

Libraries: Partners in Sustaining Communities

by **Beth Pollard**

He was the 25th in line to get online at our public library computer, where he wanted to apply for work at a local business. At the next computer, an unemployed mother was checking e-mail for possible job offers before walking a block to downtown stores.

Meanwhile, a librarian was helping a local business owner access a database on regional market conditions, the police chief was addressing a brown-bag forum on crime prevention, and residents from various countries were gathering for the weekly sing-along, where families learn English together.

This was the scene recently at the library in the city of Albany, California. Where has the hush-hush and tiptoeing in our public libraries gone?

Thanks to creativity, computers, and community outreach, today's library serves a vibrant and vital role in communities, providing essential information services that are otherwise out of reach because of cost or location or membership requirements. In fact, libraries are helping communities solve tough problems, reach disadvantaged populations, and increase the quality of life for all people.

Local government managers are finding that libraries are able to bridge economic, educational, and social divides that have continued to challenge their communities. Today's libraries are:

- The *only* access to the Internet for many disadvantaged residents in a world that requires online transactions and communications.

- A safe harbor and meeting place for immigrants learning English, high school dropouts preparing for their GED tests, youngsters completing homework after school, and citizens accessing social services and information.
- A civic and *economic* anchor that attracts not only residents but the small businesses that they frequent, such as dry cleaners, grocers, drug-stores, coffee shops, and more.
- A delivery mechanism for city and county services, including literature about community programs as well as registration for sports leagues and support services for the homeless and substance abusers.

The role of libraries in communities has changed drastically during the past 40 years. No longer limited primarily to holding a collection of books to be checked out or used for reference, libraries today serve a broad range of essential community needs and constituents. Local government managers play important roles in leading local governments and their communities to ensure that libraries are well supported, adequately funded, and able to continue their critical work.

ROLE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY: A PORTFOLIO OF COMMUNITY ASSETS

As one of the most visible symbols of every jurisdiction's civic presence, libraries are one of the best-known faces of local government. Located where citizens live, work, play, and shop, libraries define quality of life in many communities.

Public libraries provide free and open access to knowledge and services to all residents regardless of income, race, or age. They are a neutral, respected gateway to information and a safe place between work and home that offers equal access for all community members.

Because libraries touch every aspect of community life, they bring direct value to people's lives and support many aspects of local government. Through their services, spaces,

and one-on-one assistance, libraries directly serve important technology, educational, social service, and economic development functions in communities across the country.

One-stop service delivery. Service delivery is challenging for local governments, and libraries can be good partners in meeting this challenge because they can deliver many services in one location. Libraries are a vital and critical asset that can be leveraged by city and county managers, departments, and agencies as a way to directly link with and better meet the needs of citizens.

Casper, Wyoming, City Manager Tom Forslund stresses the importance of aligning the library mission with community needs. In Casper, the library is involved in addressing two tough city issues—helping high school dropouts gain their GED certificates and providing space for a methamphetamine treatment program.

Although becoming a partner with the public school system and the local drug rehabilitation service is not a traditional role for a public library, these partnerships enable the Casper library to support two populations that negatively affect the local economy.

Economic development and neighborhood sustainability. In addition to the library's role in supporting small businesses by providing research, data-

bases, and seminars, a library can serve a business attraction and retention function. As Travis Rothweiler, city administrator of Jerome, Idaho, describes it: "Economic and community development aspects of libraries are important; librarians and libraries can be a critical bridge to unique populations that cannot be easily reached."

A well-used library brings a high level of pedestrian traffic. If a neighborhood restaurant, grocery store, dry cleaner, and drug store are located nearby, library visitors are likely to take advantage of those services. An attractive library building can serve as the center of a neighborhood and offer local businesses services such as meeting space.

Some new libraries are part of mixed-use developments, with condominiums above and stores on the street level. The appeal of having everything in walking distance can be a great incentive for social and business activities.

The Indianapolis Marion County Public Library recently reopened after an extensive renovation.¹ With some of the characteristics of a Barnes & Noble or Borders bookstore, the library states that its goal during the renovation was to create a "community destination." With great views, high ceilings, and lounge-like seating areas, the library has become a place to see and be seen.

When Seattle opened a new central library in 2004, visitors increased by

ICMA's Local Government and Public Libraries Partnership Initiative

Public libraries are the focus of an ICMA project that has been launched with the support of a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

As part of this ongoing initiative, ICMA has formed an advisory committee to explore the role of city and county managers as advocates for libraries and the relationship of libraries to quality of life and community sustainability. One specific long-term objective for the project is to increase awareness among managers and other local government officials of the value of public libraries.

Available on the ICMA Web site in the Reports and Resources section is the *ICMA Management Perspective*, "Local Government Managers and Public Libraries: Partners for a Better Community." This is an executive brief that has been sent to all local government managers along with a suggestion that they use the *Management Perspective* as a focus for discussion with their community librarians.

About the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's U.S. Libraries Initiative

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's U.S. Libraries initiative works to help ensure that all people, regardless of their age, race, gender, or hometown, have equal access to the benefits of technology at their public libraries.

