

Book could close on temporary library

Plans for Lakeforest mall location put on hold by Leggett's proposed cuts

by Danielle E. Gaines | Staff Writer

Work to convert a vacant Lakeforest mall storefront into the Gaithersburg Library's temporary home could be halted, despite the time and money Montgomery County spent to renovate the second-floor space next to Sears.

Shuttering the interim location was included on a list of \$14.3 million in cuts proposed Oct. 5 by County Executive Isiah Leggett. The closure would save the county \$139,240, but cut off readers' access to the more than 160,000 books in storage during a complete overhaul of the permanent library on Montgomery Village Avenue.

In fiscal 2009, the Gaithersburg library was busiest in the county library system, with 1.3 million visits. About 718,000 items were circulated.

About \$25,000 has already been spent on the design and permits for the temporary location, said Mariam Zarif, an architect in the county's department of general services who is in charge of the renovation project.

As planned, the 3,000 square foot interim library could hold about 16,000 books.

Construction at the site has stalled until the library system knows whether the cuts will be passed, said Rita Gale, who oversees strategic management for Montgomery County Public Libraries.

"I'm concerned about the proposal," said Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg. "The Gaithersburg Library is one of the busiest in the county – that's why we're expanding it. It will be challenging for some residents if there's not a temporary library location."

Irma Sheon, president of Friends of the Gaithersburg Library, said the group had not met since June and has not taken a position on the proposed cut. Personally, she said she was pessimistic about the value of a temporary location.

"Most of us are managing OK without the opening of the interim library. The thought of using the temporary space to circulate books seems not very valuable to me because of the limited space," Sheon said.

The Gaithersburg Library branch closed in May and the county signed a lease for the space in Lakeforest mall in August.

Leggett made the budget recommendations in anticipation of the possible loss of \$14 million in revenue from ambulance fees. County voters will decide Nov. 2 whether to keep the fees, which the county's volunteer firefighters fought to get on the general election ballot.

Andrews has been the council's primary opponent of the fee.

"I think it needs to be pointed out that this is part of a scare campaign by the county executive to get voters to keep the ambulance fee," Andrews said.

Before construction was put on hold, the library system hoped to open the interim space in November.