

Library Sounding Board – June 12, 2009 Meeting Notes

The first meeting of the Anchorage Public Library Sounding Board was held in the Loussac Public Library on June 12, 2009. Nineteen people attended. The meeting identified issues facing the Anchorage Public Library and provided an opportunity to talk frankly about how to address those issues. There are many positive aspects of the library system, however, the sounding board meeting aimed to further understand aspects that present challenges to the Library's employees, patrons and delivery of service.

The board also addressed the Community Strategic Plan project, focusing on past and future outreach efforts. Detailed notes and a list of meeting attendees follow below.

Please direct questions about these notes to Chris Beck, Agnew::Beck
chris@agnewbeck.com or 907.222.5454.

Sounding Board in Attendance

Teresa Churchel – APL, Youth Services
Brian Gerd – Teen Library Advisory Board, South High
Gretchen Weiman – Chair, Library Advisory Board
Liz Posey – Urban League, Young Professionals
John Wanamaker – Parent, uses Girdwood and Loussac
Karin Wanamaker – Parent, uses Girdwood and Loussac
Laura Norton Cruz – Anchorage Land Trust
Karen Keller – Anchorage Public Library, Director
Gordon Pospisil- BP / Technology and Resource Manager
Jason Criqui – First National Bank
Sherry Edwards – Senator Murkowski's office, parent
Peter Briggs – Landscape Architect, small business
Sue Urig – Library Foundation
Lydia Gray – USKH / Parent, uses Chugiak-Eagle River Branch

Project team:

Clare Stockert – Library Foundation, Development Director
Bill Wilson – Himmel & Wilson
Chris Beck – Agnew::Beck
Krista Phillips – RIM
Liet Downing – RIM

Agenda (see information previously circulated for info on # 1,3,4 ,5; see below for info on #2)

1. What's Been Done to Date
2. Observations
3. Engaging the Community
4. Community Information Gathering Process
5. Calendar

Synthesis – Key Ideas/Themes of the Meeting

- **Promising strategies for improvements in Anchorage**
 - Improved visibility / accessibility (“big sign”)
 - Improved physical space – range of spaces for different types of uses/users
 - Improved accessibility (Loussac has a great location in center of Anchorage, but accessibility for pedestrians, transit, bikes needs improvement)
 - Need for new programs / new partners (e.g. focused around financial literacy)
 - Meeting the needs of busy, tech savvy teens, young adults
 - Need for an army of community partners and supporters
- **Role of Library in 21st century**
 - Aggregating demand – resources not affordable to individuals
 - Convenience and lower cost access to information than competition (“information without a credit card”)
 - Library as “Third place” (not home, not work) – a place for gathering, for meeting people, for face-to-face interaction not possible online
 - Access to local information – a clearinghouse and physical location for information about local life, local events (particularly as local newspaper declines)
 - Literacy – fundamental function
 - Magic of books: chance to expand awareness, bring out new perspectives

Observations

In a word or two, how would you characterize the library today?

- Incomplete on all levels – branches, physical access, services
- Untapped resource / “quiet”
- Underutilized
- Outdated – compared to university library
- Love Girdwood library – wish for a softer, friendlier kids space
- Limited academic publications
- Lacking continuity – branch to branch
- Lack of branding
- Cozy – I like a traditional library (don’t like Seattle library, like with gargoyles); Loussac is quiet, separate rooms
- Teens don’t hear / think about it
- Unlinked to student life (teachers don’t require books for research); as kids get older they quit coming
- Dimond branch – invisible
- Alaskan, but “white Alaskan” – not reflecting diversity of our city
- Destination versus place to be, not a lively community place
- Inaccessible if you don’t have a car

- Sidebar: CBeck described MOA Midtown Plan, now in process. This plan will address issues related to the accessibility and uses surrounding the library. For more information, go to <http://www.midtownplan.com/Welcome.html> (note to reviewers of these notes – this site is being updated over the next few days)

Why limited use / what barriers to expanded use?

