

“Best of Both Worlds”: Preserving the Past, Preparing for Aiken County’s Future

By W. Stuart Morgan III

The Aiken County Public Library—an impressive-looking multi-story building located in the City of Aiken’s downtown historic district—officially re-opened in a ribbon-cutting ceremony last January after a two-year renovation.

Impressively, the project to reconfigure and modernize the main library in the Aiken-Bamberg-Barnwell-Edgefield Regional Library System was conducted between January 2020 and December 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic!

“The choice facing Aiken County in 2020 was whether to continue using the existing library or to build a new one,” said Aiken County Council Chairman Gary Bunker. “After operating as a library for 30 years, renovating the existing structure to serve another 20 to 30 years was deemed to be the most cost-effective approach.

“We extended the life of the facility, upgraded its technology and layout, and created a more positive and welcoming experience for customers and staff,” he added. “The library now has a much more user-friendly environment that is brighter, and with more open spaces. Steps were rebuilt and a new front entrance elevator was installed to meet access requirements and enhance safety. The library was designed to fully enter the digital age. Meeting spaces and conference rooms now allow for a wider range of interactive and Internet-based presentations.”

The project cost \$3 million. Aiken County spent \$2 million, using Capital Project Sales Tax funding, and Friends of the Aiken County



Library made up the remaining \$1 million.

“The project exceeded my expectations in every way,” said Bill Reynolds, who served as President of the Friends of the Aiken County Library. “The parking lot is full most times of the day. So, the public is taking advantage of the new facility.”



(Left to right) Aiken County Council Chairman Gary Bunker; Bill Reynolds, President of Friends of the Aiken County Library during library renovation project; Jessica Christian, Library Manager, Aiken County Public Library; and Mary Jo Dawson, Director, Aiken-Bamberg-Barnwell-Edgefield Regional Library.

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Gary Bunker,
Aiken County Council Chairman

and filled with light.

Beautiful globe light fixtures are installed just within the entrance
(See Library, P. 8)

The Newly Renovated Aiken County Public Library

The Aiken County Public Library looks like an old school building because it shares a history with the Aiken Institute, chartered in 1888 and constructed in 1891 to serve as an “all grades school.” The Institute became Aiken Elementary School in 1937 after a high school was built. The wing added to the Aiken Institute when it expanded in 1913 became the Aiken County Public Library in 1990.

A new large sign stands on the library’s completely re-landscaped lawn. Five hundred personalized bricks, sold by Friends to raise funds for the project, line the walkway leading up to the ADA-compliant steps flanking the library’s front covered entrance.

The three-story, red-brick building features white-trimmed windows and a silver metal roof, which has two large silver-roofed cupolas.

