

LIBRARY STRATEGIES





Bitterroot Public Library Community & Facility Needs Assessment

Final Report | May 2023

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BACKGROUND

Over the period January-April 2023, the Bitterroot Public Library partnered with Library Strategies Consulting Group on a broad-based community and facility needs assessment. That rigorous process, laid out in detail in the Methodology section, underpins the findings and recommendations put forward in this report.

However, it is critical to note at the onset that the Library sought outside assistance only after years of internal, staff-led data gathering. Those earlier, diligent efforts culminated in the crafting of a useful 2021 Facility Summary. Prior to meeting with Hamilton area stakeholders, the consulting team vetted key takeaways from that summary document, and also supplemented staff's work with independent investigation drawing from additional data sources.

Staff and consultant research tell a corroborating and illuminating narrative. This is necessary context for understanding the motivations behind seeking a professional appraisal, as well as the reason for this project's intentional focus on the library *facility* (as opposed to operations more generally). Key points are as follows:

DEMOGRAPHICS

As anyone familiar with the area can attest, Hamilton and Ravalli County are growing. Bitterroot Public Library's core service area (corresponding to those portions of the County encompassed by the Hamilton, Corvallis and Victor school districts) stood at 25,577 pop. in 2021. This figure reflects a 7.2% increase from 2001 to 2020. Moreover, "in the last few years the rate of in-city growth has increased substantially."¹ This and related population trends position the City of Hamilton for a 17% growth rate over the decade to come. Net gains for the surrounding communities are likewise imminent.

Growth on this scale has significant repercussions for a small town's infrastructure and long-range planning. Moreover, as the recent Envision Hamilton report justly notes, those needs extend well beyond housing and public works projects – considerations that are front of mind for most residents when community expansion is discussed. For instance, there is also a corresponding need for additional commercial opportunity. Envision Hamilton calculates this need as the equivalent of 128,000 square feet of commercial building space.

Population growth is an equally important consideration when evaluating the current performance and future viability of library services in this same area.

¹ Envision Hamilton: City of Hamilton Comprehensive Plan (2022)

CURRENT LIBRARY BUILDING

Bitterroot Public Library's sole facility, located at 306 State Street, is an original "Carnegie Library" dating to 1916. Expansion last occurred in 1988, when capital reinvestment increased the building's footprint to its current 12,000 square feet.

As a "litmus test" for understanding the suitability of a library's brick-and-mortar footprint, most architects and space planners recommend a simple formula. Divide the existing square footage into the library's legal service area (i.e., the total population served by that institution, regardless of whether those residents are cardholders). If that calculation indicates that the Library in question offers less than 0.9 square feet of space per resident, it is likely that the building offers inadequate space to fully meet the community's present needs.²

12,000 sq. ft. ÷ 25,577 pop. = .47 sq. ft. per resident

While striking enough on its face, this deficit is exacerbated further by several important variables.

First, it must be noted that a significant proportion of this 12,000 square feet is devoted to unassignable space – areas that are essential for, but peripheral to, the library's core work. Unassignable functions include restrooms, mechanical equipment, hallways and stairwells. (Assignable spaces, by contrast, include book stacks, meeting rooms, service desks and other zones used to meet the primary function of the building.)

Naturally, all public buildings include unassignable spaces. However, like many Carnegie-era builds, Bitterroot Public Library has a higher percentage than the industry norm. This is attributable in part to features like ramps and steps, which were added to bring the original Carnegie into closer alignment with modern accessibility standards. When unassignable spaces and staff offices are excluded from the calculations, Bitterroot Public Library has only 9,600 square feet remaining for public services. The calculation can then be retabulated as follows:

9,600 sq. ft. ÷ 25,577 pop. = .375 sq. ft. per resident

² This is not a universal standard. Some planners prescribe an even 1.0 sq. ft. per resident. However, only in extenuating circumstances (none applicable to Bitterroot) does that number drop *below* .9 sq. ft. The consulting team deems the more modest number satisfactory for proving this point.

MODERN LIBRARY WORK

It is equally important to consider this physical footprint through the lens of the many functions modern public libraries are expected to serve. Carnegie libraries follow a design template dating to a period when libraries were intended chiefly as repositories for books, as public reading rooms, and as a locus for civic pride within the community.

