



Washington County Library

STRATEGIC PLAN

February 16, 2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview and Summary	1
Methodology	2
Findings and Rationale:	
Library Assessment & SWOT Analysis	3
Library Trends	5
Demographic Assessment	6
Community Survey	7
Qualitative Inputs	8
Investigative Phase: Major Drivers	9
Goals & Strategies	11
Conclusion	12
Appendices:	
A. Stakeholder Committee Members	
B. Community Forum Notes	
C. 2015 Resident Library Survey	
D. Assessment of Current Library Environment	
E. Assessment of New and Emerging Trends in Library Services	
F. Strategic Planning Retreat Participants	

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Washington County Library System 2016 Strategic Plan

Overview & Summary

This report was commissioned as part of the Washington County Library strategic planning process conducted by Library Strategies. The report reflects the comprehensive activities of a nine-month process that included extensive assessment, data analysis and trend research as well as a deliberate and focused attention on gaining community input through various channels to identify residents' needs and vision for library service. The data analysis, trend research, and community input provided a foundation for the planning process, which culminated in two all-day planning retreats with community members from across the county. This report is the result of the Washington County community working with Library Strategies to develop a strategic plan that reflects the community's vision and direction for their library.

The Washington County Library is highly valued by County residents who are generally pleased with the level of library service they receive. Yet there is a growing desire to access new and different types of services to accommodate new populations, new ways to learn, and new ways to do business. The goals and strategies that have emerged from this planning process are focused on six specific areas:

- mission and vision
- programming for targeted populations
- public awareness and library marketing
- space and facility needs
- resources and partnerships
- staffing models

These six goals, and the strategies designed to achieve them, will be carried forward in a forthcoming Implementation Plan which will include specific activities, timelines, accountabilities, outcome measures, as well as annual staff and resource implications.

This is an important time for Washington County, especially with the hiring of a new Library Director, to anticipate and develop enhanced library service across the County. This report, generated by and for the residents of Washington County, will provide a roadmap for the Library and County leaders to effectively and efficiently address the changing needs and desires of its residents for more and different library services.

Methodology

Washington County requested a planning process driven by data analysis and extensive community input. Library Strategies also employed the Rapid Results Planning™ (“RRP”) retreat component to engage the community in co-creating the strategic plan.

The scope of work included the creation of a 17-member Stakeholder Committee to oversee and assist with the strategic planning process. A sub-group of this Committee helped to identify participants representing a broad profile of the county to invite to participate in the RRP planning retreats. (See Appendix A: Stakeholder Committee membership list.)

At the onset of the process, a Library Strategies consultant conducted independent interviews with each of the Washington County Commissioners to gain background, perspective and expectations. A series of three community forums were conducted between May and July in Cottage Grove, Stillwater and Forest Lake, to provide an opportunity for citizens to express their needs and desires for future library services (see Appendix B: Community Forum Notes).

Meanwhile a resident survey was mailed to 1,500 households designed to capture current library satisfaction, usage and perceptions as well as projections of future library needs and usage. (See Appendix C: Washington County Library 2015 Residential Survey report.) Also, an online questionnaire was made available to the public on the Washington County Library website page. Approximately 200 residents responded to this questionnaire, providing additional community input.

Concurrent to the summer’s community input activity, Dr. Anthony Molaro, a Library Strategies consultant and assistant professor in the Master of Library and Information Science program at St. Catherine University conducted an assessment of the current Washington County Library environment with comparisons to five peer libraries as well as to the Twin Cities metro area libraries (with the exception of St. Paul and Hennepin County). In addition, Dr. Molaro conducted a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats) analysis with library department staff. (See Appendix D: Washington County Assessment of Current Library Environment.)

Dr. Molaro also conducted research on new and emerging library trends to provide forward thinking perspective on the evolution of library service. In addition to this research, demographic and trend data were also used to provide a residential profile of Washington County for this report. (See Appendix E. Washington County Assessment of New and Emerging Trends in Library Services.)

