



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

ICMA Management Perspective

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Local Government Managers and Public Libraries: Partners for a Better Community

Managers Can Strategically Use Their Public Libraries to Achieve Community Priorities

Once considered quiet havens for study and research, modern public libraries are creating a new niche for themselves in community life. From bridging the digital divide to offering solutions to societal challenges, the public library has evolved into the essential “go to” facility for young and old alike—both physically and in cyberspace.

How effective libraries are in achieving their potential varies depending on how connected they are to the needs and opportunities within a community. Local government managers can play a critical role in helping libraries understand and fulfill community needs and obtain resources necessary for success.

One potential barrier to library effectiveness and integration with the local government is the variation in governance structures for the management of libraries. Not all library directors report to the local government manager. The library may

have a separate authority or board, may be part of a regional entity, or may provide services under a contract. Regardless of the governance structure, libraries are essential to communities, making it vitally important that managers and library directors form strategic partnerships to provide dynamic and responsive community support services. “The central question we have before us is how to connect the library with the local government. One of our core responsibilities as managers within a community is to connect the dots, horizontally and vertically,

in order to achieve the community’s strategic objectives. We as managers need to think of public libraries as partners in this effort,” said Ron Carlee, county manager, Arlington County, Virginia.

Libraries can easily be overlooked or forgotten in local government strategic planning processes. Because of the “discretionary” nature of library services, they may also be among the last to be considered in annual budgeting and programming cycles. Yet time after time, libraries are rated very highly in the measurement of service quality in

ICMA Local Government and Public Libraries Partnership Initiative-Advisory Committee

Members of the ICMA Local Government and Public Libraries Partnership Initiative Advisory Committee are committed to gaining and promoting an understanding of the role and value of the modern public library. Composed of 25 members from communities all across the United States, the initiative’s advisory committee includes local government managers and public librarians. With a diversity of community size, type, and geographic location represented, the advisory committee provides the experience and reality check for ICMA and the Gates Foundation to explore the role of managers for the 21st century library. On August 16 and 17, 2007, at the Harold Washington Library Center in downtown Chicago, the committee met to discuss how local governments and public libraries can partner to improve communities. To see a full list of committee members, go to icma.org/public_libraries.

customer satisfaction surveys. The credibility that libraries have with residents provides a strong platform for their expanded roles. Al Roder, city administrator of Northfield, Minnesota, suggests that the challenge is to view libraries as a core “essential” function of local government. Libraries will thrive and find new and innovative ways to serve the community with the support and leadership role of the manager.

ICMA has formed an advisory committee designed to enable managers to explore their role as advocates for public libraries and as partners in enhancing community quality of life and sustainability, one of ICMA’s long-term priorities. Members of the Advisory Committee for the ICMA Local Government and Public Libraries Partnership Initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, will also work to increase awareness among other local government officials.

Manager’s role in supporting libraries

While the governance structure of a library strongly influences its relationship with the local government, its work still needs to be integrated with that of the broader community. In order to achieve such integration, the group defined the roles that the local government manager can take to provide greater support to public libraries.

Strategic Planning. The local government manager has one of the most comprehensive views of the community’s vision and future available. As such, he or she can play a pivotal role in advising the library director on how the library’s goals can best complement and reinforce the larger goals of the community. In particular, the manager can help the librarian determine if

the library’s mission is consistent with that of the local government’s. He or she can remove barriers to productive partnerships within the local government organization and encourage other departments, such as parks and recreation or social services, to work in conjunction with the library on projects. Finally, the local government manager can help align the library’s efforts to provide Internet access with the broader communication needs of the community, for example, offering WiFi access.

Funding. Managers have a clear role in insuring that libraries have an adequate and dependable source of funding, as well as a seat at the table when budgets are being prepared. They can also help libraries gain nontraditional sources of funding. As libraries’ roles evolve within the community, it makes sense that their ability to leverage resources with other local government departments that share the library’s mission may become more commonplace. And, by showcasing and celebrating the important contributions of local libraries, managers can help librarians attract funding from philanthropic, non-profit, and for-profit organizations.

Public Support. By publicly promoting library programs and services, the manager draws community attention to the importance of the library and its contribution to overall quality of life. For example, by reading to kids during a library’s story-time program, the manager lets the community and the library know he or she recognizes its worth. The manager can also function as a coach and mentor to the library director in garnering better community support—whether or not the library director reports to the manager. The manager can provide critical

opportunities for libraries to educate elected officials and residents about their work in public meetings, particularly helping them to do so in a meaningful way and using concise language. Likewise, managers can communicate with the library’s board of trustees to educate them on the needs of the community and facilitate communication and increased interaction with elected officials.

Accountability. Just as all local government departments must be accountable for the work they do, so, too, are public libraries. By listening and better understanding the library’s priorities, local government managers can assist library directors align their programs with the broad goals of the local government. Local government managers can help identify relevant performance indicators for the library and assure that the needs of all ages and other population groups within the community are being addressed.

The role libraries play and value they bring to a community

Michael Bryan, director of the Seminole Community Library in Florida, describes libraries as “the manifestation of democracy.” As the most visible, physical symbol of a government’s civic presence, libraries provide free and open access to knowledge and services to all residents regardless of income, race, and/or age. They are a neutral, respected gateway to information, a safe “third place”—a space between work and home—with equal access for all community members.