Today nearly every public library in the nation offers free computer and Internet access, but many are challenged to keep these services up-to-date and able to serve the growing needs of patrons. To help libraries sustain high-quality computer and Internet services for the millions of Americans who rely on them, the U.S. Libraries initiative supports libraries through technology grants, advocacy, and research.

The initiative recently launched a new program called Opportunity Online, which will provide computer matching grants to help libraries in 32 states replace and add computer workstations for patrons. These grants are available to libraries that serve communities with high concentrations of poverty and with technology services that are at risk of becoming outdated. Eligible libraries must provide local matching funds to participate.

For more information about the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's U.S. Libraries initiative, or to find out if your public library is eligible for an Opportunity Online hardware grant, visit the Web site at <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/UnitedStates/USLibraryProgram/>.

299 percent, and by attracting tourists and increasing sales at new businesses, the library contributed \$16 million in new net revenue.

Even Frommer's travel guide lists the library as a destination: "It isn't often that the library is considered one of the coolest joints in town, but Seattle's downtown library, which opened in 2004, is such an architectural wonder that it is now one of the city's highlights."²

Free access to technology. For the millions of Americans who don't have computers and Internet connections at home, public libraries level the playing field by providing a critical link to technology. Patrons can rely on the library for access to the essential online tools they need to seek information on health, education, employment, and government services and to communicate with family and friends.

They can also find training on how to use these technology tools effectively. For many, the local library is the *only* place where they can get computer access. Amy Eschleman, assistant commissioner of the Chicago

Public Library, states that 50 percent of patrons come into the library for an Internet connection and not for book circulation.

Free online access is critical for job seekers and those submitting online applications, including e-government applications. Two years ago, when thousands of senior citizens needed to choose a pharmaceutical plan, public librarians helped interpret the alternatives and also helped seniors complete their online pharmaceutical enrollments.

According to a study conducted by the American Library Association, education and job-seeking services are the top two uses of public Internet services that librarians identify as critical to the community.³

Workforce development. Libraries often partner with local businesses to provide training or training resources for residents entering the workforce. Some libraries provide computer classes, and others serve as a resource center for training opportunities.

Sunnyvale, California, recently presented a workshop series on man-

agement training and counseling, access to financing, and access to federal government contracting opportunities.⁴ A series of podcasts is also available that covers launching, financing, and managing a small business.

The public library in the city of Watertown, New York, hosts one of the New York State ATTAIN labs. ATTAIN, which stands for Advanced Technology Training and Information Networking, is a "statewide technology initiative funded by the New York State Legislature to provide low income residents in under-served and under-employed urban communities access to state-of-the-art technology. Utilizing interactive software ATTAIN provides community residents educational, occupational, employability, life skills, and computer training. Through the technology resources of the ATTAIN lab community residents gain educational opportunities and critical occupational skills that can lead to career pathways and gainful employment."⁵

After school and youth engagement.

For students in elementary and high school, computer skills are essential to success. Although technology may be the initial draw for a child coming to the library, often other programs offered by the library, such as assistance with homework, keep their interest.

Partnerships between libraries and teachers and access to tutoring programs provide help with homework after school—either in person or over the Internet. The Multnomah County Public Library in Oregon has a "Homework Center" that offers online chats with a tutor.

In addition, librarians are available by phone or e-mail to answer research questions. The Central Rappahannock Regional Library in Fredericksburg, Virginia, has online sections for "kids" and "teens" that are age appropriate, engaging, and offer book reviews, a poetry slam, an art show, and many other inviting options that can inspire a young person.

Education and early literacy. Literacy is essential to success in school and on

Leading the Effort: The Manager's Role

the job. Libraries throughout the country have responded to the need for literacy programs for all age groups. The F.L.A.G.ship of Marin County, California (Families Learning and Growing) is a bus that travels throughout Marin and parts of Sonoma County as part of the Marin Literacy Program, which is jointly sponsored by the Marin County Free Library and the San Rafael Public Library.

The program offers education and health programs for adults who are caring for children five years old and younger. The literacy program offers several programs to encourage reading in families, including tutoring for adults, so they can read to their children. Adults in the program receive gifts of books for children.⁶

In Grafton, Massachusetts, "PAWSing to Read" engages children who have been difficult to interest in reading by having them read to dogs.⁷ The dogs are calm and friendly and settle in for a story, which the children read to them. The reading group leaders ask the children questions about the stories, which helps develop retention and strengthens learning.

Local governments need an educated workforce to attract new business and sustain existing business. Library computers can be used for distance learning and online coursework. Distance learning can be particularly important to individuals meeting their GED requirements or completing course work that enables the individual to become gainfully employed or to advance in a career.

An Internet user who types in "college scholarships" or "college financial aid" gets millions of hits. For students with no Internet access at home, the library computer can open doors to a college education that the student may not have found otherwise. The role that librarians can play in facilitating the college application process and directing students to financial aid resources cannot be underestimated.

