Libraries get millions for hurricane recovery

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METAIRIE, La.-- Public libraries hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are getting nearly $18 million to rebuild and set up bookmobiles or temporary mini-branches while they do so, three groups announced Thursday.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is giving $12.2 million, the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund is giving $5 million, and the Institute for Museum and Library Services, a federal grantmaking agency, is offering $500,000 for staffing temporary facilities.

The announcement at the Jefferson Parish Library's Eastbank Regional Branch came as the American Library Association opened a week of meetings, the first major convention to return to the city since Hurricane Katrina devastated the region in late August.

"Libraries are part of a community's pulse. It's that simple," former President George Bush said in a statement.

Allan Golston, president of U.S. programs for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said the foundation hopes its investment, which will pay for up to 22 bookmobiles or temporary mini-branches where patrons can check out books and use computers, attracts more donations for libraries that have helped people struggling to recover from the hurricanes.

"Library staff helped them connect to loved ones, contact FEMA and insurance companies, find new housing and rebuild their lives when other social and civil services were unable to support them," Golston said.

The two hurricanes damaged or destroyed 107 public libraries in Louisiana and 34 in Mississippi. Forty remain closed in Louisiana, eight in Mississippi.
In Harrison County, Miss., alone, it likely will cost $8 million to $10 million to rebuild libraries and an additional $2.5 million to replace the collections, library director Robert Lipscomb said.