

Faith, Hope, and Politics in Cumberland County

by Jerry Thrasher

Too often politics is seen as a "dirty" business. But politics is how a democracy functions to bring about needed change. People must lobby their elected representatives to make their needs known and urge that they be met. The most effective means to have needs met by government is for a group of citizens to organize around that need or issue and work together. This is true at the national, state and especially at the local level. As the popular adage states, "all politics is local politics."

The people of the Town of Hope Mills in Cumberland County, North Carolina, were very effective and successful, despite setbacks, in undertaking "positive politics" to push for a new branch library for their community.

The desire for an expanded Hope Mills Branch began in early 1987 when the Hope Mills Town Board proposed that the town would provide land for the new branch library if the Cumberland County Commissioners provided the money for construction. Town Manager John Beasley made a formal presentation to the county commissioners on February 2, 1987, pointing out the growing population of the Hope Mills area and the growing use of the small, inadequate branch library.

At that time Hope Mills had a 1,400 square foot branch library that was located in part of the town hall on Main Street. It was established by Library Director Dorothy Shue in 1960 as part of the Cumberland County Public Library with Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) funding.

The service population for southwestern Cumberland County was just over 27,000, and the use of the existing branch had continued to grow at least seven percent a year to over 77,000 book circulations by July 1989. The branch operated six days a week for a total of 55 hours with two full-time staff.

The Cumberland County Public Library and Information

Center Board of Trustees voted on February 19, 1987, to make the new Hope Mills Branch Library its third priority behind the proposed Cliffdale Branch and the proposed Raleigh Road Branch. The Cliffdale Branch site had just been purchased and construction was anticipated within one and a half to two years.

The Raleigh Road Branch was decided to be second priority because there was no existing branch in that part of the county and there was a greater population base (34,000) than in the Hope Mills area (27,000). It was also pointed out that Hope Mills at least had a small branch facility, whereas residents in the northern part of the county have only periodic bookmobile stops.

After this decision by the library trustees, the issue went on the back burner. The issue resurfaced in early 1988 when the Hope Mills Town Board began a push to make their branch the second priority after the Cliffdale Branch. Town Council members and the Town Manager contacted me, library trustees, county government administration and county commissioners to inquire how the new Hope Mills Branch project could be moved up on the priority list. It was pointed out by several of us that a donation of a free site for the branch would improve its chances.

By June, Town Manager Beasley telephoned me that there was support on the Town Council for donating land to the county for the future Hope Mills Branch. I was enthusiastic about the possibility, assuming it met all our basic criteria for branch site selection.

A two-acre site was proposed on Golfview Road in the heart of the developing Hope Mills community complex. Library and county engineering staff inspected the site and agreed that it would be an ideal location. County government was alerted in mid-July 1988 about the development and that the library trustees would act in favor of accepting this gift of land for the future branch.



Members of the executive board, Hope Mills Friends of the Library at the construction site, Spring 1991. (Photo courtesy Jerry Thrasher.)

At the library trustee meeting on September 15, Town Manager Beasley formally proposed donating a two-acre site for the future Hope Mills Branch if the trustees would build a facility of at least 10,000 square feet within three years of acceptance. Of course, the trustees endorsed the proposal, but said that meeting the 1991 deadline would depend on county commissioner approved funding.

The Board of County Commissioners unanimously approved the donation of land at its regular meeting on October 3 to the delight of everyone involved. Of course, library trustees and Hope Mills residents had briefed the commissioners individually about the donation and sought their support. This donation of land was a tangible and popular message of the interest of the Hope Mills community in wanting a new branch library. It helped grease the wheels for a positive decision by the library trustees, county administration and the county commissioners.

The deed for the property was transferred to the county on December 1, 1988. Shortly thereafter, the library trustees made the new Hope Mills Branch Library the second construction priority as part of the library's capital improvements projects in early 1989.

So the Town of Hope Mills had successfully secured the next priority of the library trustees for future branches. The next most important step was securing the needed funding to begin construction.

This story began in January 1989 when representatives of the Hope Mills Town Board met with two library trustees and me to discuss the possibility of setting up a Friends of the Library group "to enhance, nourish, promote and assist the library in its work."