To provide further insights into community-level needs and environment, a questionnaire was sent to the elected officials of the 33 communities and townships within Washington County. Also, a meeting was held with city administrators of these communities to discuss current and future community issues that could be impacted by library services.

Finally, two all-day retreats were held in September and October in Woodbury and Forest Lake. These retreats attracted 30-50 people - current users and non-users of the Library - who represented specific targeted populations of the County. (See Appendix F: RRP Retreat Participants.) These retreats were designed to put a framework on the strategic plan and identify key themes from which to develop goals and strategies. The retreats were also designed to increase dialogue and introduce potential partnerships with organizations throughout the County.

The outcome of the above activities includes this strategic plan report as well as a forthcoming Implementation Plan that will be developed with library staff following approval and acceptance of the strategic plan.

Findings & Rationale

As part of the investigative portion of the strategic planning process, Library Strategies, with the assistance of County staff, examined a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative data and inputs in preparation for creation of the strategic plan. Many of these assessments and analyses have been presented to the County previously in comprehensive reports. Presented here, in much abbreviated form, are the major findings from these analyses, and in particular, the assessments that contribute to various rationales included in the strategic planning goals.

Library Assessment, Comparative Data and Staff SWOT Analysis

Library Strategies conducted an assessment of the Library system, looked at peer data from comparable library systems across the country, and did a “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis with library department staff. These assessments were fully documented in separate reports to the County. Here are the major findings from these three assessments:

- Washington County Library, in comparison to comparable library systems, is an average to good system. Overall, the Library fares better in comparison to national peers, whereas it lags somewhat behind metro area library averages.
- The Library is highly efficient and provides good value to residents per taxpayer dollar.

- The Library is very dedicated to customer service, and overall, receives high satisfaction marks from residents.
- The current mission and vision of the Library/County do not appear to be widely embraced by staff, nor are they driving a direction for the Library.
- In comparison to peer libraries, the Washington County Library is funded at a rate of \$77,000 less annually than national peers, and \$410,000 less annually than metro area peers.
- Washington County uses a system where the Library department pays rent to the County for its facilities. This is an appropriate system, but the peer libraries in the metro area do not have this added, substantial fee. With this rent payment accounted for, the Library's operational resources are even lower in comparison to its metro area peers.
- The lower funding level translates primarily into fewer staff. The Library has fewer staff on average than peers, and there is some indication of staff burnout, as well as a need for increased professional development opportunities for staff.
- In comparison to national and Twin Cities peers, the Library is below average in cardholder penetration, number of programs and program attendance. (The disparity in cardholder penetration may be due to Washington County's active purging to remove inactive cards. Other libraries may not manage their cardholder lists in this manner.)
- In comparison to national and Twin Cities peers, the Library is somewhat above peers and recommended indicators for purchase of print materials. For all collections (including downloadable) it is average to below average in collections budget per capita.
- In addition to some of the above areas, the SWOT analysis indicated opportunities for more partnerships, expanded programming, and improvements in outreach. Threats and weaknesses included lack of space, internal communication challenges, and splintering off of city libraries outside of the system.
- The associated but independent libraries in Stillwater and Bayport provide quality library service primarily to the residents in those communities as well as to other County residents. This arrangement is a positive for all County residents but there is disparity of service between these libraries and the rest of the County libraries in the system.
- Community libraries exist in Newport and Marine-on-St. Croix but are not fully associated libraries. These libraries are supported by the County with the addition of "Express Library" locker services.
- Lake Elmo has an independent library that is not affiliated with the County system and is not part of the County's taxing district.
- The associate and independent libraries in Washington County present challenges in the public's understanding of the library as well as disparities in library service standards.