Each of those functions remains central to the library's value proposition in 2023. However, the needs, wants and expectations of communities today are more diverse and more sophisticated. Libraries today coordinate programming for children, teens, and adults; offer vital access to technologies ranging from on-site computer access/assistance to e-books and databases; and function as a vibrant "third space" for small groups in need of no-cost options for collaboration or socialization.

Bitterroot Public Library offers an excellent case in point, as the 2021 Facility Summary illustrates. Visitation to the facility at 306 State Street surpassed 67,700 in 2019 – an increase of 18% from 2001. This growth in foot traffic is tied to: a marked increase in library programming (up 85% over the same period); growth in materials circulation (up 39%); and a demand-driven expansion to building hours (up from 40 to 53 hours/week).

Libraries designed in recent decades follow floor plans conducive to the "frictionless" mingling of these varied activities. Moreover, modern library builds incorporate planned flexibility in spatial configuration, meaning that some sections can be rearranged at a later date as community needs evolve. Carnegies offer neither advantage, as is evidenced well by Bitterroot Public Library.

MONTANA LIBRARY NORMS

The preceding discussion contextualized Bitterroot Public Library’s circumstances against expectations, norms and trends in library service generally. It is also valuable to benchmark BPL’s size and constraints against what is typical for *Montana* libraries. Data on file with the Montana State Library makes this an easy exercise.

Bitterroot Public Library is one of 11 in the state which serves a legal service area larger than 10,000 residents yet smaller than 49,999 residents. Populations and the respective size of the public library serving each are as follows:

	Population	Square Footage	Sq. Ft./Resident
<i>Bitterroot Public Library</i>	25,577	12,000	0.47
Butte-Silver Bow Public Library	34,200	36,067	1.05
Glacier County Library	13,399	12,814	0.96
Havre-Hill County Library	16,096	12,000	0.75
Lewistown Public Library	10,025	10,793	1.08
Lincoln County Public Libraries	19,687	12,953	0.66
Livingston-Park Co. Public Library	15,636	12,272	0.78
Miles City Public Library	11,699	12,800	1.09
North Lake County Public Library	11,105	10,300	0.93
North Valley Public Library	10,283	6,540	0.64
Roosevelt County Library	10,425	9,524	0.91

Within this cohort, the average is .85 sq. ft. per resident – relatively close to the 0.9 sq. ft. per resident yardstick prescribed by most library space planners. Bitterroot Public Library is by far the most confining facility within this subset, posting a space-per-resident metric more than 25% smaller than the next nearest library (North Valley Public Library in Stevensville).

CONSTRUCTION TIMETABLE + SCALE

Capital reinvestment in a library facility does not take place overnight. Even in a best-case scenario, approving, funding, designing and implementing a building project takes years.

That timetable tends to be longest in smaller and more rural communities. This is attributable to tax bases that are comparatively modest in size, coupled with competing demands for public investment. Unless extenuating circumstances inform a more accelerated timetable, the process usually takes 7-10 years from start to finish.

If the community greenlights a capital improvement for Bitterroot Public Library, it is reasonable to estimate 2030 as a viable year for completion. While no such investment is assured, this is still a useful target for extrapolating needed square footage into the future.

Since population growth is the norm for most of the country, space planners responsible for new library builds advise floorplans large enough to accommodate 10-20 years of growth – as calculated from date of ribbon cutting. Given these two factors, Bitterroot Public Library should *not* aspire towards a facility of 23,000 sq. ft., which is the footprint needed to meet the industry standard for *today's* needs.³

In 2020, the U.S. Census listed Ravalli County's population as 44,174. This reflects year-over-year growth of 0.88% over the period 2010-2020.⁴ Demographic data for 2021-22 suggests a higher growth rate for the subsequent decade, and REMI projections from the Montana Department of Commerce project that Ravalli County's population may reach 55,716 by 2040. This is equivalent to 26% growth over the period 2020-2040.

Even though Bitterroot Public Library's service area is not coterminous with county lines, this estimate is useful in extrapolating future need. If the same growth figure is applied to BPL's legal service area, the calculation is as follows:

25,577 pop. (2022) x 1.26 (growth rate) = 32,227 pop. (2040)

In other words, it is reasonable to expect that Bitterroot Public Library will grow to serve more than 32,000 residents by 2040.

If it is to both 1) make up for pre-existing spatial constraints and 2) account adequately for this growth pattern, the library must more than double in size (140%).

