Timberland Regional Library
Strategic Plan
2014-2018

October 2013 Stakeholder Focus Group Report

Summary

Library Consultants Nancy Bolt and Karen Strege conducted a series of focus groups in October 2013 with community leaders representing stakeholder groups in the Timberland Regional Library's (TRL) five-county service area. Library Managers identified potential participants, then the Library Director reviewed these lists of participants to ensure wide representation and sent the participants' invitations. A total of 51 community leaders attended the groups. Through the focus groups, the consultants gathered information to help develop TRL's strategic plan. The following is a summary of the information gathered through these meetings.

Purpose: The focus groups were designed to gather information from the participants to assist with the following:

1. To understand the major issues facing communities;
2. To identify current library programs and services valued by participants; and
3. To identify potential library programs and services that may meet community needs.

Participant Demographics

A total of 51 participants attended the focus groups from a wide variety of organizations, including port commissions, health, education and government agencies, organizations serving young children, businesses, economic development groups and Friends of the Libraries.

Number of Participants by Location

Location	Number
Centralia	12
Shelton	12
Raymond	8
Montesano	8
Lacey	11

Community Leaders Perspectives

Purpose 1: Understand the major issues facing communities.

Participants said that the economy was a major issue, including high rates of unemployment. Others suggested jobs were available, but said that a skill gap existed between job seekers and jobs. One participant mentioned "a lack of understanding in young people about available jobs and how to prepare".

A lack of well-paid jobs in the communities was also identified in these groups. This deficiency leads to "young people leaving the community for job opportunities."

Along with unemployment and lack of well-paying jobs, participants said that poverty was an issue, and that sometimes poverty "ran in families." A participant said "we are seeing generational use of Head Start contributing to poverty." Another participant said that some community members displayed "self-debasement and lack of positive identification with our communities" and have the attitude that "nothing good ever happens here."

Participants also identified homelessness, drug use, and mental health issues as community challenges. They suggested that these problems are integrated, saying "people do not have money for rent or food because of drugs" and that "some kids leave home because parents do drugs."

Purpose 2: Identify current library programs and services valued by participants

Participants were extremely positive when talking about the library. Their comments ranged from praise for individual Library Managers and employees to suggesting that library employees share a "nice gene." Many said that the Library plays a pivotal role in their communities, with a variety of materials for education and entertainment. They cited a number of the library's strengths, including the availability of Internet access, a safe place for latchkey kids, helping people find employment and services, an entertainment center, and that the "Library is what the town square used to be." A participant added "TRL is truly a deal. It's a good system, I have visited other systems and TRL is the best."

Purpose 3: Identify potential library programs and services that can meet community needs.

Help build community economies

As mentioned above, participants identified the poor economy and its effect on the communities as the primary problem facing their communities. They identified a role for libraries in helping job seekers find jobs and develop job skills. A participant said "Community Colleges are reaching out to job-seekers and new businesses and libraries can help them do so. Some people don't want to come to a college but would go to the library." Others suggested that the Library could help community members start new businesses by providing materials to help entrepreneurs find the information necessary to write business plans. Once again, participants suggested that

the Library collaborate with community colleges and economic development organizations to spread the word about library services and resources.

Cultural collector and disseminator

Participants suggested that the library help "keep community history alive." One participant said that new residents and children did not have a sense of the community's past and that connecting newcomers and children to their community's past would help them "create a sense of belonging and deepen their feelings of connection with the community."

Community Center

Participants suggested the role of community hub or community connector for the Library. Some suggested that the Library could open up the world to their rural communities. The Library "could offer digital field-trips or be the center for video conferencing." One participant said that the Library could "encourage people to come in and talk, communicate, and network, instead of engaging in isolating activities."

Many participants describe the library as a neutral place that is not school or government. One suggested that the Library expand its neutrality and become a place to mediate community disputes.

Participants in the groups noted that their communities had numerous services but that many "were working in their own little world." One person noted "We need to get all the puzzle pieces together and get everybody at the table and share networks." Concrete suggestions for the Library included "convening a meeting to promote community services" or becoming a repository for information. The Library could be the leader, organizing and providing access to this information to ensure seamless access. Finally, one participant noted that with the "demise of newspapers, the Library can be a dispenser of community information."

Children

Some participants suggested that the Library's mission should focus on younger children to increase youth awareness of the Library, offering a "place to connect with children before they face problems." Suggestions were also made to collaborate with organizations that serve youth, including the Summer Lunch Program and other summer programs, schools, day cares, and Head Start. Participants saw pre-school services as a social and educational experience for children and their parents.

One participant at the community leaders' focus group and others at the library employee focus groups were passionate about getting rid of late fees, especially for children. One participant said fines become "A barrier to kids getting book" and another person said "Kids need books more than the Library needs the fines."

Marketing

Participants urged the Library to increase its visibility and relevance in communities through marketing. Participants said "TRL needs more marketing through immediate and relevant PR" and "the perception [of the Library] is old-fashioned, re-brand it!" Participants understood the difficulties of marketing, saying there is "too much information out there, it's hard to get messages out to our communities."

Participants suggested a number of activities to improve marketing, including identifying a few members of specific demographic groups who would spread the word (word-of-mouth) to their groups, speaking to service clubs, installing electronic reader boards outside all libraries, and taking library services into community settings. One participant said "You're talking to the wrong people here. You should talk to young people and non-users, including YAs, seniors, young professionals."

Technology

Participants also emphasized the role of the Library in providing access and training in technology, urging the Library to embrace and showcase new technology, especially 3-D printers. Participants saw the Library as a place for helping its community "manage the transition between digital and print and noted that "people want information right away and they use technology." Group members saw a role for the Library in helping people learn how to use new technology.