THE EAST PROVIDENCE PUBLIC LIBRARY

FIVE-YEAR PLAN

RENEW, EXTEND, ENGAGE

Report Prepared by Michael J. Carlozzi

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

The Library gratefully acknowledges the patrons, staff, Trustees, and City Leadership who participated in the community survey, focus groups, and interviews.

T he world is always changing, and public libraries with it. When the East Providence Public Library (hereafter the Library) last authored its five year plan, no one knew of COVID-19. The George Floyd protests had not yet happened. State legislatures were not so actively endorsing book banning.[1] Large language models like Chat-GPT were not yet public; the complexities they add to the already challenging work of fostering media literacy not yet imagined.[2] As social institutions, public libraries must grapple with these upheavals and address their own contributions to systematic racism and further forms of inequity.

These are and continue to be challenging times, and ones that call for the Library to support its mission with vigor and purpose. In doing so, the Library reaffirms its central commitment to offer high-quality service to local patrons and state partners and to respond comprehensively to community needs. To continue this work, the Library will organize its efforts around four goals:

I. Continue offering high-quality and responsive service, reviewing and updating as needed the Library's mission statement and related documentation

II. Extend the Library's efforts to be more inclusive and equitable

III. Partner strategically with city and state officials to address larger social and educational concerns

IV. Promote avenues of support for residents to be civically engaged

The Library developed these goals in consultation with the Board of Library Trustees, the City of East Providence leadership, and community members, under the guidance of a consultant, Michael Carlozzi. These goals will frame the Library's daily functioning and help to guide development of additional initiatives.

---

[1] News reporting suggests that books banned in public schools increased by 33% from 2022 to 2023, https://pen.org/report/book-bans-pressure-to-censor/ . The American Library Association reports record numbers attempts to ban books at public libraries in both 2022 and 2023: https://www.ala.org/news/2024/03/american-library-association-reports-record-number-unique-book-titles

[2] See research from Stanford Univ. History Education Group, https://openarchive.stanford.edu/taxonomy/term/1024

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To develop this plan, the Library sought stakeholder feedback, collected demographic data of the Library's immediate and surrounding service areas, and analyzed internal data on Library usage.

- Demographic data are based on the latest American Community Survey (ACS); when such estimates are unavailable, data come instead from the 2020 U.S. Census.

- Library-specific data come from the Ocean State Libraries data portal and, when appropriate, from library staff.

- Interviews were held with library administration and Mayor Roberto DaSilva, and focus groups were conducted among the Board of Library Trustees and a group of patrons who had volunteered to serve in such a group after completing the community survey.

- The community survey was completed over the winter of 2024 online and in-person, having 392 responses. No personally identifiable information was collected in the process. Another survey had been sent specifically to the library staff, completed by 22 persons and collected anonymously.

HIGH-QUALITY, RESPONSIVE SERVICE:

I. Review the Library's Mission and Data Collection Process

The Library has a record of excellence and satisfaction. Respondents to the community survey rated overall customer service highly, averaging a score of 4.65 out of 5. Virtually all of the written responses to the survey praised the staff and services, often remarking on how staff were friendly and helpful, and how they would go "above and beyond." These responses coincided with results from the Library's last community survey administered five years ago, when patrons similarly commended the service. The Library continues to provide core services, and does so to excellent results.

Serving an Unwritten Mission

However, if there is one constant to library service, it is that it must adapt to the community's ever-changing dynamics. And recent crises, from local disruptions to the global COVID-19 pandemic, have shown the Library can successfully implement innovative solutions to address community needs. The Library's adaptability was on full display with the Washington Bridge crisis, for example, when the Library partnered with city, state, and federal officials to create a temporary disaster recovery center. These strengths demonstrate the Library's ongoing success in meeting its core mission through both traditional and inventive services.

But while the Library has undertaken such efforts, the foundational documents guiding the Library's efforts do not fully account for this necessary work. Many people, from patrons to staff to Trustees, expressed concern that the Library's current mission statement appeared outdated and did not reflect the modern library's substantially widened scope. Thus one goal is to review and update the Library's mission statement and related documents, in order to fully codify the

Recent work at the Library includes restoring Weaver's cupola. Left, before; right, the renewed feature.

Library's commitment to, and ongoing efforts towards, meeting the rapidly evolving needs of its patrons.

Community responses expressed a parallel concern about the mismatch between what the Library does and how the Library describes or promotes what it does: focus group participants and survey respondents indicated a lack of effective promotion and marketing. One focus group respondent claimed, and found agreement from almost all of the other participants, that he had learned of many services for the first time (such as the Library of Things) from the survey itself. The Library, then, needs to consider how it publicizes its services. One way to do so would be to promote services at relevant locations. Analysis of the community survey revealed that those who expressed interest in one-on-one instruction were also more likely to use the Library's reference computers. Promotion of librarian instruction could be done at the Library's computer areas, where those patrons may be most receptive to such materials. Similarly, those who expressed interest in English language classes also expressed interest in notary services, demonstrably more than respondents who did not express interest in English language classes.

