square feet in its Kingstowne Shopping Center for a county-supported library. The development company also threw in the rent from two adjacent stores, worth \$750,000 over the life of the leases, to pump up the library endowment. In exchange, the county gave Dvoskin a density bonus and spent \$1.2 million outfitting the library. The symbiosis has worked out wonderfully, beams Clay. "A couple of months, we were the main draw of the shopping center."

Fairfax understands what librarians in Henrico and many other Virginia counties fail to fully appreciate: By generating traffic, libraries create real estate value.

In the courting of developers to underwrite the expense of building new facilities, Fairfax is far ahead of Henrico. But in one important respect, the Fairfax and Henrico models remain very much the same and fall short of their potential: Both localities are adapting libraries to the prevailing auto-centric human settlement patterns rather than using them to transform their communities into something more livable.

Arlington County planners think about libraries very differently. Instead of using the economic value created by libraries to offset construction costs, a la Fairfax, Arlington is harnessing the economic value to drive revitalization. Nowhere is that strategy more clearly illustrated than in the Shirlington Town Center.

In the 1980s, the Shirlington area of Arlington County was what might charitably be called an "aging suburb." It had been the site of one of the Washington, D.C., region's first auto-oriented, suburban shopping centers. As growth surged out to Fairfax County, the shopping center decayed. Despite a superb location off an Interstate 395 exit, the area was slow to attract much commercial development. A developer purchased the old shopping center and gave it a make-over as a mixed-use, pedestrian community but with only modest success.

The Town Center did have many of the components that Arlington County planners thought it needed to serve as the core of a vibrant urban village: seven or eight city blocks arrayed in a grid-like street structure, a mix of residential, office and retail buildings, and streetscapes that favored pedestrians over automobiles. A block-long restaurant row was particularly inviting. But the center just wasn't clicking. It



The Shirlington Library and Signature Theater are integrated seamlessly into the urban texture of the Shirlington Town Center. A small plaza out front creates a public space where people can interact. Although structured parking is available, many library patrons access the facility on foot.

lacked the round-the-clock activity the planners and civic leaders were looking for. They wanted busy streets -- busy with pedestrians not cars. They wanted a village center with a strong "sense of place" that captured people's imagination as a desirable place to spend time.

Arlington County has committed itself to provide those missing elements. Running at 15-minute intervals, 400 buses go through the Town Center every day. Plans call for building an attractive bus depot in the town center. To reduce the uncertainty of when the buses will arrive, GPS transponders will track each vehicle's exact location. The bus initiative is critical to creating a quality urban place: It takes people out of their cars, reducing automobile congestion, and it puts them on the streets, where they can interact. Another critical element is the neighborhood grocery store. After lengthy negotiations, the county has coaxed Harris Teeter, Inc., to build one in the town center. That was no easy task given the difficult conditions the county set: Harris-Teeter had to reduce its normal 50,000-square-foot footprint to 25,000 square feet, and it couldn't surround the store with a vast parking lot. The grocer addressed the first challenge with

an innovative design, which included putting its drug store and wine selection on a mezzanine floor. And the county dealt with the second by providing free parking in a municipal parking deck next door, says Tom Newman, director of the county's real estate development group. The grocery store, a major traffic generator that keeps people in the "village" and puts people on the sidewalks, will open this fall.

Last but not least, Arlington County had set aside \$5 million, raised in a bond issue earlier in the decade, to build a new library in the community. As luck would have it, the Signature Theater, an up-and-coming theater producing off Broadway-caliber shows, was outgrowing its old location a mile or so away. The library people and theater people joined forces to build a new facility together, with the library on the ground floor, the theater above, and the parking deck next door. The theater raised more than \$10 million in support of the project. The arrangement has been wildly successful.

The Signature brings in big night-time crowds, up to 500 to 600 per night, to see spectacular productions like "The Witches of Eastwick," in which actors

swoop out above the audience. Many patrons are locals, says artistic director Eric Shaeffer, but 40 percent come from Maryland and Washington, D.C. "The theater has changed Shirlington," he says. "It's become a night-time hub."

The theater also puts on programs in the library like the Arlington Speaks series, in which actors, playwrights and production crew talk about their craft. In a symbiotic relationship, the Signature provides program content for the library, and the library promotes the theater.

The library also contributes to the vision of a community where things are happening 24/7. "We have a regular flow of traffic on the streets during the weekday but especially during early evening and the weekends," says director Susan McCarthy. Many of the visitors arrive on foot. "Most of our traffic is through the front door," not from the parking deck connected to the side door. "We have a lot of people who come over from the offices during the day, checking out a book for the weekend or using the wireless."

Meanwhile, the library is reaching out to other arts and theater groups like Washington Shakespeare and Busboys and Poets, says McCarthy. "We're really pleased to be part of the emerging arts enclave."

McCarthy sees the library as much more than a repository for books, or even a community

gathering spot. It's an engine of economic development. "People talk about the rise of the creative class," she says. "Well, [the creative class] is beginning to emerge in this area. Arlington has become a place where people can express themselves through the creative arts."

In sum, by fostering a nexus of artistic and theatrical groups, the Shirlington library is stimulating the growth of the creative class in Arlington that contributes disproportionately to innovation and entrepreneurial vitality.

Five years ago, libraries were struggling for identity. Who needed them when vast repositories of knowledge were available online, Amazon.com was delivering books to your doorstep, and Google was digitizing thousands of books for access over the Internet? By redefining themselves in an increasingly depersonalized society as community crossroads where real, live people come together and interact, they have emerged as relevant as ever.

Indeed, through their ability to generate traffic, libraries have demonstrated that they create real economic value. Local governments, like Fairfax County, leverage that value to gain financial concessions. Others, like Arlington, harness that value to transform communities and stimulate capital investment. Yet others, like Henrico, are satisfied to provide a worthwhile service to citizens without capturing any of the economic benefits. It's high time for Virginians to rethink the contribution that libraries can make in creating better places to live.

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