32,227 pop. x .9 sq. ft. per resident = 29,004 sq. ft.

Pages 11-16 underscore the need through a section-by-section breakdown of library areas/zones and the shortcomings with each. Unsurprisingly, nearly all such deficiencies correlate in some direct way to the Library's small and strained physical footprint.

³ .9 sq. ft. x 25,577 residents = approx. 23,000 sq. ft.

⁴ https://montana.reaproject.org/analysis/comparative-trends-analysis/population/tools/300081/300000/#page_6

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

After preliminary conversations with Bitterroot Public Library leadership, Library Strategies proposed a project approach composed of two dovetailing phases of work. These can be summarized as follows:

Community Assessment: Lead stakeholder engagement exercises to determine what residents need, want and expect from their local library – now and into the future.

Fieldwork / Appraisal: Deploy a veteran library space planner to visit Hamilton and apply expertise to an appraisal of the basic pros and cons associated with different capital reinvestment options now under discussion.

The interplay between the two is important.

Bitterroot Public Library’s acute spatial constraints are not “new news” to the groups responsible for the organization’s governance and long-range planning. Several possible pathways toward expanding the Library’s physical footprint have already been floated. Three which have garnered enough traction to warrant additional exploration are:

- 1. Fire Hall:** The Hamilton Volunteer Fire Department is scheduled to vacate its facility on the corner of State St. & S. 3rd St. and relocate to a new, modernized fire station at Foxfield Ave. & Skeels Ave. This will leave the 115-year-old Fire Hall available for other uses. That structure’s proximity to the Bitterroot Public Library prompted community conversations about that space as an annex for library operations.
- 2. Green Space Expansion:** Bitterroot Public Library is adjacent to a modestly sized green space. A gazebo, tree canopy and water ditch make this area between BPL and S. 4th St. a popular spot to read, socialize, and hold outdoor programming. However, the pressures on the Library’s indoor spaces precipitate interest in learning more about the viability of an expansion to the Carnegie’s west at the expense of this green space.
- 3. Relocation:** Out of nearly 1,700 libraries funded through the largesse of Carnegie grants, only 750 are still in use today as public libraries. Over the slow course of decades, many communities have opted to rehome library services in new, larger, and less restrictive buildings. Such a decision is never made lightly, and only when a more viable path to effective library service is available. In such cases, the historic Carnegie is usually retrofitted for some other civic or commercial purpose.

The City of Hamilton cannot meaningfully and confidently advance these conversations without an understanding of the principal drawbacks, advantages, and cost implications of each option.

Eventually, those conversations must involve architects, engineers, and other building professionals. As a point of departure, however, it is necessary to learn more about the suitability and advisability of the above possibilities through the specific lens of *library service*.

Fieldwork/Appraisal

Library Strategies regularly provides field assessments of this sort to libraries contending with expansion dilemmas. Our lead consultants have spearheaded or advised on dozens of renovation, expansion and rebuild projects. This institutional knowledge positions us to identify obstacles and other detractors associated with each of the above-named options.

As a means to this end, Melissa Brechon MLIS visited Ravalli County in January 2023 to conduct a site appraisal and high-level operations audit.

Before, after and during that January 2023 fieldwork, Brechon also interviewed a dozen community leaders. Interviewees included representatives from City leadership, the Library Board of Trustees, the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce, Friends of the BPL, and more. (See Page 58 for a complete list and executive summary of takeaways.) Each enjoys some unique or otherwise valuable perspective on the locations and issues in play.

Insights from this work, coupled with the consulting team’s professional knowledge, also underpin the findings and recommendations laid out starting on Page 24.

Community Assessment

As a national thought leader in library space planning correctly and concisely notes: *“Public libraries are enormously diverse. They represent the full mosaic of American communities. Accordingly, no one can prescribe exactly what each public library should look like.”*⁵

Phrased another way, no library can plan confidently for its future without a firm understanding of the ever-evolving needs, habits and expectations of the community it exists to serve. Exploring long-range investment options therefore requires intentional stakeholder engagement.

In addition to the one-on-one interviews already mentioned, consultants Library Strategies conducted focus groups and a community survey, detailed below.

⁵ Charbonnet, Lisa. *Public Library Buildings: The Librarian's Go-To Guide for Construction, Expansion, and Renovation Projects*. Libraries Unlimited, 2015.