A sense of place. Libraries, often located between work and home, provide a "third place." They are visible symbols of a local government's

Integrate libraries and librarians into the whole of local government:

- Ensure that the library has a mission and programs that are consistent with the community's and the local government's mission and values.
- Facilitate aligning the library's efforts with broader community needs.
- Include the library director on the management team.
- Include libraries in master planning and strategic planning.
- Ensure that libraries are fairly and objectively considered during the budget process and allocation of resources.
- Foster communication and connections between the library and other departments.
- Look for ways to integrate library staff with other municipal and county staff.
- Facilitate a dialogue and shared understanding on what is excellence for the local library. Recognize that what is excellence in one library branch may not be the same for another branch.
- Be on the lookout for opportunities that have value and relevance for libraries. Keep libraries in mind!

civic presence. Libraries are free. They are available to everyone and, in a sense, are the great societal equalizer, a manifestation of democracy. The rich and the poor can sit side by side at a reference desk, can check out the same books, and can attend the same book discussion groups.

Libraries are usually comfortable places where toddlers sit in a circle with their parents to hear a story, young children go to select their "own" books, teenagers go for help with a school research project or to investigate financial aid for college, recent graduates interested in starting a business attend workshops on business planning, and seniors learn computer skills, join a book club, or volunteer. Libraries are central to a community as a place for all people.

LEADERSHIP IS KEY

Whether the library director reports to a city or county manager or to a board, librarians are essential partners in promoting the values that are necessary for sustainable communities. Libraries can often take advantage of their unique position in the community to help solve community problems, and city and county managers need to engage library directors and staff in this effort.

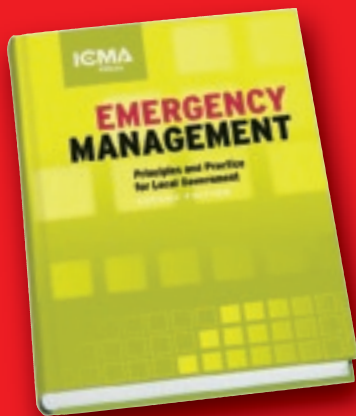
This synergy can happen only with adequate funding. Because the services that libraries provide to our communities are vital, funding libraries is vital. There are two significant expenditures: capital and operating. A capital investment in buildings and technology must be sustained through an adequate operating budget.

The critical role that libraries play in providing services that sustain community residents and businesses must be strengthened and preserved. Local government managers have a significant leadership role in ensuring that libraries receive enough funding to successfully deliver services to the community.

Managers must take an active role in articulating the value of libraries to elected officials, residents, and businesses. There are demonstrable returns on investment that library services generate and tangible and intangible benefits libraries provide to the community.

It is the manager who can form a partnership with the library director to educate the council during the budget process and demonstrate the need for a viable budget. By describing the multiple services that libraries provide and the constituencies libraries serve, managers can showcase the

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Regardless of the governance structure, the library is always a core responsibility of the manager. The manager has the ability to see the big picture, to connect the dots to integrate the library into the mission, to ensure that libraries are a critical part of the community.

—Ron Carlee, county manager,
Arlington County, Virginia

value that libraries bring to the community. Perhaps most critical is the fact that libraries are essential to community sustainability and community engagement.

COMMUNITY GOALS

Public libraries provide a diverse array of critical community services in a public space that brings together people of all ages, backgrounds, and interests seeking to improve their lives. In this way, libraries play a vital role helping to build more vibrant, successful, and sustainable communities. Local government managers are in a unique position to create strategic partnerships with libraries that can leverage community assets to support libraries and strengthen communities.

As local managers across the United States learn more about the evolving and potential role of libraries in their own communities, they will be able to better integrate the work of libraries in helping to realize broader community goals. **PM**

¹Erika D. Smith, "Can Library Remain Relevant in Digital Age?" *Indianapolis Star*, December 9, 2007, www.indystar.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071209/LOCAL/712090346.

²"Seattle Central Library," Frommers.com, 2007, www.frommers.com/destinations/seattle/A33693.html.

³"Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2006–2007," American Library Association, 2007, www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=News&template=/Content

Management/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=165393.

⁴"Free Small Business Workshops Offered at Sunnyvale Public Library," City of Sunnyvale, October 15, 2007, <http://sunnyvale.ca.gov/News+Releases/2007+News+Releases/10+02.htm>.

⁵"ATTAIN Lab Manager/Coordinator," New York City Housing Authority, 2007, http://home2.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/about/job_opp_30.shtml.

⁶"MLP Programs and Services," Marin Literacy Program, www.marinliteracy.org/prog.html.

⁷"Small Daily Differences," Tufts University, March 19, 2007, www.tufts.edu/home/feature/?p=paws.

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Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of three *PM* articles on the importance of libraries in our communities. Coming in April is "Welcome to the E-Government Library of the Future – Today," and coming in May is "Public-Private Partnership Saves Public Libraries, Avoids New Taxes."

Coming in **PM**

- **Rewriting the Story of Inner-Ring Suburbs**
- **Lessons Learned From Infrastructure Development**
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