Mapping Gaps in Data Collection

Since survey results show that respondents highly rated the Library's services, the findings suggest the Library has successfully reached and satisfied the needs of a core group of patrons, and that such satisfaction might further increase by expanding patrons' knowledge of what happens in the Library. But sometimes what is most learned from a data collection process is what was *not* learned–and from this planning process alone we could not learn the opinions or beliefs of those who did not use the Library

regularly, or at all. That is, almost everyone who completed the survey were active library users. Only 12 who completed the survey identified as a "non-user"–so it stands to reason that survey respondents are more likely to praise library services. The survey cannot represent those members of the public who might have been turned off by their experiences and never returned– and thus were not captured in the survey.

This had implications for data analysis. For example, library administration reasonably wanted to see what core American Library Association values were most important to the community; survey participants were asked to choose only their top three values. From the data we had learned that community respondents most valued the promotion of lifelong learning (81%), the provision of educational and recreational materials (80%), and the upholding of intellectual freedom (51%). The lowest chosen value was addressing the critical problems in society (8%). But this does not mean addressing critical problems was least important to the *community* in the context of other core library values, only to those who had completed the survey. To interrogate this further the Library needs to collect more data from the community at-large, and, actionably, try to include them more in library services.

That the Library reached so few non-users is not surprising; non-users are notoriously difficult to reach. If the Library would like to consider input and perspectives from those not currently using services, then it will need a comprehensive strategy to do so. How can library staff reach these individuals, whether at physical sites or through distribution channels? Doing so will require strategy and is not something to be considered only during the five-year planning process. Library administration has expressed a strong desire to try and reach these non-users, and has pledged to strategize ways to do so.

The community survey highlighted the need to engage in a routine quantitative and qualitative data collection process, one not mandated by the urgency of a five-year plan but by the Library's service needs. Routine data collection can help inform, more directly, Library policy or planning, even if only in an advisory capacity. It can also help administration understand public perceptions; for example, when public libraries discuss "access," they often refer to the equitable and equal access of library resources and materials. However, when hearing the term "access" without additional qualification, focus group participants interpreted it to mean hours of operation or transportation. Soliciting routine patron feedback can help library administration understand when messaging lacks clarity.

II. Expand the Library's Reach: Inclusive, Equitable Services

The Library is committed to promoting equity, diversity, and inclusivity, values which have been recently affirmed by the American Library Association.[3] Doing so will mean making the Library's space and services more welcoming to those from all cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. Library administration has striven to do so, for instance by recently implementing policies related to programs and displays and collection development that reflected and honored the community's diversity.

Meeting such a goal, though, requires concerted and sustained effort. Despite a commitment to diversity and inclusivity, public libraries tend to serve and employ mostly a homogenous user-base: those who identify as white and from higher

[3] ALA's interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights: www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/EDI

socioeconomic status.[4] The Library is not an exception. First, the users who completed the community survey mostly identified as Non-Hispanic White (83%), and we have no compelling reason to believe that those who completed the survey do not represent the Library's user-base, which would exceed the city's estimate of those identifying as Non-Hispanic White (77%). Further, only 11% of those who completed the survey claimed to speak Portuguese at home, in contrast to the 20% estimate for the entire community. Second, as noted by library workers, the demographic profile of the Library staff does not reflect that of the community, being overwhelmingly white and comprising mostly persons who do not speak languages other than English. Library administration found the lack of staff diversity as troublesome and expressed willingness to review the Library's hiring practices and collaborate further with the City's human resources department.

The Library, then, plans to address these concerns by making more of an effort to consider its services. Staff, for instance, observed that despite serving one of the largest Portuguese populations in Rhode Island, the Library did not offer any programs in Portuguese. Some patrons claimed that the Library did not present enough materials or host programs about other cultures, such as non-Christian holidays; they argued people from different cultural backgrounds might be more comfortable visiting the Library if such programming were offered. The Library, furthermore, will make a concerted effort to hire a workforce that more accurately reflects the community's demographics.

With the above reservations about gaps in survey data aside, the community survey also identified actionable ways of expanding inclusivity and advancing equity. Patrons expressed interest, on the survey and in focus groups, with cultivating the outdoor space at Weaver, and 53% of respondents expressed interest in using outdoor seating areas. Many of the respondents (38%) indicated that they had used the Library for quiet study, stressing the importance of study space–both Riverside and Weaver have only one room apiece dedicated to this space. In contrast,


---

4 See, for example, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/opis-2022-0135/pdf

the Warwick Public Library's central location has ten glass-partitioned rooms available for patron use.