Focus Groups. Over the week of March 20-24, 2023, consultants Melissa Brechon MLIS and David Katz MLIS conducted a series of three focus groups. These guided conversations probed the “facility issue” through the experiences and impressions of Hamilton area residents.

No library operates in a vacuum; most are deeply embedded within the communities they serve. For that reason, facilitators also asked participants several questions relating to the vitality, shortcomings and future of Hamilton more generally. (Session prompts can be found in Appendix B).

A steering committee composed of community members played an instrumental role identifying prospective attendees. In total, the consultants engaged nearly 30 well-placed community members over three 2-hour focus group. A summary report is available on Page 40.

Community Survey. In the interest of securing inputs from the broadest possible swathe of library constituents, Library Strategies also crafted an online community questionnaire. Questions drew heavily from LSCG’s own repertoire of “tried and true” questions, but also reflected Bitterroot Public Library’s specific services, resources and challenges.

Administered between February 12 and March 31, 2023, this 16-question survey drew 701 completed response sets. That turnout is impressive for a community of this size. BPL’s final survey count exceeded the consultants’ “stretch goal” by nearly 75%. Quantitative and qualitative takeaways are condensed into an executive summary available on Page 29.

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

What follows is an executive summary of themes which emerged repeatedly and organically across the community engagement activities outlined above.

Between focus groups, interviews, and survey responses, Library Strategies compiled nearly 100 total pages of notes. This large amount of raw data makes both ordering and synthesis necessary. For cohesion and ease of reading, findings are ordered according to library function or zone.

Information in this section is relayed in the consulting team’s words unless otherwise specified. With that said, participants offered hundreds of cogent, helpful comments – and direct quotes from community members are often exactly what is needed to illustrate a point. Whenever such a quote is used, it will be in quotation marks. Unless otherwise specified, the reader should assume it is representative of a sentiment voiced regularly during the course of this study.

Size, Location, Functionality and Ambiance

If there is broad agreement concerning any point explored by this assessment, it is around the “duality” of Bitterroot Public Library’s facility. Residents appreciate the Library’s downtown location, rich history, and handsome façade.

At the same time, but in striking contrast, stakeholders are close to unanimous in their assertion that the Bitterroot Public Library is aging, cramped and constricting.

- “As beautiful... as the present building is, it's clear that Hamilton has outgrown it. It feels crowded when you enter.” *(Survey)*
- “It seems like the library is trying to pack the variety of what I would call essential services into a small space with no room for innovation or enhancement.” *(Survey)*

These shortcomings manifest themselves in several ways that detract from the library visitation experience. Issues concerning parking, meeting and study spaces, children’s services, and the computer area will be explored separately. Additional considerations include an overall careworn appearance, sense of clutter, and unclear boundaries between “quiet” and “loud” zones.

- “I wouldn’t call it ugly, but the building’s insides are certainly showing wear and tear from all the use it gets.” *(Focus Group #3)*
- “Even though the library is small, you could almost get lost in here. No one is to blame. Staff are forced to pack a lot into a small space, so of course there’s going to be a certain jumbled feel.” *(Focus Group #2)*

Many openly aspire towards a future where the Hamilton area boasts a library that is equal to both today’s needs and tomorrow’s growth.

- “The library needs more space to accommodate the growth of the local population.” *(Survey)*
- “For a community the size of ours, it’s time for a larger, more updated space. I don’t see it being enough to simply build an annex or re-configure the existing space. Maybe it’s time to begin looking for a completely new facility to serve the community into the future.” *(Survey)*

Parking

No discussion of library location or size can divorce itself from the question of parking. Parking is an obvious and acute challenge for Bitterroot Public Library. This is expressed in unambiguous terms through the survey, where fully 42% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with parking accommodations and availability.

- “Parking can be dicey at times, [particularly] as the population grows.” *(Survey)*
- “Parking is my number one dissatisfaction. It’s especially difficult when the county is having meetings.” *(Survey)*
- “Parking is atrocious, particularly when there’s a popular event going on.” *(Focus Group #3)*

Children’s Services / Spaces

On the whole, parents praise the “creative, engaging, and age appropriate” children’s programming that staff manage to put on within their limited footprint to do so. Most other aspects of the children’s section also receive relatively high marks.

