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Wednesday, 01 August 2012 18:12

With park project, village joins national effort offering free book exchanges

Grafton has its first Little Free Library, a project that organizers hope will have local residents sharing their love of books in a most public way.

Through the combined efforts of a retired school administrator and area Girl Scouts, a shuttered box containing books for free exchange was installed this week in Centennial Park.

The wooden box, which resembles a large birdhouse, has been registered in a national Little Free Library program that promotes reading.

Steve Kittleson, a former Grafton High School principal, used his carpentry skills to construct the box, which is atop a post at the 17th Avenue entrance to the park. The little library, one of the first of its kind in the area, is part of a program endorsed late last year by the village's Public Arts Board.

Plans call for the library to be filled with books that are free for anyone to take. The idea of the program, though, is that the borrowers will eventually return books or put others in their place to keep the exchange alive.

"It's a neat project to be involved in because one of the best indicators of a young person's success in school is their ability to read and read well," Kittleson said.

"This project encourages and supports that process at an early age and also involves the community in a worthwhile, long-lasting endeavor."

Grafton Girl Scouts will play a key role in the Centennial Park project by serving as little-library stewards. Their monitoring duties include making sure books are available and keeping an eye on the library's condition.

The project is designed to complement, rather than compete with, its larger counterpart, the USS Liberty Memorial Public Library. In fact, the public library is pitching in with the park effort and others like it that are expected to follow.

"There should be no problem keeping the Little Free Libraries full," said John Hanson, director of the public library. "We have books that the steward can have for this great community

project."

A Wisconsin-born venture, Little Free Libraries were introduced in Hudson several years ago as an informal book exchange and have since sprouted up across the United States and in other countries.

The Grafton project was registered as the 1,718th Little Free Library nationally.

Typically, little libraries are placed in or near a park, on a well-traveled street corner or along a bike path. Although visitors are allowed to take any books they want, they are encouraged to add to the collection, which can cover a variety of subjects for readers of all ages.

Public Arts Board member Erin Blum said the board is encouraged by response to the project, which has attracted five volunteer builders, including Kittleson. Four other little libraries are expected to be installed at other sites with the help of the Parks and Recreation Department.

"It's a totally voluntary effort, so it's really nice to see people stepping forward to become a part of this," Blum said.

Although Scouts are a perfect choice as overseers of little libraries, the stewards can be almost anyone who appreciates books, Blum noted.

"They basically watch over it and make sure there are books in it," she said. "For stewards and builders, it's pretty much self-motivated."

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.

Additional information on the Grafton's project, including a little-library brochure and registration forms, can be found at www.qualitylifegrafton.com, the village's website.

More details on the nationwide effort are also available at www.littlefreelibrary.org.

Image Information: GRAFTON'S FIRST LITTLE FREE LIBRARY has been installed at the 17th Avenue entrance to Centennial Park. The library, which holds books for free exchange by visitors, was built by Steve Kittleson (right), a retired school administrator. Local Girl Scouts — represented here by (from left) Lydia DeBlaey, Meriza Crom and Isabelle DeBlaey — will serve as stewards of the library. Plans are under way for four additional little libraries to be placed in

the village. Photo by Sam Arendt