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Public Arts Board backs plan for community project to construct neighborhood boxes for book exchanges

Finding a good book to read in Grafton may soon be as easy as walking down the street to the nearest birdhouse.

LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES, such as the birdhouse-styled structure shown here, are designed to promote free book exchanges.

Make that the nearest birdhouse-styled library.

The Public Arts Board on Monday endorsed a plan to introduce Little Free Libraries, a project popping up across the country in which residents, service groups and businesses erect lidded or shuttered boxes to hold books for free exchange among local residents.

The boxes, which are often designed to resemble birdhouses, would be open to anyone who stops by looking for something to read. Besides borrowing and then returning books, the hope is that participants will also contribute reading material.

“The goal is to help encourage residents to read more,” Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said. “The Public Arts Board hopes this will be a project done in collaboration with service clubs, residents and businesses throughout the community.”

A Wisconsin-born venture, Little Free Libraries were introduced in Hudson as an informal book exchange and have sprouted up in dozens of communities. The libraries are typically small structures placed atop a post in or near a park, on a well-traveled street corner or along a bike path.

Visitors are allowed to take any books they want but are asked to return them when finished and encouraged to add to the collection, which can cover a variety of subjects for readers of all ages.

According to a brochure distributed by Little Free Libraries organizers, theft is not a concern because the books are free. People worried about thieves and vandals are encouraged to put their libraries in highly visible areas where residents can keep an eye on them.

“Locations could include parks, residential streets, commercial areas such as downtown and areas adjacent to village rights-of-way,” Hofland said.

To discourage people from taking books to resell them, message stickers and stamps can be placed on the materials. A QR code can also be added to books, providing an app that will direct readers to a Web site on Little Free Libraries.

According to organizers, libraries can be constructed for as little as $50 using a build-your-own kit. More sophisticated designs, including those with artwork, can cost significantly more.

The purpose of Little Free Libraries is not to compete with or replace public libraries, but promote literacy, communication and community involvement, organizers said.

“The success of the project will depend on how many people are willing to participate,” Hofland said.

The Public Works Board is scheduled to discuss the Little Free Libraries project further at its January meeting, including specific plans on how to establish a program in Grafton. The Parks and Recreation Board is expected to review the project, which will require final approval by the Village Board, Hofland said.

For more information on the project and its impact on communities, visit www.littlefreelibrary.org.