In March 1989 the Hope Mills Town Board appointed a committee of citizens to establish a Friends group. Commissioner Marion Kinlaw was the driving force for the creation of this group. The first organizational meeting of the Hope Mills Friends of the Library was held on March 22, 1989, in the Hope Mills Community Center. Mrs. Dorothy Brower was selected as the group's first president; she was a wise choice. Mrs. Brower had just recently retired as the coordinator for media services with the Cumberland County School System. But most importantly, she had just completed serving six years on the CCPL & IC Board of Trustees, representing the Hope Mills area.

Mrs. Brower's experience, knowledge, and leadership was a great help in getting the Hope Mills Friends operational. She was able to pull in local community leaders and workers to push for the funding for the needed branch library. She is well known not only as the wife of the retired Hope Mills textile plant manager, but in

her school and church involvement. Both she and her husband are alumni of Duke University and active in community affairs. With her numerous contacts she was able to pull together a cadre of dedicated community spirited people to start the Friends of the Library with the help of Town Commissioner Marion Kinlaw.

During the first half of 1989 the Friends held regular meetings getting their bylaws drafted and approved; establishing various committees on membership, publicity, finance, programs and telephoning; and getting incorporated. The official organizational meeting was held on September 25, 1989. At that time they had 117 members and a treasury of just over \$1,800.

One of the Friends' handouts emphasized their immediate goal:

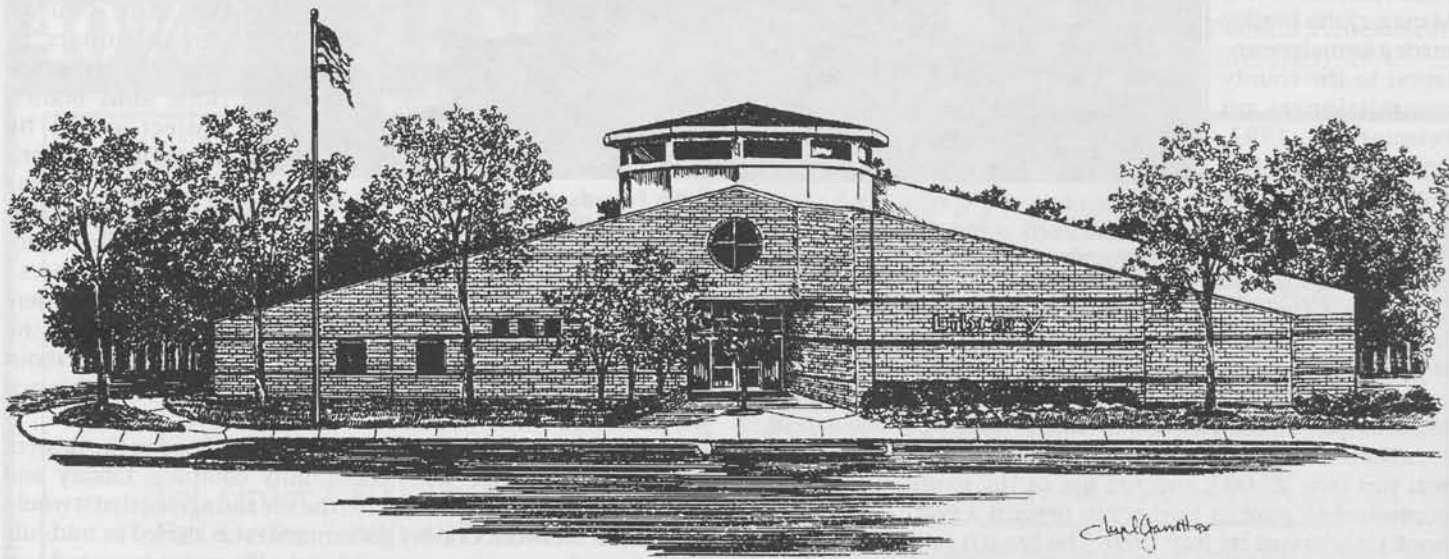
The purpose of the Friends is to ensure that the library is built by the county on time (Keep in mind that while the library is scheduled to be constructed, no funds have as yet been allocated); and then to enhance the library in every possible way after it is built.