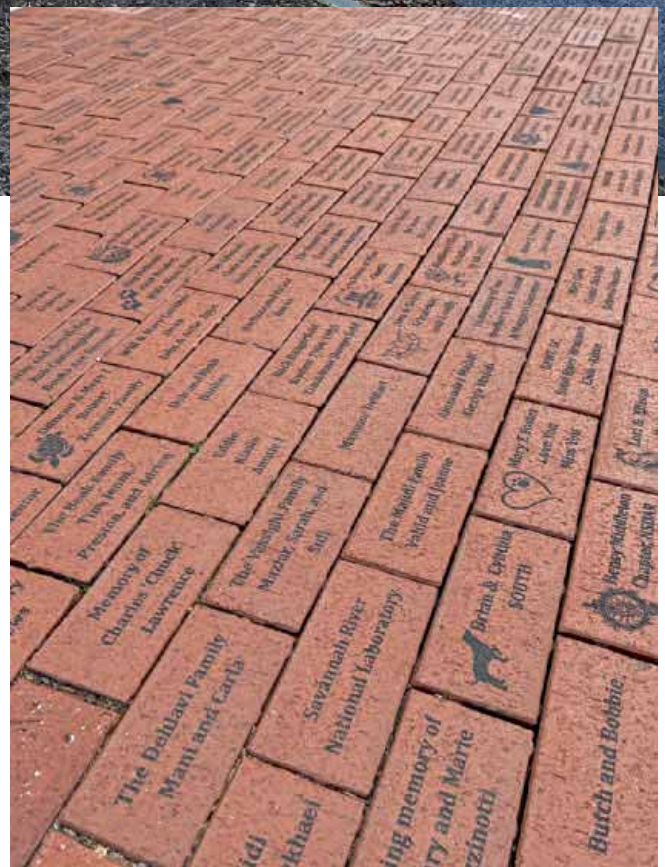
Inside, the library is open, airy



Aiken County’s “Friends”

“Providing support for capital projects like a library renovation is just one way that the 501(c)3 organization benefits Aiken County Library,” said Bill Reynolds, President of Friends of the Aiken County Public Library (Friends) during the renovation project.

“We have an ongoing mission of support for the library’s day-to-day operations, too, including raising funds for the library’s collections and programs, offering volunteer support, and advocating for the library’s needs with community stakeholders,” he explained. “We work to keep the library strong, relevant, and well-funded.”



A portion of the personalized bricks sold by Friends of the Library that helped fund the renovation project.

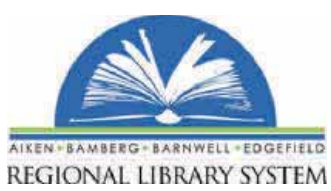
Featuring Special Rooms and Sections, Conference Rooms and Much More ...

The Aiken County Library's spacious two-floor interior was designed to accommodate a broad range of interests, and to provide ample space for everyone.

The library's first floor includes: a café-style seating area; a central service desk, located close to collections of new books, DVDs and audiobooks; a section where used books are sold year-round; a section for youth services; a teen room; four rooms dedicated

to younger ages that house picture books, fiction and nonfiction for middle age readers; a giant Lego building table; two meeting room spaces; a large community meeting room; and a creative lab/classroom, capable of seating 25.

The library's second floor includes: a South Carolina and Local History Room; a floor-to-ceiling case featuring monthly displays of arts, crafts, history, and culture; a public service desk, reading tables, and comfortable armchairs conveniently located near current newspapers and periodicals; five small-group meeting rooms; a 14-person conference room, which features audio visual and videoconferencing capabilities; collections of adult fiction, nonfiction, large print, and biography; staff offices and storage spaces.



Library ... (Continued from P. 6)

where two donor walls, one honoring the 1990 renovation and the other honoring library donors, are displayed.

The library's 10,000-square-foot, two-floor interior has been refurbished with \$200,000 worth of new furnishings. A grand central staircase, a new ADA-compliant elevator in the front, and a rebuilt 1990s-era elevator in back, connect the first and second floors.

Digital signage on both floors posts library programs, events and services. Wi-Fi is provided throughout the library.

Ample parking is also provided outside on three sides of the library.

"Our library is located in Aiken's historic district, blocks from downtown, City Hall, and the county courthouse," Reynolds said.

"Residents love this iconic building and its convenient location. There also is a popular city park featuring a children's playground located on the library grounds.

"To abandon a lovely, historic building and build a new facility away from the center of Aiken would have been wrong for the community," he added. "Renovating the old library and modernizing its interior provided the best of both worlds by maintaining the library's lovely exterior and its wonderful location."

Remarkably, Aiken County kept the library open for public use during most of the project.

"This was one our goals," Reynolds said, "and I'm glad we were able to do it.

"Keeping the library open required a tremendous amount of patience and hard work on the part of library staff who often worked

in the midst of a construction zone,” he added. “With help from our contractor, library staff coordinated several different moves during the project as we closed one area of the site and re-opened another. The goodwill and patience of library users also helped make this approach work. They tolerated noise, dust and disruption because they wanted the project to succeed.”

The Aiken County Public Library project was designed by McMillan Pazdan Smith Architecture and completed by J.E. Stewart Builders.



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