More Than Just Books
The Role of Public Libraries in Building Community and Promoting Civic Engagement

BY RASHAD YOUNG

Public libraries are evolving from their traditional role as promoters of reading and literacy to institutions actively involved in meeting the needs of their communities.

Why? Libraries are trusted, stable, apolitical, safe institutions, and accessible to everyone. They are key facilitators of community advancement by promoting civic education, bridging communities, and providing a forum for public dialogue in many ways:

- They provide classes in English as a Second Language (ESL); resume writing consultations; and financial and digital literacy workshops.
- They often serve as voting centers and places to secure information on voter registration and obtain absentee ballots.
- They join and initiate partnerships with local businesses, schools, organizations, and social clubs to address community needs.
- They can play a significant role in a community’s progress toward environmental sustainability, serving as a sustainability clearinghouse, providing a location for public outreach and information exchange, conducting workshops, and demonstrating green initiatives.

In many localities across the country, libraries are a vital part of the community social fabric. Their outward focus and community outreach enables them to generate information about public services that engages the community not just as patrons but as participants.

A Vital Community Resource in Greensboro

During my time as city manager in Greensboro, North Carolina, I became highly aware of the role of public libraries in building community and promoting civic engagement. The Greensboro library system was instrumental not only in addressing community issues and concerns by providing a variety of resources, services, and programs but also in helping residents connect and interact with government and community decision makers. In determining the best strategies to accomplish library goals and objectives, they look for opportunities to partner with the community to address issues, concerns, and interests.

- Employment and economic development. The Greensboro’s Central Library Information and Reference Division at the Glenwood Branch Library provides one-on-one job and career consultations, resume workshops, and one-on-one small business consultations and workshops.
- Newcomer and immigrant integration. The Glenwood Library established a Multicultural Resource Center. The center offers extensive programs and services for speakers of other languages who are learning English, including tutoring, conversation clubs, software in a specialized ESL computer lab, and citizenship classes. This branch maintains the library’s foreign-language learning collection including materials in at least nine different languages.
- Youth initiatives. Greensboro’s McGirt-Horton branch library partnered with the Parks and Recreation department for Third Thursdays, a program promoting positive attitudes for teens. The library was involved with the Hope Project, a Parks and Recreation teen gang prevention initiative. McGirt-Horton also partnered with JobLink, a program supported by a consortium of nonprofit and government agencies managed by the Guilford County Workforce Development Board. JobLink provides teens with employment opportunity resources, career planning, and education.
• **Family engagement.** Two to three times during the school year, the McGirt-Horton branch library provides meeting space to two middle schools for their parent–teacher open house activities. By hosting these events, the library provides an opportunity for parents to become more engaged.

• **Community engagement.** The Greensboro community is engaged in the development and success of the Greensboro Public Library. Citizens volunteer in a variety of ways. In 2011–2012, volunteers provided 18,024 hours of volunteer service, which was valued at $327,676. In addition to these hours, many citizens served on advisory groups for the library’s special projects, special festivals, and initiatives.

A Social, Recreational, and Information Hub in Alexandria

In Alexandria, Virginia, the story is similar. City libraries operate as social/recreational facilities, offering family film series, youth games, and other activities. As community centers, they provide meeting rooms and spaces for community events or are used as community heating and cooling centers in weather emergencies.

The Alexandria Library staff creates and implements services and programs based on customer needs and preferences. They collaborate with city agencies, local businesses, and nonprofit organizations to raise awareness of issues, missions, and the goals affecting the community. Alexandria’s libraries provide a host of community services, resources, and programs, including these specific initiatives:

• **Literacy initiatives.** In addition to traditional literacy and ESL programs, Alexandria Library provides communitywide literacy initiatives, such as All Alexandria Reads, a program designed to create shared experiences through reading. Another program, PAWS to Read, uses therapy dogs to assist children with reading difficulties.

• **Job training and education.** Alexandria Library partners with Liberty’s Promise, a program that places low-income, documented, immigrant youth, ages fifteen to twenty-one, in eight- or ten-week unpaid internships with local businesses, government agencies, and nonprofits by providing internship opportunities.

• **Community safety.** The Beatley Central Branch Library partnered with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children to host “Take 25,” an event to draw attention to National Missing Children’s Day. The Alexandria Police Department will assist with the child identification event by fingerprinting local children and providing a safety presentation for parents to learn about ways to keep their children safe.

• **Linking community with government.** The Alexandria Library and Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) have partnered to bring convenient automobile services to Alexandria’s neighborhood through DMV 2 Go. The repurposed, environmentally friendly recreational vehicles are outfitted with three customer-service kiosks and friendly staff to help residents with transactions.

• **Environmental sustainability.** In September 2012, the Alexandria Library began the installation of solar panels at its Beatley Central Branch. This project supports the vision of Alexandria’s Eco-City Charter and Environmental Action Plan. Converting sunlight to energy, the 42.3-kilowatt system will help offset a portion of the branch’s electricity consumption and reduce Alexandria’s greenhouse gas emissions and the building’s peak demand energy usage. The project offers educational opportunities to teach residents the benefits of renewable energy, sustainability, and the library’s green initiatives.

The goals of Alexandria Library align with the mission and goals of our city council. With education as a top priority, the libraries work with the Alexandria City Public Schools in promoting programs and services for school-age youth and their parents and guardians. They have created educational resources to support self-learning and literacy through enhanced digital and electronic tools and providing programs for all community groups and age levels.

**Fostering Pride and Community Loyalty**

Across the country, libraries are contributing to the success of government and businesses and helping
to create a sense of community. They are helping to build neighborhoods, facilitate civic and community engagement, and improve residents’ lives. Above all, they foster loyalty and pride in the community.

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