Library Service Trends

An examination and report on New and Emerging Trends in Library Services was also conducted by Library Strategies in an attempt to project possible future directions for the Library. A summary of those trends and key findings follows:

- Reading remains as popular as ever in the Internet Age, but the formats on which people access the written word is varied and changing rapidly. Specifically, eBooks and digital content usage is expected to climb, while use of print materials may remain flat or decline very gradually.
- The “Internet of Things” – or the network of objects embedded with computer or digital technology will increase dramatically. Further, technology devices and usage are changing very rapidly, and the pace of change is not expected to decrease. This is an opportunity that is being embraced by many libraries who are emerging as the “go to” place for technology training and internet literacy.
- “Maker” technologies are a significant trend in libraries. These creative “makerspaces,” primarily based in technology, are becoming a standard service offering in many public libraries.
- Internal library systems technologies (as opposed to technology service offerings to patrons) are not expected to see significant changes in the foreseeable future.
- Despite reductions in print materials in many cases, libraries are not getting smaller. Instead, more space is needed for meeting rooms, programs, separate teen areas, quiet spaces, and other specialized activities. Libraries increasingly focus on flexible space that can be easily altered in the future.
- Various software technologies exist to assist in staffing and other internal efficiencies, such as in scheduling for example.
- The use of more powerful data analytics offer libraries increasing opportunities for improving service and being more efficient. These technologies are becoming more affordable and accessible.
- Many public libraries have adopted primary missions beyond books, such as lifelong learning and other education services, programming and cultural events, early literacy advancement, technology training, some social service functions, and more, depending on community needs.
- For many communities, public libraries are playing an increased role in economic and workforce development.
- Marketing services to the community is increasingly a part of library operations. Easy-to-use and attractive websites are a both a core service and a critical marketing tool. (Note: The Library receives low marks and satisfaction levels for its current website.)

- Some libraries are challenging traditional organizational structures (such as technical services, adult services, and children’s services), and moving to management and staff structures designed to achieve strategic goals (advancing literacy, economic development, outreach, partnerships, etc.) This may include functional reorganization based on programs and populations served rather than on geography. The strategic goals in this report could drive reorganization around core priorities in service delivery and program development.

Demographic and Other Trends and Factors in the County

A wide variety of federal, state, county and regional data sources and reports were examined as part of the investigative phase to project major trends for the County that would affect Library service:

- The County is expected to experience significant population growth by 2040, with a current population of approximately 248,000 increasing to 338,000 – an increase of 90,000 or 36%.
- The largest percentage population increases are expected to occur in the Hugo and Lake Elmo areas, with significant growth in total numbers also occurring in Woodbury, Cottage Grove, and Forest Lake.
- The percentage of households with seniors is expected to see the largest increase.
- Based on recent trend reports from the U.S. Census and American Community Survey, the total number of children and teens is not expected to grow significantly – but will remain more or less stable at current levels. (For the past eight years, the percentage of total population under 19 years has decreased from 28.9% to 27.8% but the total number has gone up and down and ultimately grown slightly by about 3,000 individuals.)
- There will be significantly more diversity in the County’s population, expected to rise to 20% or more non-white in the coming decades.
- Based on recent U.S. Census trend reports, the County will likely experience an increased number of households at higher incomes, while simultaneously seeing a growth in under-resourced households. (Median household income increased from \$66,305 in 2000 to \$80,748 in 2013. Meanwhile, the percentage of households in poverty during this same period increased from 2.9% to 5.8% and has not recovered since the Great Recession.)

- Washington County residents are highly educated, with 96% obtaining a high school graduate degree or higher. In addition, around 40% of its population has bachelor's degree or higher, up from 26% in 1990. Educational achievement and higher household incomes both correlate positively with library usage and reading.
- A relatively large percentage of employed Washington County residents do not currently work in the County and are likely accessing services elsewhere.
- Transportation within the County is a major issue and concern for a high percentage of households that are under-resourced, a portion of the senior population, and teens.
- According to Metropolitan Council reports, expanded public transportation is needed along I-94 to Woodbury and beyond, south toward Cottage Grove and Hastings (across the border in Dakota County), along Highway 36 to Stillwater, and north parallel to I-35E to Hugo and Forest Lake.

