

TRUSTEE CORE SKILL FIVE: Trustees shall facilitate an ongoing process of strategic planning for the library and will determine their community's future needs for library facilities, collections and information access.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR THE LIBRARY

### Introduction

Excellent library service starts with evaluation and planning. The library staff and board must know the library and the community. To use the jargon, they must scan the internal environment, the library, and the external environment, the community.

All planning, from the simplest to the most sophisticated, consists of four basic parts:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to go?
- How do we get there?
- How will we evaluate our success?

### The Internal Scan – Studying the Library

The library board and staff should periodically review the current strengths and weaknesses of the library. Every service and every area of the collection and every area of the library should be included in this review. What assets does the library have that can be built upon? Is there a handsome facility, a friendly staff, a good genre fiction collection, a strong Friends group?

What strengths does the library need to develop? Is there a too-small video collection, poor signage, inadequate Internet skills, an invisible interlibrary loan program, poor public relations?

The director should periodically have an interview with every staff member, including custodial staff, to determine what they need to do their job better. The director should report information gathered in these interviews to the board.

The library director should also review the entire physical facility on a regular (but unscheduled) basis and report findings to the board.

Questions that the staff and board should ask about the library include:

- Is the library building friendly, welcoming and barrier free?
- Does the library have an inviting reading area with comfortable furniture?
- Is the library overcrowded?
- Is the library making good use of the available space?
- Is the library in good repair?
- Are the grounds attractive?
- Is the lighting soft but strong?
- Are the restrooms clean?

- Is the signage large and clear?
- Are the staff members genuinely friendly?

It is good practice for the library director to regularly ask library users or board members to make the same site review. Even a good library staff can become so familiar with a building that they miss a problem.

The library board should also do a board evaluation at least once every two years to make sure it is functioning as effectively as possible.

### The External Scan – Studying the Community

No public library can offer excellent service unless the staff and board know the community they serve. The library director and the library board should review current information on the community's demographic, educational, political and economic trends at least once every two years. They should know:

- how the population is divided
- how good the schools are
- who the major employers are
- how the community is doing economically.

They should also be familiar with:

- the most active groups and organizations
- the most active churches
- the most active civic organizations.

They should know:

- whether genealogy is a major community interest
- whether the community has an active local history association
- whether the community has an active fine arts association
- what the major recreations are for men, women and children
- how many children are home-schooled
- how many residents commute to other communities
- whether the community has demonstrated local support for literacy
- the most outstanding needs of the community.

In fact, the list of relevant questions that can be asked about a small community are almost endless and endlessly fascinating.

Every library staff and board should gather objective information about the community. For the library to depend on the opinions of the staff and board often recycles outdated, limited or wrong information. Local government, chambers of commerce, local schools and other agencies often have valuable community information. The latest census supplies a great deal of information. Comparison with similar and neighboring communities is also valuable.

## Networking with the Community

The most important part of learning about the community involves making sure that the library is part of the community and is actively communicating with the community at all times. Talking with different groups in the community should be an ongoing priority of the library administration and the library board.

Sometimes, it is important to ask people what they want from the library. But, quite often, it is better if the library staff and trustees simply learn more about the lives and needs of the community residents. The library's staff and trustees can use that information in determining how the library can best serve the community.

Communicating with the community can involve activities such as the following:

- making local government and funding authorities aware of what the public library does for the community
- getting community leaders to believe that the library is important to the community's quality of life
- learning from community leaders what the community's needs and values are
- partnering with local educators to develop the services the library offers to school-age residents
- talking with parents, individually or in groups, about library services for children, young adults and families
- convincing the media that events at the library are worth covering
- inviting heavy library users to the library to participate in focus groups that will discuss library services
- getting information about the library into the hands of non-users so that they can discover the library's services.

When the library is involved in a truly major project, such as a building program, the staff and trustees should make communicating with the community's residents a top priority at every stage of the project. In the early days, the emphasis should be on gathering information and opinion and answering questions. In the later stages, the emphasis should be on marketing the project and its benefits.

As they develop the library's strategic plan, the library's trustees must ask themselves if:

- the community
- the board
- the director
- and the library staff

have all been clearly heard throughout the planning process.