- For kids – “no fun” – library is an obligation, not a preferred destination
- Language barrier – e.g. people from Pacific Island cultures
- Many people, particularly younger people, believe “Internet & Amazon are good enough”
- No space for teenagers to hang out; library currently just a place to get pickup a book and leave
- Competing alternatives: convenience and cost of borrowing vs. buying / keeping
- Loved library as a child, a place to spend days; loved Portland library as an adult – convenient and great collection of materials. Loussac is less appealing.
- Slight intimidation – need a card, need to be quiet; especially intimidating for immigrants. Families afraid of deportation – sign up, get deported
- Less convenient than alternatives for young professionals; their focus is instant gratification
- Timing of programs; e.g. youth programs need to avoid hours of working parents
- Barnes & Noble versus library; irritating to see corporations taking over what has been a public role (and offering an environment more appealing for many people than the library)
- Kids can’t get to the library, parents are very busy, walking riding, bus not seen as safe
- Building not senior friendly – Bill asks “who is it friendly for” John W. “me” – (someone looking for traditional library experience)
- Contents of library – lack of music, best sellers; items available often checked out (facts: anchorage library has 700,000 volumes / moderately sized collection, consistent with size of town)
- Added after the meeting – annoying as a parent that kids can reserve a book online, but parents (with a different library card) can’t actually pick up the book

What has been your Best Library Experience?

- High school studying with friends
- Homer public library as a space / interior (also Girdwood, Haines)
- Family time – going to library as a kid with parents
- Mt. Holeyoke Library – wood paneling, quiet hum
- A place to fulfill appetite for books
- Old Mountain View library – a place that was generous, busy, let kids hang out after school
- Teens coming to use computers, finding “books about my culture, in my language” – gives validity to me, my life...
- Smell of the books at the local bookmobile – a chance as a kid to ride bike or walk to a nearby library.

Bill Examples – Themes for Library Success

- “Kitchen versus grocery store”
- Convenience – after hours pick up, drive thru
- Context responsive – coffee dunkers
- Kid friendly – spaces, scale, entry
- Technology – bandwidth
- Youngstown library – coalition around subject of financial literacy

Feedback regarding Outreach Plan

- General: approach outlined looks good
- Formulate questions differently for different groups; with non-users, ask about information seeking behaviors, vs. opinions about the library
- Outreach – find ways to partner with schools, get to kids and parents through newsletters, handouts (although some restrictions these days)

General Discussion – Issues, Strategies

- Librarians are key to success; would be good if more librarians “looked like me” that is, reflected the cultural and ethnic diversity of our town
- Small businesses would greatly benefit from facilities with diverse spaces – quiet reading, group study, option to rent rooms for meetings
- “What would it take to get you to make Library your home page” – response, link to local information not available through other sources
- Blockbuster vs. Netflix – what is future of information delivery (note – after the meeting I heard that a new service is coming to US, “Netflix for books”)
- Aggregating demand – libraries can afford information sources (e.g. journals, academic resources, perhaps software like GIS, SPSS) that is beyond the reach of most individuals or even small businesses
- Expand cultural resources, e.g. recent PBS show on American Indians
- Thoughts re library as source of local information – young people heavily rely on networking (vs. published information) “my brother’s friend works at best buy”
- Better access to materials (more branches, bookmobile, etc.) is a great idea but hard to deliver – a wide range of challenges: costs, managing logistics, AK weather...
- Library innovations held back by relationship with Muni – “every good idea must past muster with city leadership”
- Need to recognize technology gap “lots of people don’t have internet access”
- **A thought added after the meeting:**

While we found the meeting interesting, we were both a bit surprised that there was very little discussion of what is the essence of a library.

For me, it isn’t a gathering space, teen center or place for “young professionals” to schedule conference rooms, but it is a place which houses these wonderful devices called books which offer children and adults alike an opportunity to travel to distant lands (real or fantasy), step into the body and experiences of someone else (of a different culture or circumstance) and expand their minds beyond what corporeal experiences would normally bring them. It is the ability to go to the library and wander the stacks and stumble onto a new book or to be guided there by the librarians that is the magic. It is about literacy and the growth of people’s minds and hearts. I hope that this belief is shared by others and that we don’t inadvertently morph our library into something less profound.

I am looking forward to the meetings yet to come and to the growth and development of our library system. Thank you for your dedication and energy in moving this all forward.

Cheers John Wanamaker