- “We have moved around a lot and seen a lot of children’s programs at many different libraries. We are very impressed with the children’s programs at Bitterroot Public Library.” *(Survey)*
- “I am constantly amazed by staff, particularly those in the children’s area. I wouldn’t want them to do *differently*, and I really couldn’t ask them to do *more*.” *(Focus Group #2)*

Where they emerged, criticisms take one of four forms. First, some parents lament that children’s services and programs are concentrated during hours when most families are unable to attend due to schedules built around ‘9-5’ day jobs.

- “We need our programming offered at different hours of the day. Children’s program times feel homeschool centric.” *(Focus Group #1)*
- “I wish that toddler story time was offered on the weekends. We are unable to utilize it as frequently as we would like.” *(Survey)*

Other parents critique collection development priorities which they feel to be politically charged or otherwise biased.

- “Children’s story time books have a tendency to have very progressive undertones. It is unnecessary and disappointing to see those agendas pushed.” *(Survey)*
- “Please do not purchase any liberal... literature for toddlers, preschoolers, and elementary.” *(Survey)*

Many adults lament that the rowdiness of the library’s youngest patrons – coupled with “noise bleed” between functional zones – distracts from a library experience that they would prefer be child-free.

- “There is no clear division between areas. This can mean your experience is noisy where you are looking for it to be quiet, and full of kids when you’re visiting for a kid-free purpose.” (*Focus Group #1*)
- “I would love a slightly larger children's area further from study areas and computer space. Because children can be noisy and should be *able* to be a little noisy.” (*Survey*)

Last, the underwhelming size of this children’s section is called out as a check on many families’ usage of and satisfaction with Bitterroot Public Library.

- “It would be incredible to have an expanded children’s area that sparks creativity and exploration. An area where families could meet to spend time together.” (*Survey*)
- “My family doesn’t go because we can only get there during the busiest time – when it feels like the children’s room packs them in like sardines.” (*Focus Group #1*).

It is telling that two of these four complaints hinge around space and configuration.

Teen Services / Spaces

Although modest in size, the children’s section is *proportionally* equivalent to the percentage of public space allocated to children’s services in most “model” libraries. The same cannot be said of the teen zone, such as it is. This space is so small, ill defined and static in how it can be used that many residents – even self-identified regular users – are unsure if the BPL even contains a space specific to teen users.

- “The children's area is very well-laid out, but the teen area is cramped.” (*Survey*)
- “Do we have a teens’ section, aside from maybe a few bookshelves? If so, it can’t be much or well known about.” (*Focus Group #2*)
- “I think that the library currently is well laid out, considering the very limited space, [but] teens and seem to be really shortchanged.” (*Survey*)

By contrast to this present state, parents and teens have aspirations for what the library can do and should be for the area’s young adults. Residents want a public space where teens can safely exercise a level of semi-autonomy, enjoy amenities and programming matched to their needs, and not feel like “an afterthought or late addition.”

- “Kids and teens deserve a social hub they can be proud of. I picture a space where they can be loud, (within reason,) enjoy minimal supervision, and play the video games they are all so fond of.” (*Focus Group #3*)
- “There aren't as many library programs available for middle/high schoolers. I wish they had something for teens to attend.” (*Survey*)

Many study participants underscored that this under-met need can only be fully appreciated within the broader context of what the Hamilton area offers (or more to the point, what it doesn’t offer).

- “[I] would love more fun teen programs and events because there is very little offered in Hamilton for this age group.” (*Survey*)
- “Outside of school and school extracurriculars, there is nothing for young people to do. We don’t need what Missoula has, but we need *some* place for them to go and to own.” (*Focus Group #2*)

Meeting Rooms

Aside from books and programming, the library’s public meeting room may be the aspect of library service which generated the most comments and conversation over the course of this study. Residents who expressed an opinion on the subject are appreciative of the amenity and what it makes possible for community members.

- “[I’m] very happy with the ability to use the public meeting room without charge, and the provision of refreshments, tablets, markers, pens, etc. to facilitate our meetings.” (*Survey*)
- “Clubs meet here. It’s a comfortable, neutral, central place to meet up. Coffee shops and homes aren’t, necessarily.” (*Focus Group #2*)

Given its public nature, central location, and welcoming vibe, community members also identify this space as the ideal spot to hold programs open to the general public. Author readings/presentations are one prime example. However, those same characteristics also make the meeting room the perfect place to host events *not* organized or sponsored by Bitterroot Public Library.