While seemingly divergent requests, both outdoor, social settings and quiet, indoor areas show how space is an important resource offered by the Library, and one that can serve diverse community needs. For those without their own yards, the green spaces surrounding the Library's buildings can serve as a free, accessible way to interact with nature. The Library can also seek innovative ways to link outdoor space with Library services, for instance by publicizing outdoor WiFi access and relevant objects in the Library of Things. In parallel, residents who lack quiet space–be it for study or leisure–can retreat to library rooms. Unlike cafes and similar businesses, however, the Library's spaces require no purchase to use. Attention to accessibility, moreover, can ensure these spaces are designed according to best practices, better supporting a range of patron needs. Thus one way to further the Library's goal of equitable, inclusive outreach is to expand access to quiet indoor and social outdoor spaces.

Unfortunately, both the Weaver and Riverside Library have limited space, about which patrons in the focus group and staff expressed frustration. Adding more space at any of the libraries is not immediately practical, so the Library should consider ways in which it can have a presence at other venues, such as the City's proposed Learning and Community Center.
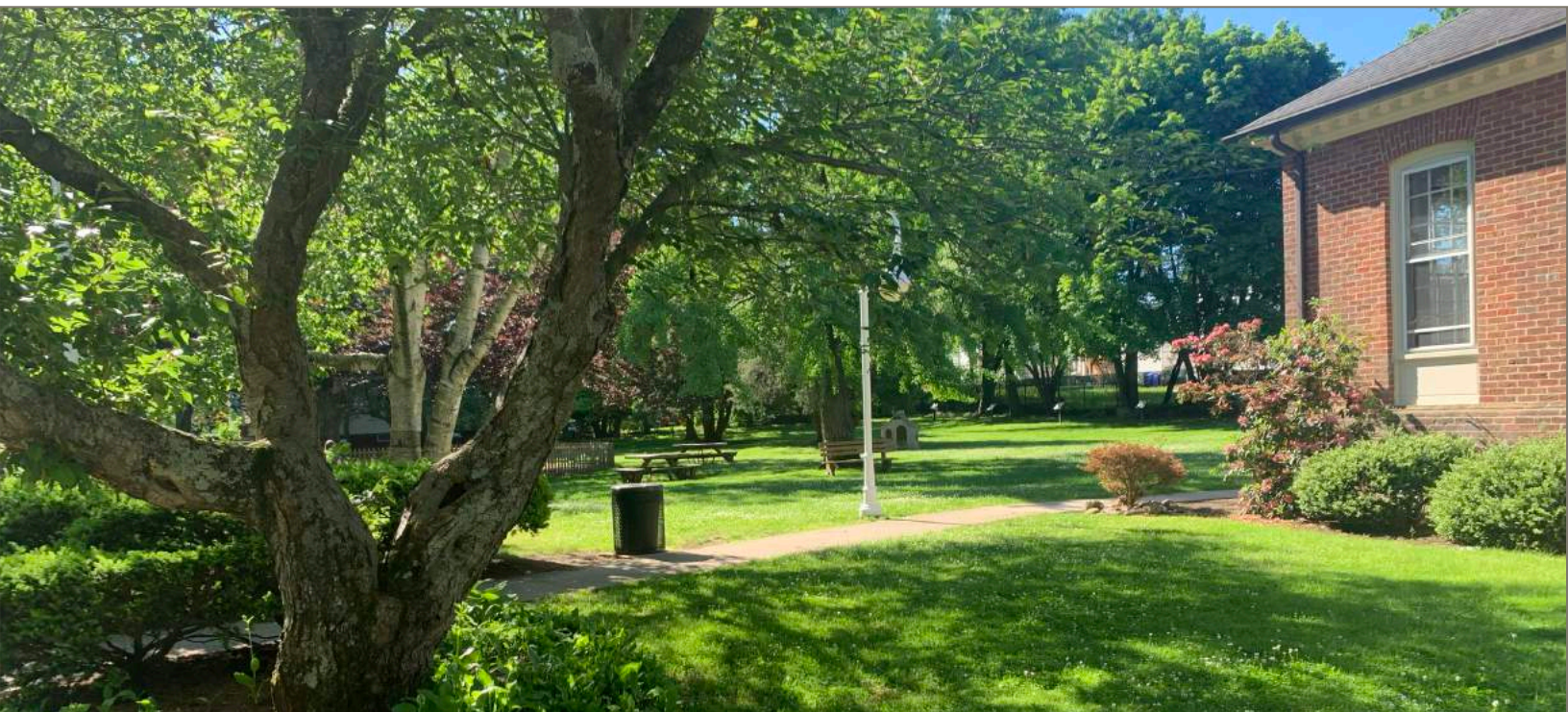
III. Partner Strategically With City and State Officials To Address Larger Social and Educational Concerns