The Third Place. Libraries provide services for people of all ages and

needs. Seniors use the library as a social center, young children as a place to develop a love for reading and learning, and teenagers go there to study, use technology, and engage in constructive, fun activities. For new immigrants, libraries offer a means to learn about their new community and the local culture, or learn English. Libraries are a neutral haven where all people can feel comfortable and safe. Libraries can also provide a place to communicate information about local government programs, showcase local artists, and encourage civic engagement and discourse. Libraries function as a cultural center that celebrates diversity in the community.

Building Communities. Libraries are viable partners in community development projects and anchors for new retail centers and residential development. Libraries provide stability in neighborhoods, as well as symbolize positive change and local commitment when new facilities are built. They provide a means for individual residents and businesses to connect to their immediate community, as well as to the global world. Libraries are fundamental social and economic connectors in every neighborhood where they reside.

Education, Workforce, and Business Enhancement. According to a recent Urban Libraries Council report, Making Communities Stronger, libraries are contributing to their communities in many new and innovative ways. Libraries encourage literacy within the community in the broadest sense of the word. Early literacy programs help parents and child-care providers prepare children of all income levels for school. Adult programs build an educated workforce. Libraries facilitate workforce development by providing access to the Internet and technology training that helps local

residents learn new skills and apply for jobs. Many libraries are also offering technical assistance programs for small businesses.

Change Agent. Libraries are a focal point for neighborhood change. Several Chicago Public Library branches, have bridged affluent and previously blighted neighborhoods, helping to create new economic development, along with a safer, more stable community.

Libraries have become much louder places, just out of necessity, because people in neighborhoods need a library to be that third place, the place where they can come to find answers to questions they have.

Amy Eshleman, Assistant Commissioner
Chicago Public Library

In short, libraries can be important partners for local governments in improving the quality of residents' lives and increasing opportunities for all. Pete Giacoma, director of the Davis County Library in Utah, emphasizes the need for partnership, noting, "Equal effort is required on both sides. The local government manager and the library director must have a shared sense of excellence and be willing to work cooperatively with each other to provide services for the community."

The changing roles of public libraries

Libraries are a dynamic resource and play many roles in their com-

munity. They are no longer just a place to get books and quietly study. Community needs are evolving and libraries are changing with them. And libraries function inside and outside their four walls through literacy programs and bookmobiles, and form nontraditional partnerships with other government departments to better serve residents.

The rise of the Internet has turned libraries into a communication hub for everyone. The Chicago Public Library recognizes that 50 percent of their patrons come for Internet access. Adults and children without computers come to the library and learn to use the technology. Many libraries offer free WiFi, giving business people and students another place to work. Visitors and tourists are able to come in and check their e-mail. The Internet allows libraries to provide access to critical information and databases required by residents 24 hours a day/7 days a week. In Arlington County, Virginia, use of the library's Web site makes it the second largest branch in the system by use—all in a "virtual" world.

Libraries are designing and implementing unique ways to reach a tough community demographic—teenagers. Some offer gaming programs where teens can come in and use library computers for games with the provision that they also check out and read books. In Casper, Wyoming, City Manager Tom Forslund reported the public library has started to do prevention work to address two of that community's most pressing issues—drug abuse and high school drop-out rates. And from the Mathews Memorial Library in Mathews, Virginia, to the Carson City Library in Nevada, teens packed their public libraries for rock concerts.

Governance and community partnership models for libraries

There are many governance structures for libraries. Some library directors are on municipal executive management teams and report directly to the local government manager, others report to an appointed library board of directors, and several unique models were described at the advisory committee meeting, such as the two below.

The municipal library in South Burlington, Vermont, is physically located in the public high school and shares facilities with the high school library. The two libraries have separate budgets, with the public library paying the school \$75,000 per year for rent, utilities, and technology. The school provides IT and janitorial services,

while the municipal library provides most of the collection. The libraries have separate staffs, including two chief librarians who work together, one reporting to the school superintendent and the other reporting to the city manager. This relationship has been in place for over 30 years and works well for the community.

Corning, New York, and seven surrounding municipalities have created a public-private partnership with Three Rivers Development, a private, nonprofit economic development organization. A ten-year agreement was reached seven years ago to change the Corning Library to a free association library. The library became a nonprofit organization under the state education law. Three Rivers Development owns the library building and leases the space to the library; they are also the main funder of the library's endowment and the municipalities pay the

operating costs through their negotiated contracts. The municipalities' contracts define what services Three Rivers Development will provide and the cost of those services. The library's board of directors is made up of members appointed by the municipalities and Three Rivers Development.

Next steps

Local government managers across the United States need to have a greater awareness and understanding of the traditional, evolving, and potential role of libraries in the community. As this role continues to change and mature over time, local government managers need new information and tools to better integrate the work of libraries in helping to realize broader community goals. The advisory committee will be working in the coming months to develop a proposed plan for addressing these needs.

About ICMA

ICMA is the premier local government leadership and management organization. Its mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and advancing professional management of local government worldwide. ICMA provides member support; publications, data, and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to nearly 9,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world.



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. More information is available at: www.gatesfoundation.org.

U.S. Libraries Initiative

Computers and Internet connections have become an essential part of daily life in the United States. Millions of people, many of them in low-income communities, rely on public libraries for access to these technical tools and training. The foundation's goal is to help libraries continue to provide these services for the people who need them most.