

Columbus Public Library: Collaborative Community Development in a Rural Municipality

Summary: Columbus Public Library seeks a \$48,000, National Leadership Grant in the Planning/Community Anchor category with a Community Performance goal. We will take a leadership position in a community-wide, collaborative, municipal planning project in rural Wisconsin, slated for 2018-19. We will look to other communities that have undertaken a comprehensive and collaborative community planning project, learning from their successes and challenges. We will take stock of municipal and community assets and evaluate how best to spend our limited fiscal resources to give citizens the most bang for their taxpayers' buck via this comprehensive plan. The library will tailor its own strategic plan to dovetail with the municipality's plan. We will share the planning methods, successes and challenges learned with rural libraries across the country that may not be able to afford professional consultants.

Background: Like many rural areas located outside of urban centers, Columbus, Wisconsin is changing from a rural agricultural and manufacturing community into a bedroom community of the Greater Madison area. We are just over 5,000 in population and growing every day. Newer residents expect a dynamic and vibrant community while established, multi-generational families honor its deep and historic roots. Satisfying both groups can be challenging, but the library's 2015 Strategic Plan both honored community history and introduced innovative, citizen-led programming. As one of the 10 libraries in the original American Library Association's (ALA) [*Libraries Transforming Communities \(LTC\): Turning Outward*](#) program, library and community leaders learned and honed the Harwood Institute's community engagement tools, resulting in a dynamic library plan. It's time for a new plan for the library and the municipality as a whole.

Project Design: As an extension of Library Director Cindy Fesemyer's [*PLA Leadership Academy*](#) project (March 2016), for which IMLS funding has ended, we will launch a **collaborative effort with multiple municipal departments, in consultation with citizens and a paid consultant, to formulate a plan for future growth and change in Columbus, Wisconsin.** The library will act as community convener and facilitator of multiple community-wide conversations that will impact the whole municipality, not just the library's role within it. By analyzing comprehensive community needs and wants in this *municipal* plan, we believe we can simultaneously formalize the library's position as a true community anchor by creating a *library* strategic plan that is perfectly aligned with municipal administration, elected officials, business and community leaders.

In this collaborative, comprehensive planning process, the library will deploy a variety of community engagement tools that go beyond Harwood practices, including planning tools from the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, Conversationcafe.org, Essential Partners, Everyday Democracy, Future Search, National Issues Forum and World Cafe. As an advisor for the ALA [*LTC: Models for Change*](#) effort taking place now at ALA, Cindy Fesemyer is uniquely positioned to **expand the traditional boundaries of the public library within the municipality it serves.**

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Community partners: Members of the **Columbus City Council, the Mayor and the City Administrator** are about to take up the issue of planning as they prepare the city's 2018 budget. The library will continue to engage with local government in order to create impactful change at the local level. To ensure a professional and well-informed final plan, the city and library will hire an **outside planning expert**. Library staff will take the lead in community engagement work, training **citizen facilitators** to collect resident input. Partnerships between the library and various city departments, like **Columbus Recreation, Public Works and the Senior Center**, will help ensure diverse participation in the planning process. Partnerships with business groups—the **Columbus Chamber of Commerce and Columbus Downtown Development**—with civic groups—**Columbus Rotary, Kiwanis, Oddfellows and Lions**—and with community groups—**Columbus Literacy Council, Columbus Area Historical Society, a local artist collaborative and the Friends of the Library**—will give us access to as many voices as possible throughout the process.

Professional partners: We will **learn from other communities** that have engaged in similar collaborative, asset-based community planning processes. The City Administrator and the Library Director will each leverage their professional networks to find the right model communities to approach asking them to share their experiences, lessons learned and expertise. At least one organization from each field—municipal administration and library administration—will serve in an advisory capacity throughout the process.

National impact: This asset-based, collaborative planning model can be **shared with library leaders across the country** who work in any size library. We will share our planning process, methodology and lessons learned via national webinars and conferences, in partnerships with ALA, PLA and other national library organizations. The Library Director will **blog or podcast throughout the process**, interviewing involved parties and sharing lessons as they occur so others can learn from our experiences and from the expertise of the planning consultant.

Goals: Our final products will be citizen-informed, collaborative municipal and library strategic plans that answer two questions: (1) What service delivery model(s) best meets a community's aspirations? (2) Do we have the assets—the facilities, financing and expertise—needed to make good on that service model? Equally important, we will share our experiences on the national level so libraries can create collaborative plans with or without consultant support.

Timeline: 2017: City Council adds planning expenses to 2018 budget (in process). Summer 2018: environmental scan of field to identify national advisors; hire consultant, begin blog. Fall and winter 2018: convene partners; community and municipal assets mapping; data collection. Spring 2019: community conversations. Summer 2019: draft community and library strategic plans; pitch sessions for national conferences and webinars.

\$48,000 Budget: \$25,000 consultant fee (library's portion of the expected \$100,000+)
 \$22,000 additional library staff, part- time, for one year
 \$1,000 community meeting expenses