LOCALTOWN PUBLIC LIBRARY CASE STUDY

Scenario: the Governance and Nominating Committee of the Localtown Public Library’s board is preparing to discuss recruiting the next class of trustees. The board has 20 seats, only 14 of which are filled.

Part 1: Our Community’s Libraries

Long-time residents in Localtown haven’t exactly gotten used to the changing composition of the community’s population over the past two decades – a change quite evident to staff at the community’s two libraries. A once ethnically homogeneous though economically diverse part of Long Island (from working class to upper-middle class) is now ethnically quite diverse with large numbers of Middle Eastern and Asian residents populating its schools, shopping in its stores, enjoying its parks, utilizing its social services, paying its taxes and coming to the library. Of course they’re buying houses too, and that’s pushed up real estate values which some folks think has encouraged the kind of people who ‘once made Localtown great’ to leave…or to claim that it’s made housing unaffordable for their own grown children to settle there.

The community has a main library – a stately Federal-style 1940s brick building near the railroad station and shopping streets – and a branch library near the community’s second and newer high school – a 1960s structure in a park-like setting. Each facility has been updated at points in its history, but both are decidedly “tired” today and hardly the equal of the best contemporary suburban libraries – some quite visible in neighboring towns and villages. Built more to accommodate stacks than to accommodate people, neither branch is fully accessible; neither has adequate meeting, teaching or group work spaces; neither has enough comfortable seating; neither has sufficient technology infrastructure; and neither is environmentally responsible.

Nonetheless, by statistical measures, Localtown Public Library is a success. Circulation has risen each year over the past decade, plateauing only recently with a decline in the use of DVDs. Gate count has grown every year – often by 5% or more. Programs for children and older adults are oversubscribed (and would continue to be if twice as many were offered!). Ask anyone who’s come mid-day and they’ll tell you the parking lots are so full of cars it is almost impossible to park. The mayor recently quipped: “I wish our streets and sewers took a page from our libraries; if they lasted as long as the libraries have, we’d save a ton of capital money.”

The library’s leadership and its front-line staff view things differently. The director is active in the state library association and, through her travels, has seen libraries in other communities
that have benefited from dramatic physical transformations changing how they operate and how they serve. Members of the board have heard from neighbors that the library isn’t the place it used to be and they sense the facilities are out of step with changing times and a changing community. Staff are gratified by the number of users, but many would privately admit they feel inadequately prepared to serve the many whose primary language is not English, whose culture seems foreign, whose needs are not entirely clear, and whose children seem shy. There’s a subtle but pervasive sense of guilt, as well, that long-time patrons (the people who raised an early generation of families here) are inadequately served as well.

Localtown is not without overt social tension. Anti-immigrant graffiti has been found scrawled in civic spaces; editorials in the local paper have simmered with anger over the changing character of the community; books in world languages at the library have been found mis-shelved; and clubs in the high schools have been formed around ethnicity that to some are about ‘community empowerment,’ and to others seem a cover for exclusion.

Another sensitive topic: the library’s board is made up of the kinds of people who ‘once made Localtown great.’ They are older, ethnically homogenous, and familiar to one another since their kids were young. They are fiercely committed to the democratic principles foundational to public libraries. They believe the library’s doors should be open to every Localtown resident and responsive to the entire community’s needs. At the same time, when a board seat opens it is generally filled by someone well known to the rest. Perhaps most critically, the library’s operating budget, an allocation from the Localtown municipal budget, has been in decline for years and the board has seemed powerless to fight it or identify other sources of revenue.

**Part 2: Strategic Planning: Research Findings**

At the director’s urging, the board approved funding for a strategic plan to guide Localtown Public Library over the next three-to-five years. Consultants were hired and began with a period of research that yielded a trove of data. English-speaking older adults mostly like the library just as it is but wish for more quiet in the reading rooms at each location, and a place "just for seniors" to gather and talk, play cards, and enjoy speakers on current events. Immigrant seniors said they would take advantage of educational and wellness programming daily if it were offered; they feel comfortable at the library even if they don’t always feel welcome in the community. Empty nesters indicated affection for the library – even though many buy their own ebooks – and said they’d come more often if there were opportunities to volunteer or meet notable authors. Teens said that better hang-out space, project rooms and faster wireless connectivity would improve the library experience. Families – particularly dual-earner households with school-aged children – want a safe space for their kids to go afterschool and on Saturdays. Families with small children were universal in their demand for more toddler and pre-school programming, and lots of space to explore and discover.
It's worth noting that very few of the respondents in an online survey and focus groups had much to say about the library's collections...except for educated immigrants who want more materials in their native languages.

Library staff and board members conducted site visits to libraries in the region that had recently built new buildings or undergone renovations or expansions. They were inspired by what they saw: lots of open space devoid of stacks but filled with comfortable seating, multiple meeting rooms of different sizes, cafes, fanciful children's zones, and some with design elements that make extraordinary accommodation for children and adults with special needs.

Civic leaders (elected officials, philanthropists, business owners, association presidents, etc.) were queried through a series of one-on-one interviews to gather their opinions. Those who love the library (and many said they do) underscored its important role as a free and essential community asset. A surprising number rarely set foot in the library, and several incorrectly assumed that in a digital age, library use is in decline. Several town board members reminded their interviewer that anyone in a leadership position had to keep the interests of the entire community in mind. "The library has needs just like every municipal department," said one, "and we've got expenses in every area that we've got to keep under control." Roads, schools, parks, fire houses and more are all in need of attention.

But so are the library’s two aged buildings! In both, bathrooms would meet accessibility requirements...if this were 1974. Furnishings are contemporary...circa 1988. Technology infrastructure is functioning but you’d better come with laptops fully charged because you’ll never find an outlet.

School officials were approached as part of the research process but were less than responsive to requests for input. Instead, members of the strategic planning team reached out to individual teachers they knew, armed with a short list of questions asked over a cup of coffee. Many highlighted the need for ESOL classes and acculturation for immigrant parents for whom American ways are still foreign. Several noted that Asian and Middle Eastern families often had elderly parents living in their households who would benefit from targeted library programs and services.

Localtown Public Library has had small Friends groups at each of its two locations virtually since they opened, but in recent years the groups have been small and their impact modest. Heartening to note however: in focus groups and surveys, many respondents indicated a willingness to help the library achieve its goals.

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