



Photo by Gary Smith

Librarians Anita East and Jean Rupp stand in front of the county's unreliable bookmobile.

## Sputtering bookmobile frustrates librarians

By Kevin Bushweller  
Staff Reporter

It's antiquated and injured, unreliable and expensive, and almost dead. You may have seen it in your neighborhood, billowing the sounds of an unhealthy engine in pursuit of educating the masses. It is the Charles County bookmobile.

The 15-year-old truck has given its two librarians nothing but frustration recently. It has been sidelined by poor brakes, bad tires, faulty generators, unreliable air conditioners, a leaking roof and transmission problems for 214 days in the last five years.

"You pick it up from getting one thing done and on the way back to the library, something else happens," said Anita East, a county bookmobile librarian for 7½ years.

And that's what happened two Fridays ago. With one exception — the bookmobile never made it out of the shop parking lot.

Despite their frustrations, East and Jean Rupp (the other bookmobile librarian) were looking forward to pick-

ing up the bookmobile from Owens Garage in Faulkner, where it was being repaired. The bookmobile had been out of commission for eight weeks, and they were impatient to get back on the road.

East turned the key, the engine chugged for a little while, and then choked, dead. The bookmobile was sidelined, again.

"Our biggest problem now is becoming dependable," said Rupp.

Rupp and East sat in the shop office, disappointed and dejected, but not surprised. They, and others, know the bookmobile's future is in jeopardy.

"The last three or four years, it's been one thing after another," said Linda Gateau, community services liaison for the Charles County Libraries. "It's really on its last legs."

The bookmobile is still in the shop.

Library administrators are submitting a request to the county commissioners for \$45,000 to purchase another bookmobile. It will not be a new one, but definitely a more reliable vehicle. More than \$10,000 was needed for last year's repairs for the bookmobile,

which was bought used about seven years ago.

Gateau said the bookmobile is an expensive machine to maintain because it carries a lot of weight and requires many custom-made parts.

"We can't keep putting money into the bookmobile and not putting it on the road," said Richard Treleven, assistant director for the Charles County Libraries. "We can't keep eating these kind of repair bills. We've had to use money from other accounts for repairs."

The county bookmobile program, which started in 1959, serves geographically disadvantaged areas, where libraries are hard to find. Librarians offer books, records, magazines and do information searches.

In addition to curious children and adult readers, the bookmobile serves homebound elderly and others confined to their residences.

The two librarians, who work different hours, drive the bookmobile to Nanjemoy, Cobb Island, Rock Point and other remote areas of the county. They also served St. Charles before the Waldorf library was built.

"They miss us coming," said Rupp, who has been a bookmobile librarian for 9½ years. "There are lots of areas in the county where we are their basic library service."

East remembers several occasions when pajama-clad children were lined in the streets at dusk waiting for the bookmobile.

"The children think you live on the truck," East said.

It is an understatement to say Rupp and East would be disappointed if the bookmobile program dies. They enjoy and believe in their work. And it is not clear where they would be reassigned if the bookmobile program was ended.

"It's a combination of a lot of little things," said Rupp. "All the different people you meet. You become their friend."

Treleven believes a segment of the population will surely lose if the bookmobile is sent out to pasture without a replacement.

"Ignorance breeds more ignorance," said Treleven. "The thing about a bookmobile is you can intercede. Do we continue with a bookmobile service or do we not?"