- “We need enrichment opportunities in the Valley, like author programs and spotlights on local history. No place is a better fit than the library, where it’s: ‘Come as you are, come for free.’” (*Focus Group #1*)
- “The Library is uniquely positioned to hold nonpartisan forums and other meetings focused around public affairs.” (*Focus Group #2*)

However, as valued as the meeting room is in *principle*, that utility is checked in *practice* by significant shortcomings. Limitations include the number of rooms, size, flexibility, ambiance, and tech set-up.

- “[We need] bigger, nicer meeting rooms (more than one) with a community kitchen.” (*Survey*)
- “[We need] additional meeting rooms – one larger, and one for smaller groups than what we have presently.” (*Survey*)
- “I attempted to use the downstairs meeting room to record a Zoom meeting for a podcast. But it was way too noisy to be usable. I could hear chairs squeaking from upstairs and other noises and had to abandon the Zoom.” (*Survey*)

This demonstrated need, as well as drawbacks, will only grow more acute with time. Thirty-five percent of survey-takers report that the meeting room is important to them today, but this number increases when respondents are asked to anticipate their library needs in five years' time. More compelling still is the community's growth trajectory and what a larger population means for the already overburdened meeting space.

- "Our meeting rooms are not just a little bit lacking – they're totally inadequate. This is not a dig against the Library; it's a truth for the Valley in general. I'd like to see a suite of 7-8 meeting rooms, ranged from small to large (with the Library's current space probably classed as medium)." (*Focus Group #2*)
- "I like the current meeting room, but I wish there were more rooms available" (*Survey*).

Study/Reading Spaces

Library patrons in Ravalli County cherish the ability to visit the library for silent work, study, and reading pursuits. Twenty-nine percent of survey respondents identify it as a consideration core to their use of and vision for the library.

- "It's a good place to sit down and get stuff done between meetings or errands. Bring your computer, hook up to the internet, and park yourself anywhere." (*Focus Group #3*)
- "You see people doing solo work all the time. Some probably need the high speed internet, because connectivity is not to be taken for granted out here. Some probably just want a change of scenery." (*Focus Group #1*)

When asked to rate satisfaction with these spaces, however, nearly 20% of those who expressed an opinion indicated some level of dissatisfaction. Study spaces are too few, often busy, and neither clearly marked nor clearly demarcated from other "zones" within the library.

- "[We] need a few standalone quiet rooms, for those who need a study/workspace." (*Survey*)
- "I've gone to libraries to read or work on emails. When I was a student, I also visited the local library to study. I wouldn't ever do this in Hamilton, though: there are too few spots, and it's just so loud." (*Focus Group #1*)

Computer Area

Personal smart devices are ubiquitous, but not universal. In this Digital Age, the Bitterroot Public Library is a “lifeline” or “equalizer” for residents who do not have their own computer. Moreover, many families in this largely rural service area do not enjoy fast, reliable internet connections at home. These households lean on the library’s computer lab, as well. Still other patrons are well equipped for their everyday needs but rely on the library for occasional printing and scanning necessities.

- “Please continue to have public computers for those of us that cannot afford personal computers and Internet at home.” *(Survey)*
- “There’s still a great divide between folks who’ve got home internet and folks who don’t. It’s unfair but that’s how it is.” *(Focus Group #3)*

This need for “hardware” exists alongside a need for computer classes and one-on-one assistance from staff. Insofar as these already exist, they are appreciated and called out for praise.

- “[I’m] very, very satisfied with computer help... unavailable anywhere else in the community.” *(Survey)*
- “[I’d] like computer assistance for those of us older folks: classes or tutoring or IT assistance. We could bring our own laptops or tablets or smartphones.” *(Survey)*

Many residents comment on the age of and wear on most library computers. In addition to newer hardware, a vocal subset are also interested in on-site access to advanced software applications which residents cannot afford to have at home.

- “We’ll never afford and maybe don’t need a full-on makerspace, but would benefit from a few computers with heavy-duty video editing software, Photoshop, and the like.” *(Focus Group #2)*
- “I expect a modern library to offer more technology choices than what’s presently available. With that said, I can’t in good conscience recommend adding anything right now: there’d be no place to put it!” *(Focus Group #3)*

As that last quote alludes, utilization and satisfaction with this space are also hampered somewhat by size-related considerations: section configuration, the number of terminals available, awkward proximity to other library areas/functions, etc.