## Using the Information

The director and the board should set aside a reasonable amount of time once a year to evaluate both the library and the community on the basis of the information that has been gathered. The director may make a written or verbal report, or both. The library's objectives for the coming fiscal or calendar year

should reflect what has been learned and the budget preparation should reflect the library's current priorities.

Any active and vital library will benefit from a half-day board retreat once a year. A growing number of libraries are making use of this very useful planning tool. If the library is facing a truly major project, such as a building program, a full day retreat may be justified. But a retreat should not be scheduled unless there are issues that need serious discussion. The board members will quickly become impatient if the retreat is a waste of their time.

A board retreat is still covered by the Kansas Open Meetings Act. The retreat should be announced, just as a regular board meeting is, but it should be specified that it is a working meeting. Those who wish to discuss issues with the board should be invited to a regular board meeting.

Important issues to discuss at a retreat might include:

- coming needs in automation and library technology
- special needs in collection development
- the needs of the facility
- the need for a building or redecorating program
- possibilities for more effective board function
- improved relations with local government and community leaders
- staff compensation and benefits
- the need for increased tax support
- possibilities for grant funding
- a long-term program for community fundraising
- the need for an endowment or foundation
- special needs for staff training
- possible partnerships with community agencies and organizations
- the need for practical advice from library consultants or other specialists
- the evaluation of recent major projects or resolved problems.

Small libraries do not always need extensive, written long-range plans. But it is critical to have an effective planning process. A library will find it easier to market programs that are wisely selected, effectively implemented and thoughtfully evaluated.

#### Using the Information to Select Priorities

On the basis of comprehensive and current information, a small library staff and board need to consider what their top priorities are and what top priorities they want to develop in the coming fiscal periods. Most small libraries have a combination of the following priorities:

- staff development
- building program and/or building maintenance
- recreational print materials
- recreational video and audio materials
- print, video and electronic information with the skilled reference staff to use it
- resource sharing

- community information
- children's services and programming
- adult programming
- life skills and hobbies
- senior interests and eldercare
- local history and genealogy.

The board and staff of a library also have to decide what the library will *not* have as a priority. Small public libraries certainly choose not to be research facilities but even something so obvious should be given some thought. How is the library staff going to serve community residents who are pursuing research on specific topics? These might include farmers, businessmen, clergymen, teachers, professors, students and those with specialized interests. If the library has an active and visible interlibrary loan program and the library staff members have good Internet searching skills, then the library is probably offering a reasonable level of service for its size. If not, these areas need to be strengthened.

Good reference service, including effective access to electronic information, effective interlibrary loan and effective use of system services is so basic to modern library service that it must be considered a priority in every Kansas public library.

There will always be services that the library will have as lower priorities but these should be the result of thoughtful planning.

For example, in a small community that has several video outlets competing for customers, the library may choose not to have an entertainment video collection. That can be a legitimate decision but it must be a well-considered one, since popular videos are usually a successful public library service.

In an active community where the residents have many demands on their time, the library may choose not to place an emphasis on adult programming. But again, that must be a careful decision, since it eliminates a service that is usually a major part of library public relations. The library should consider the benefits of partnering with other community agencies on projects and programs.

### Implementing Major Projects

When a plan for a project is completed and implementation begins, the planning process should shift to monitoring and evaluation. The board monitors the plan's progress and makes adjustments as necessary.

Modern strategic plans are dynamic documents and they can be altered when it is necessary. The trustees should ask:

- if the goals are being accomplished,
- if parts of the plan need re-consideration and amendment
- if there are new issues that need to be integrated into the plan.

As the library's priorities and projects are evaluated, it should be kept in mind that the goal of evaluation "is not to prove but to improve." The library director and trustees should create a safe

climate where they can candidly discuss failures as well as successes. A library that never fails is a library that has never pursued excellence.

With a strategic plan in place, the community's leaders can understand where the library is headed and what its priorities are. The strategic plan should drive budget planning, staff allocation and the development of public services.

A library's products include materials, information access and services. But they also include friendliness, comfort, community and a wide variety of life-enhancing pleasures. Most librarians instinctively assign a high value to these things. They should be integrated into a planning process. And they should be part of an ongoing campaign to market the library to the community.

Resources to help the Library Board with planning Patron Services, Library Management and Technology Resources are available from Webjunction Kansas at:

<http://ks.webjunction.org/do/Navigation?category=14860>