A library alone obviously cannot solve, or even address, overarching educational and social challenges. It must be positioned as a trusted and reliable partner within a network of city, state, and nonprofit organizations. Yet social challenges do not disappear when patrons walk through the door, and some might argue that, in the wake of the housing crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, they have only worsened. A majority of service-facing library staff responded that serving the public has gotten more challenging in the past five years, attributed at least partially to overarching social issues such as homelessness and substance abuse–with evidence suggesting that these problems have intensified since the pandemic.[5]

These kinds of issues have always challenged public libraries, and public libraries have always been expected to address them without the requisite financial support. Lack of support does not justify helplessness, however, and the Library has risen to the challenge. Just this year, the Library obtained grants to hire temporary support staff to help address patrons' social needs, such as by connecting patrons with community resources and collaborating with local crisis intervention teams. These are vital positions that help to reduce barriers to access and destigmatize help-seeking behaviors but, unfortunately, are not permanent and rely on grant funds. Several staff members expressed the need for additional social work support, something to which Library administration is very much open.

Further, one of the Library's goals has been, and will continue to be, supporting education. In the community survey, the most popular library-related value (chosen by 81% of respondents) was to promote lifelong learning through continuing education. The Library does this through dedicated spaces such as the Adult Language Learning Office and the Fuller Creative Learning Center, as well as one-on-one patron instruction and educational programming. The Library will actively engage with its city and state partners

---

[5] See WPRI's reporting of federal data: https://www.wpri.com/target-12/a-perfect-storm-ri-homelessness-soared-70-over-past-four-years-federal-data-shows/

to support education. One way to do so is through the City's Learn 365RI Municipal Compact, which was promoted by Governor McKee and signed by 31 of Rhode Island's cities and towns. The Compact pledged to increase out-of-school learning opportunities for school-aged youths. The Library is currently completing one cycle of learning activities for the Compact and is planning to extend and expand the activities.

IV. Promote Avenues of Support for Residents To Be Civically Engaged

The American Library Association has pledged to support civic engagement. Libraries can fill a vital nonpartisan role in encouraging public and democratic participation. In 2022, the White House called upon the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)– the federal agency supporting U.S. libraries–to "promote civic engagement and participation in the voting process." Historically, the Library has supported engagement by hosting candidate forums and by partnering with the Secretary of State to deliver services, such as piloting a new kind of touchscreen voting machine. Libraries taking a more active role in encouraging civic engagement is a relatively new phenomenon,

though, so much potential exists for doing so. For instance, other U.S. public libraries have hosted voter registration drives, offered more targeted civics-oriented programming, and connected patrons with local volunteer opportunities. The IMLS has asserted that grant funds will be available for public libraries wishing to cultivate civic engagement programming; a recently funded project at the Boston Public Library, for example, comprised over $100,000 to consider how maps may influence critical thinking and engagement.

Patrons were receptive to the notion of libraries assuming a more active role in civic engagement, but they were concerned that the Library might become "political." Although the Library in this role would be nonpartisan, the patron concern highlights the importance of clear communication to minimize the risk of misinterpretation. Encouraging the act of voting and connecting patrons with ways to engage civically in their community is not a partisan act–it supports the very core of what makes a democratic society work.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Goal 1: Continue offering high-quality and responsive service, reviewing and updating as needed the Library's mission statement and related documentation

Objective 1: Review and revise the Library's mission statement

Objective 2: Develop and implement measures more regularly to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from library users

Objective 3: Promote and market library services more strategically

Objective 4: Endeavor more actively to reach members within the community who are not currently active library users

Goal 2: Extend the Library's efforts to be more inclusive and equitable

Objective 1: Prioritize inclusive hiring practices to more closely match community demographics and to collaborate closely with the City's Human Resources Development

Objective 2: Celebrate and recognize more cultures and backgrounds through library programs, displays, and collections

Objective 3: Collaborate further with the City's Affirmative Action Office

Objective 4: Review usage of space within the libraries themselves and possibilities elsewhere throughout the City

Goal 3: Partner strategically with city and state officials to address larger social and educational concerns

Objective 1: Support City efforts to establish a Learning Community Center

Objective 2: Continue to support City and state educational efforts such as Learn365RI Municipal Compact

Objective 3: Work actively with both local and state officials to play a more active role in addressing larger social issues, such as recovery support and the housing crisis

Objective 4: Consider staffing needs and the extent to which additional social support can be implemented

Goal 4: Promote avenues of support for residents to be civically engaged

Objective 1: Clarify and outline concrete ways in which the library can responsibly support efforts to improve civic engagement beyond what is currently offered

Objective 2: Pursue funding opportunities to develop the Library's civic engagement programming