

REINVENTING THE LIBRARY

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Opening an electronic library branch in Valley View Mall, a place with more foot traffic than probably anywhere in the Roanoke Valley, is a fine step toward improving customer access to Roanoke's library services.

If people won't come to the library, bring the library to where they shop and eat.

But it is only a first step. Our hope is that it spurs momentum toward many more steps to bring Roanoke's aging library system up to modern standards.

A comprehensive consultant's study in 2005 revealed some troubling realities about the system: a shortage of collections and staffing, libraries housed in old buildings, a lack of funding needed to compete with systems in surrounding localities. Nearly two-thirds of Roanoke residents don't use the library, the study found.

One of the study's recommendations was delivering library services from places where people are most likely to use them -- developing a "retail model" with libraries designed as destinations with coffee shops, public programs and a complete focus on customer service.

Which makes Valley View a logical location for a library branch. The library is thinking smaller, starting with a kiosk, scheduled to open this morning.

The kiosk turns the perception of library as a hushed, stuffy cave right on its head with a wireless Internet zone and a touch-screen computer. Patrons can return library books there and collect from lockers books or DVDs they have reserved online.

The kiosk is a beginning. More reinvention of the library of old is key to ensuring that the city's system remains a vital, viable service available to all of its citizens.

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