

## **Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Library Plans for the Future**

by Judith Cremer, Director, Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Library

*[Judith became the director of the Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Library in October 2006, after the retirement of Freda Dobbins. She had served as Assistant Director since 2003. In that position she had focused on the library's technology needs, which makes her very valuable to the library at this special time. (Editor's Note)]*

In 2002, the Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Library (PWRL) Board of Trustees developed a new long-range plan for providing library services to the residents of the two counties. It was determined then that the best way to equally serve all the patrons in the library's legal service area would be to complete a library automation project that would bring the holdings of the library directly to patrons in a real, albeit virtual, way. So, for the past three years PWRL has been working on ways to secure the funds necessary to complete this sorely needed library automation project.

PWRL is the only two-county public library in Kansas. The library serves a legal service population of 21,546 residents in Pottawatomie and Wabaunsee counties and maintains libraries in Alma, Alta Vista, Eskridge, Harveyville, Olsburg, Onaga, St. Marys, and Westmoreland. The collection the library manages currently totals around 115,000 volumes, shared among the eight locations. Those volumes contain a rich supply of information which include medical, legal, technical, recreational, and some unique local history titles. The collection fills a multitude of information and reference needs and hopefully provides an infusion of fresh ideas that help to give an economic and cultural boost to our local communities and the world beyond.

The proposed library automation project represents a real overhaul of the library's traditional way of doing business and library staff, as well as the Board, feel that the project's successful completion speaks to our library's continuing viability as a positive force in the communities served. Because of technical and communication challenges inherent to rural libraries, this transition has only recently become feasible for our library. Now the library is struggling to pull together the means to finance this vital upgrade.

PWRL has successfully managed all library processes for many years using a manual paper system to track all collection and circulation transactions. That system no longer addresses the needs of modern information seekers in the fast-paced and busy society in which we all live. The fact that a patron can't walk into a branch library and immediately learn what books the library owns, or know where the books are currently located, has become a major stumbling block in the library's effort to meet growing patron expectations and demands.

Securing computers, internal networks, and broadband Internet connections was the first step in the library's transformation. Public access to computers and the Internet began in 2003 with the assistance of funding received by the library through a Kan-ed grant. This update now represents the backbone

necessary to support an automated library system. During 2005, a concentrated review and weeding of the collection was begun and continues to be actively pursued. All these steps have brought the library to a point of transition.

The library's proposed automation project is designed to benefit anyone with an information need. With this project, PWRL will tie our eight locations even more tightly together as we extend access beyond the walls of our eight individual locations. Resource sharing and the maximizing of limited resources was a motivating force in the creation of the Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Library. The proposed automation project is a modern manifestation of this central philosophy. With access to more complete, accurate information about the collection and the status of individual holdings, staff and patrons will be able to immediately see what the library has, where it is, and how to get it regardless of their location or the physical location of the material itself.

PWRL has managed to collect \$50,000 earmarked to finance retro-conversion of the library's integrated shelf list. This amount includes general budget funds, as well as grant funds from the State Library of Kansas, the North Central Library System and the Prairie Band Pottawatomie Nation. All told, the total proposed automation project will cost about \$160,000, excluding the cost of additional staff that will be needed to complete the project.

The library staff and Board now feel that the next step will need to be a concerted grassroots campaign to reintroduce the library and its role in the community to the people we serve. As part of that process, we will be explaining the automation project and showing how it will make a difference in the library's ability to better serve its patrons. At the same time, patrons will be given the information they need to take ownership of the library and be provided with ways and means to help the library realize its customer service goals.

If you have questions about the Board's plans and goals for updating the library or would be interested in giving assistance, please contact Judith Cremer, Library Director, at 785/437-2778. Fresh ideas and new perspectives are always welcome as we all work toward providing the best information and service possible to those our library serves.