

Shortgrass Library System RISEs to the occasion with new technology for rural community libraries

By Jamie Rieger
Commentator/Courier

Information Services Initiate (RISE) has now installed video conferencing equipment in all of the pilot libraries, including those within the Shortgrass Library System.

With 21 sites now online, residents in rural communities will soon have the opportunity to take training, hold meetings and take in programs via conferencing with those in other communities.

"It is useful for rural areas where there are limited educational and training opportunities. So far, in its first year, things are going well. We have six libraries up and running: Ralston, Redcliff, Medicine Hat, Bow Island, Foremost, and Brooks, as well as the Shortgrass Library," said Julia Reinhart, chief executive officer of the Shortgrass Library System.

"You can video-conference between communities. We haven't had a video-conference between all 18 library systems yet, but we have had some between six or seven. The quality of the video-conferencing is not as good in some other locations as it is here. We are kind of a pilot project for the whole province," she added.

Pilot libraries in the Chinook Arch system include Claresholm, Coaldale, Lethbridge, Milo, Picture Butte, and Stirling. Those in the Marigold Library System include Airdrie, Drumheller, Hanna, Okotoks, Rockyford, and Trochu.

RISE is a three-year project that will link together 80 communities and reach 450,000 people through a library-based video-conference network.

The \$5-million project is a partner-



COMMENTATOR/COURIER PHOTO BY JAMIE RIEGER

SHORTGRASS UPDATE: Shortgrass Library Systems CEO Julia Reinhart and board chair, Dwight Nagel provide Cypress County councilors with an update on the regional library system's services, including the new Rural Information Services Initiative.

ship between the Shortgrass, Chinook Arch, and Marigold library systems that encompass southern Alberta.

The Alberta government committed to funding 75 percent of the cost through its Rural Alberta Development Fund. Other sources of funding have included the Public Library Development Initiative from Alberta Municipal Affairs and the Alberta Public Library Electronic Network. The three regional library systems are also raising \$500,000 privately.

"This is a partnership of partnerships," said Reinhart.

The funds are being used for

increased staff at member libraries and for purchasing and installing the video-conferencing equipment, which will vary from community to community based on needs and requirements.

Once RISE is established, residents in rural communities will be able to have access to such things as courses and training to upgrade their skills and will allow organizations to meet through video-conferencing, cutting down on travel time and expenses.

"It works off the SuperNet system, which is why the quality is so much better and one of the biggest things we are doing is in working with SAIT and

NAIT to set up some courses," said Shortgrass board chair, Dwight Nagel.

Currently, there is no cost for the service, but Nagel said in the future there may be a cost that would go to the individual library to help them cover staffing costs.

"Some of us feel that libraries should be making some money at least to cover the cost of the room and the amount of time needed for a library staff member," he said.

The Shortgrass Library System drop-off box has only been in place in Dunmore since anuary and so far, the service has been deemed a success.

"We have had requests from people in the county and from public libraries. So far, it is going pretty good. It is a very good location by the mailboxes and it may be an option for other locations that are on our delivery route," said Shortgrass Library chair, Dwight Nagel.

The Cypress County Library materials' return service is located by the Canada Post mailboxes on 13th Street in Dunmore and allows area residents to return books, movies, and other library material without having to make a trip into Medicine Hat.

"We want to offer additional services to the residents of Cypress County, especially those in the Dunmore area. We are looking to make Shortgrass more available to the people," said Julia Reinhart, CEO of Shortgrass.

Materials are picked up on Tuesdays and Thursdays and delivered to the Medicine Hat Public Library for sorting and distribution.

Nagel said that because Shortgrass makes deliveries to Prairie Rose School Division Schools, any community in Cypress County that has a school and is on the delivery route could have a materials' return box installed in the future.

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