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Welcome to the Northern Virginia Front Page Section 06-Feb-04

Receipts get rubber stamp

By CHRIS SCHNEIDMILLER
Journal staff writer

The Fairfax County Public Library system's due-date cards are going the way of glass soda bottles and the passenger pigeon.

For at least 15 years, library patrons have received a card in each book they check out, stamped with the date by which the volumes must be returned. It's a tradition older than many of the libraries' customers. But the tradition's time is up.

By the end of February, the county's 21 library branches will have switched to a computerized system that prints a single receipt listing all the borrowed books and their due date.

"I think it's great," said Daria Parnes, branch manager for the John Marshall Library on Rose Hill Drive. "I think it's very high-tech. It's just catching up with the future."

Using the receipts will save the libraries more than 22,800 work hours and \$59,500 in the first year, officials said. Staff and volunteers no longer will have to spend up to four hours each day stamping cards, and the libraries will not have to buy the cards and card pockets. Customers also will save time as their books are scanned and a receipt quickly printed, Parnes said.

This month, each library will begin sealing card pockets to ensure they are forevermore closed to small slips of paper. With one-third of the libraries' collections checked out at any given time, it could be months before the more than 2 million items are reconfigured, said Lois Kirkpatrick, library system spokeswoman.

The John Marshall branch performed its sealing blitz last weekend, and by Monday had left the due-date cards behind. The Martha Washington Library won't convert until the end of the month, but branch manager Barbara Rice is ready: "The process of having to put the card in the pocket and take it out, you know, it gets old."

Some library users also expressed a complete lack of nostalgia for the due-date cards: "No, no, no, no, no. This is wonderful," said Mike Thomasson as he checked out at the Martha Washington branch on Fort Hunt Road.

Only time will determine whether the high-tech honeymoon will last. Both the Alexandria and Arlington libraries have tried receipt slips, which sometimes went over like a Super Bowl half-time show. The pieces of paper are easily lost, and with them the due date for the books, patrons say.

"It probably is one of the more frequent complaints I receive," said Patrick M. O'Brien, Alexandria director of libraries. "People don't like having the books listed on one sheet."

The city is sticking with the receipts. This spring, however, it will take bids for a new computer system that will offer automated telephone or e-mail notification of overdue material.

Arlington libraries gave up on the printed receipts several years ago after a few months, said director Ann Friedman. Staffers now stamp a strip of paper stuck to the back of each book, though receipts are still used by the automated checkout machines.

If they lose their receipt, Fairfax County library users can go online or call their library branch to determine when books must be returned. They also can sign up for e-mail reminders of due dates at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/library.

Receipt slips serve other purposes once filled by the due-date card, Rice said. "It still makes a good bookmark."



Brig Cabe/Journal
Shirley Bolstad, a Fairfax County volunteer librarian, stamps due-date cards at Martha Washington Library on Wednesday.

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