Community Survey

Under Library Strategies' guidance, Rainbow Research conducted an independent, confidential, random sample survey of 1,500 residents of Washington County regarding Library service, both current and projected into the future. The margin of error for the survey was + or – 2.5%. The primary findings from the survey report were:

- The survey responses were weighted toward people 40 and older, so while still valid, it should be noted that service to children and young adults is probably under-represented in the results.
- The Stafford Library in Woodbury is the most popular library for respondents. Other heavily used libraries, in order, were Park Grove in Cottage Grove, Hardwood Creek in Forest Lake, Stillwater Public, Oakdale and Wildwood.
- The Library is used first and foremost on-site for physical resources (i.e., checking out books), as well as remotely for many resources, and on-site for meetings or space. Use of the Library for courses or education, and for technical resources showed lower use. Patterns of use were surprisingly similar for all age groups, except the 75 and older population.
- The Library is used at least every other month by 64% of respondents.
- Nearly 25% of respondents also use another public library outside of Washington County – a particularly high figure.
- Respondents show a high satisfaction level with all current services, and 75% strongly agree that they feel welcomed at the Library.
- The highest use of the Library remains checking out books, followed by browsing collections, getting help from a librarian, and checking out DVDs or CDs.

- In terms of projecting use 5 years in the future, the highest increase in expected use by respondents is “Visiting the Library in person,” followed by “Use of on-line resources,” “To read or study,” and “Take a class or learn a new skill.” Virtually all other Library services also showed expected increases, but at a lower percentage or rate.
- Respondents think the Library is an important gathering place for their community, and the physical location matters to them.
- 61% of those responding to the question agree or strongly agree that they are willing to pay additional taxes for expanded Library services and hours.

Qualitative Inputs: Community Voices, Municipal Administrators Meetings, Forums, Retreats

Qualitative data and input into a strategic planning process is often richer and more meaningful in providing directions on community needs and desires than various “hard” data. Community voices enrich the conversation, and provide much needed balance and perspective in the process. Library Strategies and the Library conducted a wide range of offerings and venues for County residents to share qualitative input into the process (see Methodology, page 2), all of which provided rich data that will be useful to Library administration in looking at detailed provision of service. Here, however, we summarize the major themes and findings heard across these processes:

- Washington County residents highly value their public libraries, and would like to see enhanced services and facilities.
- There is not clarity among Washington County residents as to what are Washington County libraries versus associated libraries or community libraries. Most people associate with the library nearest to them rather than the system.
- Increasing and enhancing services to seniors is a priority, particularly in outreach, technology training and support, and programming and lifelong learning activities.
- Enhancing services to teens, at least in some areas of the Library system, is desired. Creating dedicated, vibrant teen spaces in some of the system libraries seems to be the major focus or need.
- Early literacy is a concern across the County, however, most agree that the Library has good early literacy services currently and the major area for improvement is in outreach and public awareness.
- Increased and enhanced programming and educational activities for all ages is desired. It was widely noted, however, that the Library should not duplicate other offerings in the community, particularly activities offered by community education programs.

- The Library’s website is not user friendly and users would like to see a major overhaul and upgrade. This message was heard in virtually all venues.
- Respondents want the Library to maintain strong print collections, but also increase downloadable and digital materials.
- Respondents would also like to see the Library keep up-to-date with technology, but are more concerned about technology training and assistance than hardware/software.
- Increased or enhanced services to under-resourced, diverse, and special needs households and individuals was heard widely. Major strategies or concerns in this area centered around outreach, transportation issues, and lack of awareness among these varied populations.
- There was substantial interest, although not universal, in the creation of “makerspaces” or other creative areas in some of the libraries.
- Although not shared in all of these qualitative venues, there was significant interest in advancing the Library’s mission around workforce and economic development.
- Advancing partnerships in the community was a regular theme, both to increase resources and connections for the Library, but also as a public awareness and community advancement tool more broadly. Stronger partnerships with schools was desired across all of these forums, although many noted that it will be a challenge working across multiple, diverse school districts.
- Increasing use of volunteers for more diverse tasks was a common theme.
- Stronger marketing, public relations, and public awareness of the Library and its services was widely desired.
- In the community retreats, and to some extent in the other qualitative venues, most people expressed a preference for larger, full service libraries rather than small community or neighborhood libraries. This was not universally expressed, but was the preponderance of the direction for the majority of those in attendance.
- There was significant agreement that more space was desired for the current library facilities – for meetings, programs, training and educational offerings, community gathering – and that additional facilities or expansions are also likely needed in the future. Respondents strongly agreed that there should be an emphasis on flexible, changeable space in any renovations or expansions in the future.

