

Santa Cruz Public Libraries Strategic Plan 2017-2021: Premise and Process

The Santa Cruz Public Libraries (SCPL) are entering a period of transition and change. In June 2016, the voters gave their support to the improvement of each of SCPL's ten physical branches through either construction or renovation.

It falls to us now to consider the functions of these buildings. What services and programs will be relevant to our communities' values, needs, and goals? What kinds of buildings should we build? It is an exciting opportunity. We need a plan.

The Premise

In reviewing current public library research and practice, we have found that the most effective strategic plans begin with the community, and perhaps surprisingly, not in the Library. Creating programs and services and then going out to find audiences for them doesn't help an organization be relevant. Instead, ***we should start with the community and find out its priorities, passions, and values and then figure out where the Library can fit in.***

In her 2016 book, The Art of Relevance, Museum of Art and History Executive Director, Nina Simon, writes:

"Communities are made of people with shared dreams, interests, and backgrounds. The more you understand them, the more easily you can unlock relevant experiences with them...The most powerful way to gain access to a new community is not by creating programming or marketing campaigns you think might fit their interests. Instead it starts with networking...Listen to their interests and concerns. The more you understand what matters to them and what experiences they seek, the better you can assess whether and how you can connect with them."

How do we make those connections with the variety of communities that live in the SCPL service area? ***We should check in with the people we think we know, but we also need to have conversations with people we don't see in the Library.***

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation has formed a partnership with the American Library Association to encourage libraries to "Turn Outward." Carlton Sears of the Institute explains: *"Turning outward means that we ask crucial questions that get at the heart of what community members desire for their town."* Richard Harwood, founder of the Institute, says that Libraries are the perfect organizations to ask those questions: *"...libraries are some of the most trusted institutions in our nation's communities, making them a good place to start conversations. Community is the reference point for the approach of turning outward..."* (American Libraries, January 22, 2015)

Nina Simon and the Harwood Institute confirm that SCPL needs to engage with others, assess where it can have an impact, and find more innovative and effective ways for the Library to be part of the community. With that information, we can create a strategic plan that is relevant and continually renewed by remaining connected to the community.

The Library used several avenues to gather data in the fall of 2016:

- **one-to-one conversations with individuals**
- **Staff Day focus on strategic planning**
- **community meetings, one held at each branch**
- **online and hard-copy surveys distributed to both staff and public**
- **an online Impact Survey to better understand how the community uses its public technology resources and services**

Community First

In September and October 2016, Library Staff and Library Advisory Commissioners went into the community to initiate conversations with individuals, small groups, and organizations using the Harwood Institute model and the concepts from Nina Simon's book, **The Art of Relevance**.

17 staff people representing all levels of experience and responsibility comprised the internal Library Strategic Planning Steering Committee; the seven Library Advisory Commissioners served as the external steering committee. They gathered data, reported it, analyzed it, gave feedback, and drew conclusions.

Conversations

Community data collection began in September. Each person sought conversations with people they knew and people they didn't know. Some respondents were library users and many were not. Following a very short list of prompts, people were asked to describe their communities, including both the rewards and challenges of living in them. People reflected on the goals of their communities and how they thought progress could be made toward those goals. Together, the interviewer and the interviewee brainstormed the ways the Library might fit into solutions and strategies on the issues identified. Conversations were documented and participant demographics were noted. By December, nearly 100 conversations had been described.

Staff Day

On October 10, preliminary results from the first interviews were shared at Staff Day. Staff practiced the interview protocol with support from experienced interviewers, and were invited to also conduct interviews in the community if they could. Staff were asked to complete a written survey about their own views of the role of the public library in the community...actual and potential.

Community Meetings and Surveys.

From October 15-November 15, community meetings, one at each branch, were held to invite community comment. From September to November 15, there were opportunities for community members to contribute to the information gathering via social media, surveys placed in branches, and online surveys on the Library website. During the month of November, an online impact survey was conducted to better understand how our community uses and benefits from free access to computers and the Internet at the Library.

Approximately 1000 responses were received from all these sources.

Analysis and Patterns

In December, ten readers representing the staff and the Library Commissioners read through all the data looking for patterns in the results. The Strategic Plan draft presented here reflects the remarkably similar conclusions those readers came to. Across the Library service area, people identified these needs:

- desire for more morning and evening hours
- increased adult programming with particular interest in discussion/community forum events
- need for both quiet spaces AND interactive spaces in each facility
- flexible multipurpose areas in each building/meeting rooms for group activities
- more materials for all ages
- more technology access that includes both proper infrastructure and training opportunities
- development of more partnerships and services to address the needs of people without homes

Two barriers were consistently identified:

- high cost of housing (causes greater need for libraries because there are fewer financial resources for individuals to spend on computers, Internet, reading materials, information needs)
- traffic and gridlock (people feel isolated in their communities even with a car because driving is frustrating and mass transit is not well-developed; need to use local libraries as community centers)

Draft Strategic Plan

The attached draft strategic plan was developed in response to the community. It is anticipated that during the implementation of Measure S, the strategic plan will be reviewed every three years. The data gathering we began in 2016 will continue so that the Library can remain responsive to the community as it evolves.

Benchmarking and Data Analytics

SCPL will do a detailed benchmarking study using the California State Library statistics.

In addition, through an affiliation with the Peninsula Library Partnerships (PLP), Santa Cruz Public Libraries will access a new data resource, Gale Cengage Analytics on Demand. This product allows the Libraries to have access to detailed analysis of SCPL household level data to better understand communities' and patrons' needs. It will allow the system to understand variabilities in customer demographics and use by branch.

The Library expects the Turn Outward process of checking in with the community to continue as branches, services, and programs develop. SCPL intends to be proactive in learning community values and goals as it finds ways for the Library to fit into solutions and community progress. Community engagement will always be our first step.

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