In August, the Friends commissioned a sign to be erected at the future branch site stating "Future Site, Hope Mills Branch Library" to keep the community informed and interested in the project. In February 1990, the Friends invited the Cumberland County Commissioners to have breakfast at the existing Hope Mills Branch Library to see the cramped conditions and the need to move forward with the new facility.

In developing the library's budget in early April for 1990-91, I included \$550,000 for the first year's construction cost for the new Hope Mills Branch. This was endorsed and approved by the Library Board of Trustees and forwarded to county government for review and recommendation to the county commissioners.

Due to tight budget constraints the county manager did not include the new branch in his recommended budget to the commissioners in May. The Hope Mills Friends began sending word to their members through their newsletter and by telephone to contact the county commissioners and urge their support for funding the new branch. At the same time the Friends wrote letters to Congressman Charlie Rose and Senators Jessie Helms and Terry Sanford to support the federal Library Services and Construction Act for the construction of public libraries funding that President George Bush had eliminated.

The elected officials for the Town of Hope Mills were also making their voices known with the county commissioners during



Artist's rendering of the facade of the Hope Mills Branch Library (Cumberland County Public Library and Information Center.)

this time. This effort culminated on June 14, 1990, during one of the county commissioners' open budget hearings to hear from various county departmental boards. Library Board Chairman Sylvia Dean requested that funding for the new Hope Mills Branch be reinstated. Several members from the Hope Mills Friends were also in attendance showing support for the new branch.

The commissioners requested the county manager to come up with a plan to fund the new branch and increases in library materials without raising taxes. On June 19, the county manager recommended that a three-month hiring freeze for 106 vacant county government jobs be instituted. This was later expanded to a five-month hiring freeze on all county government positions from July 1, 1990, to December 1, 1990.

One county commissioner was quoted in the local newspaper stating that "the freeze would force cuts in services and called her fellow commissioners' refusal to consider a tax increase a 'bull-headed, short-sighted, myopic attitude.'" Another commissioner said the freeze would hurt many departments, but was needed to build the library without raising the tax rate: "It does create undue hardships on some but we're trying to build a library."¹

In late June the county commissioners approved the required funding in the 1990-91 county library budget to begin construction of the new branch. Like other county departments, the library could not fill three existing positions until December 1990. This was a difficult decision for all concerned because it adversely affected all of county government in order to move forward with this construction project.

The library system was also successful in obtaining an LSCA

Title II construction grant for \$74,179. Application was made in June 1990. The fact that federal LSCA funding was available through the State Library was an important factor in county commissioner approval of the Hope Mills Branch project.

In July 1990 the architectural selection process was completed and the design phase began. The project went out for bids in January 1991, and construction contracts were approved totalling \$883,688 in March. The official ground-breaking ceremony was held at the new site on March 28, 1991.

The new 11,200 square foot Hope Mills Branch Library opened its doors on June 6, 1992, thanks to the successful lobbying of the Hope Mills Town Board and the Hope Mills Friends of the Library.

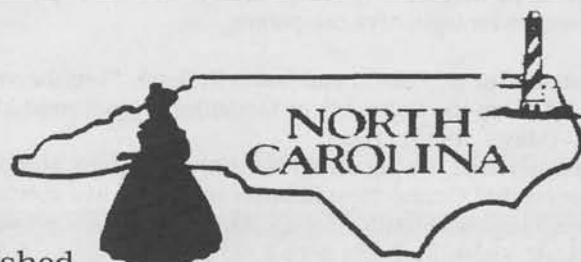
With the dedication and opening of the new branch in June 1992, one of the most successful library lobbying efforts for our library system was concluded. A number of obstacles had to be overcome to make this important project a reality. The Library System's

branch priorities were changed; free land was found, donated by the Town of Hope Mills and accepted by Cumberland County Government; a Friends of the Library group was initiated and organized; federal LSCA Title II public library construction funds were applied for; and local county funding for the project was secured during tough economic times. Only the vision and determination of the people of Hope Mills made it happen.

¹Bryan McKenzie, "Job Freeze Sought To Fund Library," *The Fayetteville Times* (June 20, 1990): 4A+

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