Investigative Phase: Major Drivers

All of the above findings and rationales listed above must be considered in shaping the Library’s strategic directions and goals, balanced, of course, by resource, geographic and other realities. However, the short list of major drivers that must be accounted for in shaping the strategic plan include:

1. Significant projected population growth for the County.
2. The increasing diversification of the County's population, especially seniors, non-white populations, and under-resourced households.
3. Current and future funding and staffing levels for the Library. More particularly, realistic capital *and* operational budgets must be factored into any major directional changes.
4. Use of the Library is gradually shifting from use of hard copy materials to digital materials and access to resources, educational offerings and training, programming, and community gathering spaces.
5. The Library is a diversified system, offering facilities ranging from full-service, large libraries to small libraries and express locker systems, and that diversity of facilities is likely to continue in the future. Upgrades and renovations are needed at a number of current Library facilities. A one-size-fits-all approach to facilities is unlikely to serve the range of needs and desires among County communities and residents.
6. Relationships with and provision of services at associate and community libraries in the County must be accounted for in the Library's strategic directions. To maintain the strength and effectiveness of the County Library system, additional associate libraries shall not be approved.
7. Lack of transportation, particularly for households and individuals without easy access to cars, is a significant barrier to use of the Library for many residents. In parallel, a large percentage of County residents currently work outside of the County.
8. Increasing community partnerships and private support are significant trends in increasing support for public libraries.
9. Nationwide, library staffing structures and management models are changing to better fit service needs and directions, and community goals.
10. There is an opportunity to further advance awareness and use of Library services among County residents.

Recommended Goals & Strategies

Goal 1: Deliver extraordinary programs, services, and collections

- Strategy 1:** Expand outreach services to underserved populations.
- Strategy 2:** Support the growth and development of youth and families.
- Strategy 3:** Cultivate lifelong learning opportunities for adults.
- Strategy 4:** Align library collections to meet changing needs.
- Strategy 5:** Demonstrate value and advocate for resources.

Goal 2: Expand Public Awareness of the Library

- Strategy 1:** Revise and refresh the Library Mission Statement.
- Strategy 2:** Overhaul the Library's website.
- Strategy 3:** Create a three-year marketing and promotions plan.
- Strategy 4:** Increase dedicated marketing and promotions resources.

Goal 3: Improve Library Facilities

- Strategy 1:** Update existing space and plan for new facilities.
- Strategy 2:** Explore opportunities to rework current space to meet evolving community needs.
- Strategy 3:** Develop a capital improvement plan.

Goal 4: Cultivate Partnerships

- Strategy 1:** Create a community engagement plan which includes partnerships with area organizations, businesses, and schools.
- Strategy 2:** Expand use of volunteers to support and advocate for current and future library needs.
- Strategy 3:** Work with fundraising and advocacy groups and other community partners to increase support for the Library.

Goal 5: Serve as a Community Technology Hub

- Strategy 1:** Enhance public technology training opportunities.
- Strategy 2:** Champion emergent technologies.
- Strategy 3:** Provide ongoing information technology training for staff.

Conclusion

Based on the research, analysis, and community input and participation in defining a vision for the future of library service in Washington County, Library Strategies presents this report with recommendations for clear and direct goals and strategies to guide the Washington County Library for the next three years. Many of the strategies outlined above have staff, space and budgetary implications that will require further discussion and consideration. An important next step is the creation of a detailed, internal Implementation Plan with Library staff to carry the goals and strategies forward with specific activities, accountabilities, annual budget implications and outcome measurement processes.