

Westlake library growing with help from grass roots

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WEST LAKE HILLS — Fifteen years ago, the Westbank Library was little more than a cramped room with a leaky roof, and Beth Fox used a shower curtain to protect about 5,000 books from harm.

Today, Fox is director of the Westbank Community Library, a graceful brick building with four full-time employees, more than 35,000 books and an annual budget of almost \$400,000. Construction is scheduled to begin this fall on a \$2 million expansion to triple the library's size.

The operation has come a long way, so Fox was thrilled last week when a respected journal ranked Westbank as the nation's best small library. There was just one problem — Westbank shouldn't qualify as a "small" library, a case of mistaken identity related to an arcane measure used by the state. Instead of serving 1,500 people, Westbank next year will report a more accurate figure of 17,400.

The discrepancy would have dropped Westbank from the top spot in the survey, printed in the September issue of *American Libraries*, author Thomas J. Hennen Jr. said.

No matter, Fox and other supporters of the Westlake library couldn't be prouder and believe the recognition is long overdue. Volunteers have held hundreds of fund-raisers, gathered thousands of signatures and even changed state laws to get their library.

"We really feel like we are an unusual and special library," Fox said. "There have been a lot of things over the years that reinforce that."

The Westbank Library was created in 1983 when a determined group of 65 decided their community needed a library. Others obviously agreed. A book drive at Westlake High School ended with more than 30,000 donated books, and it took two months for Fox and 15 other volunteers to select 5,000 for the library's collection.

Staffed almost entirely by volunteers, the library's first home was in donated space the size of a studio apartment in the Texas Commerce Bank building in Southwest Austin.

"If you had five people in that room," Fox recalled, "you sort of had to inch along the wall."

The independent library received no tax money and depended on fund-raisers to stay afloat. Volunteers baked cakes, washed cars, sold donated books and held 5-kilometer races to raise money.

When the library kept growing, volunteers stepped up their efforts. In 1989 the library moved to its current site at 1309 Westbank Drive — a new building financed with \$240,000 in donations.

Then, in January 1998, library supporters made history with the state's first election to create a library taxation district. Voters in the Eanes school district overwhelmingly approved adding a half-cent tax on most purchases. Supporters had lobbied the Legislature to allow the vote. Library officials estimate the sales tax generates about \$400,000 a year.

Jeanette Larson, development director for the Texas public library system, said Westbank volunteers have set an example for other libraries. Wells Branch and Salado in Central Texas and Benbrook, near Fort Worth, have followed Westbank's lead and created library districts, Larson said.

"The people who worked to get the tax district passed are really amazing," she said. "They

developed the legislation and spearheaded the process."

Construction on a \$2 million expansion for Westbank is expected to begin this fall with a two-story addition that will triple the library's size to 16,000 square feet. Plans include a computer room with Internet access, a separate reading wing for children and space to double the collection to 75,000 items.

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