

Battens' generosity helped provide Norfolk library

By Tim Eberly
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NORFOLK

The city needed a new central library but had tied up its money in other capital projects.

So Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim paid a visit to the Virginia Beach home of Frank and Jane Batten, one of the wealthiest couples in the country.

The Battens had been good to the city in the past, giving \$11 million for the Virginia Zoo.

"I asked Frank if he would be interested in helping with another civic project in Norfolk," Fraim said.

That conversation, in April 2008, led to a \$40 million donation from the Battens - \$20 million from Frank Batten Sr. before his death and \$20 million later from his widow through the Batten Foundation.

The sum amounts to the largest donation in city history.

On Friday, the Slover Library - named after Batten's uncle - will open to the public.

Frank Batten Sr. voiced one desire for his gift: He wanted the library to be "the most technologically advanced in the country," Fraim said.

The city has tried to honor Batten's request. Seven labs feature about 130 computers, and patrons will find an e-book library, free Wi-Fi and a room to produce videos. The library will offer classes on graphic design, as well as editing videos and digital photos.

Batten also knew for whom he wanted to name the library: Col. Samuel L. Slover, who helped raise Batten after his father died.

Slover founded The Virginian-Pilot and its parent company, Landmark Communications, the predecessor to Landmark Media Enterprises. He served briefly as Norfolk's mayor in 1933. He died in 1959.

"I think Frank was very pleased to honor his uncle, who didn't have his name on anything in the city and yet had a profound influence on the city through the company and through his citizenship," Jane Batten said.

Frank Batten Sr. was the retired chairman and chief executive officer of Landmark.

He died in September 2009 at 82.

The Kirn Memorial Library served as the city's main library for 47 years. It closed in 2008 and was demolished the next year to make way for a light-rail station.

The city's capital project money had been committed to light rail and to building a courthouse, schools and a police precinct.

The Slover Library cost \$65 million, of which \$22.6 million was paid by the city.

Norfolk officials initially projected that it would cost \$46 million, city records show.

But the project expanded. The glass tower grew from three floors to six and the overall space from 96,000 square feet to 138,000.

"The Slover provides our region with a centrally located, extraordinary place that will encourage community engagement and promote thoughtful conversations on issues important to our 1.7 million residents," Slover Library Foundation President Harry Lester said in a news release.

The library blends old and new as it sprawls across three buildings on downtown's Plume Street. The glass tower connects a 19th century former federal building and an early 20th century gallery and cultural arts corridor known as the Selden Arcade.

Inside, computers and touch screens contrast with original woodwork, marble and flooring.

On a recent tour, busy workers assembled a desk. A librarian shuffled books onto a shelf. On each floor, cardboard paths branched from the elevators to protect fresh carpeting. Plastic-coated, brand-new computers.

"As you can see, they still have a lot to unpack and get ready," said David Sullivan, the city's chief information officer.

Sullivan showed off the children's section, the video-gaming lounge and the bistro at the Selden Arcade entrance, which will be run by a woman with a reputation for a mean Brunswick stew.

Sullivan said the oceans of space allow visitors to "find their favorite spot."

He called up a picture on the large touch screens that allow visitors to search the library's historical photo collection.

"A lot of times when we do tours, we bring them here, and we can't get them to leave," Sullivan said.

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