

BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH CONSENSUS

Four Mississippi River towns embark on a shared-service mission thanks to the skilled navigation of their library directors
by Jennifer Wilding and Thomas J. Hennen

Public libraries across the country are facing mounting pressure from governing authorities to regionalize, downsize, and become more cost-efficient. Staying ahead of the curve, the four directors of the public libraries serving Scott County, Iowa, made it their business to determine how their respective communities would regard those choices.

"Libraries Together," a year-long 2005 study financed by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services as well as several local sources, has given the four directors—Faye Clow of Bettendorf Public Library, Pam Collins of Scott County Library System, Kim Kietzman of LeClaire Community Library, and LaWanda Roudebush of Davenport Public Library—valuable insight into what changes their patrons would and would not find acceptable. The final report, "Weighing the Options: Libraries in Scott County," has also provided a starting point for a proactive effort to use collaboration to enhance the quality of services the four libraries deliver.

The impetus came from Gov. Tom Vilsack and local leaders, who all expressed strong interest in seeing Davenport-area governing authorities share or consolidate public services—including libraries. Clow, Collins, Kietzman, and Roudebush decided to take the lead in determining the future for their institutions, and to base their strategy upon an understanding of what their patrons and communities thought would strengthen their services.

After a series of meetings in 2004, the libraries set out to gain that understanding by engaging Consensus, a nonprofit consulting firm whose 2004 study of metro Kansas City,

Kansas, libraries, "Making Book: Gambling on the Future of Our Libraries," had been well-received nationally. For its study of library sentiment in Scott County, the Consensus team (which included the authors of this article) conducted research and surveys and held a week-long series of public forums. The resulting reports, available at www.libraries.together.org, tell the story of how the people of Scott County view their libraries and how service could be improved—and of public misperceptions that library leaders need to deal with.

WHERE WE STARTED

Gov. Vilsack's vision for regionalism in Iowa is in stark contrast to the current reality. Iowa's tradition of local control has resulted in many small municipal libraries. In 2004, Iowa had 543 public libraries, one for about every 5,400 Iowans. (The national average is one library for every 31,000 residents.) While state law allows for the formation of county and multijurisdictional libraries, the only option with a workable funding structure for most counties is the municipal library. In fact, the Scott County Library System is one of just two county libraries in all of Iowa, and its per-capita tax is unpopular with elected officials.

The challenges facing the four libraries serving Scott County reflect nationwide trends—among them financial pressures that can lead to restructuring, uneven levels of reciprocal borrowing, and LeClaire's secession from Scott County Public Library because town officials felt the municipality could provide better service on its own.

Each library has its own distinct characteristics. Bettendorf, which is located in an affluent suburb, is highly ranked in Hennen's American Public Library Ratings—a system for measuring input and output measures among U.S. public libraries (*AL*, Oct. 2005, p. 42–48). Davenport serves the urban core and is considered *the* library for historical and genealogical research. LeClaire's constituency is a small blue-collar town of 3,000 that is experiencing an influx

JENNIFER WILDING is the director of the Consensus consultancy in Kansas City, Kansas. THOMAS J. HENNEN, director of the Waukesha County (Wis.) Federated Library System, served as a consultant to Consensus on the "Libraries Together" project. For more information, visit www.libraries.together.org.

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of new residents. Scott County Library System operates a headquarters, six branches, and a bookmobile in the rural areas and small towns that comprise most of the county's land mass.

WHAT WE FOUND

The Consensus team engaged the public in deliberation on three library reorganization options—becoming more independent, collaborating more, or unifying. The final report discusses the three options and the likely public and stakeholder response to each.

Citizens who participated in forums or surveys, as well as stakeholders such as board and staff members, agreed that the best option is collaboration. They came to this conclusion because:

- It builds on what's already working. The four public libraries in Scott County are leaders in collaboration in the state of Iowa and already work together.

- The goal of collaboration should be to increase the quality of service, not to save money, and collaboration should not be imposed from the outside.

There was, however, no consensus on whether collaboration is an end unto itself. Some felt it was, while others said it was a necessary step towards unification.

FAIR SHARES

Perceptions about fairness had an impact on people's opinions about how to pay for libraries. While the great majority of survey respondents favored collaborating to provide services and govern, that wasn't true when it came to funding libraries. Instead, a majority wanted a countywide property tax that would fund all the libraries.

Respondents were asked to identify which considerations influenced their thinking. The majority selected "everyone should pay the same tax rate" and "citizens rather than government should decide how much to spend on libraries." While only about a third expressed their willingness to pay more for library services if the four libraries merged, more than 70% said they would pay more if they were subject to the same tax rate as everybody else.

DEAL BREAKERS

Citizens and stakeholders adamantly rejected three tradeoffs:

- Losing the unique character of each library. Patrons value the differences among the four libraries and reject any move toward homogeneity.

- Becoming more independent. Residents saw greater independence as a step backwards to a time when the communities didn't work together.

- Ending the free use of other Scott County libraries. While the Bettendorf library is a net lender, at least 25% of each library's residents visit one of the other three libraries. Citizens viewed free reciprocal borrowing as an inalienable right and said that libraries should be free to all, no matter where in the county they live. Respondents were as committed to others having free access to their libraries as they were to continuing their own unrestricted use of other communities' libraries.

TAXING CONCEPTS

We found two major misconceptions among area residents about the funding of public library service that could have a dramatic impact on the way residents might view changes stemming from greater collaboration. Respondents seemed to believe that reciprocal borrowing doesn't cost libraries anything, and that property values don't affect a community's tax rate.

The State Library of Iowa asserts that reciprocal borrowing costs \$1–\$2 per item; Scott County's library directors peg the amount at closer to \$4. Area residents were surprised to learn that it costs anything at all; some refused to accept that there was an expense involved.

When it comes to property taxes, suburban residents pay almost twice as much per capita. Yet we were often surprised to learn that they were willing to pay slightly more if everyone in the county paid the same tax rate. County residents generally were unaware of the impact of tax capacity: that areas with higher property value can raise more money with a lower tax rate than can a poorer community.

Since the first phase of "Libraries Together" ended in January, the four directors have developed a plan for increasing collaboration among their libraries and plan to meet with Iowa legislators in the fall to encourage changes to Iowa law that would create state funding for wider units of library service. ☐



Front row: Pam Collins, Scott County Library System; LaWanda Roudebush, Davenport Public Library; Back row: Faye Clow, Bettendorf Public Library; Kim Kietzman, LeClaire Community Library (now administrator for the Southeastern Library Services Area, based in Davenport).