- “The computer space is strange. People should have access, but maybe less of a focal point?” *(Survey)*
- “Due to small size, [there’s] no separation or privacy to the computer space.” *(Survey)*
- “I get the sense that if someone has to wait for a computer, they may just turn around and leave. And if they leave like that, will they ever come back?” *(Focus Group #1)*

EXPANSION OPTIONS: PROS AND CONS

What follows is a high-level appraisal of three pathways to capital reinvestment in Bitterroot Public Library: incorporation of the neighboring Fire Hall, expansion into the adjoining green space, or a rebuild project at a new location.

These were identified in January 2023 as the most viable strategies for expansion at that point in time. However, this appraisal of “pros and cons” is not a comprehensive look at all possibilities. A truly comprehensive evaluation would also consider the feasibility of a mixed-use public facility (with the library as one anchor), construction of a satellite branch or locker box style location, etc.

This overview of advantages and challenges is not exhaustive in scope, either. At this early stage, and with the City’s next steps unknown, a rigorous evaluation of code requirements, tabulation of a price tag, etc. are premature investments. Once the City greenlights a specific path forward, this will trigger additional needs for professional consultations and inspections.

OPTION 1: FIRE HALL

Library Strategies did not overtly mention the Fire Hall in either the community questionnaire or focus groups prompts. Even so, most residents seem aware that the Hamilton Volunteer Fire Department will soon move to a new home. Given proximity and space needs, many study participants freely shared aspirations that the Library claim all or part of the neighboring structure. Naturally, it is easier to see the advantages than the drawbacks associated with that ambition, but both merit fleshing out at this time.

Advantage 1.1: Location

Residents feel that the Fire Hall, like the Carnegie next door, is as practical and convenient a location as possible for the brick-and-mortar hub of Bitterroot Public Library. This block is close to other errand hot spots that already draw residents to this section of downtown Hamilton.

The Fire Hall is also owned by the City, negating the need to acquire new land to achieve expansion of the Library. Proximity to the Carnegie also allows for serious discussion around joining the two structures into a larger library “campus.”

Advantage 1.2: Historic Structure

The Fire Hall, like the neighboring Bitterroot Public Library, is an officially certified historic structure. Its status as “one of the city’s oldest residents” makes it a locus for civic pride.⁶ As such, there is broad interest in retaining the structure, preventing its deterioration, and finding a new purpose for the downtown landmark.

Capital reinvestment in a library requires both public and private funding, and that support relies on community buy-in into the project. By extension, warm public sentiments toward the historic Fire Hall can be marshalled as an asset when advocating for public funding and soliciting private donations. Many precedents for this can be found in library field literature.

Advantage 1.3: Shared Space Potential

Libraries are evolving into community *conveners* and *collaborators*.⁷ This commonly manifests itself in a desire for 1) large and versatile community meeting spaces housed within the library, as well as 2) close partnerships between libraries and allied community organizations, which can include the permanent sharing of physical spaces. In a small and rigid Carnegie space, these discussions are nonstarters. However, if the Fire Hall is devoted wholly to non-commercial uses, it allows for new community dialogue and possibilities.

In the words of library space planner Fred Schlipf: “Probably the single greatest problem with library conversions is unexpectedly high costs. Remodeling and modernizing an old building can easily cost as much as starting over, and if the result is less efficient to operate than a new building, the high costs can continue for the life of the structure.”⁸

Disadvantage 1.1: Remediation/Rehabilitation Expenses

Regardless of what purpose(s) it is recast to fill, the Fire Hall is likely to require significant site and facility rehabilitation work. Examples include the identification and remediation of pollutants and contaminants, including in the soil. Where vacated fire stations are concerned, higher than tolerable concentrations of petroleum and coal byproducts are particularly commonplace.

⁶ <https://www.fireapparatusmagazine.com/the-fire-station/hamilton-mt-fire-department-replacing-115-year-old-station/#gref>

⁷ Klinenberg, Eric. *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civil Life*. Crown, 2019.

⁸ Schlipf, Fred & Moorman, John. *The Practical Handbook of Library Architecture: Creating Building Spaces that Work*. American Library Association Editions, 2018.

For the interior, the age of the structure necessitates inspection for asbestos in pipe and duct lining tagging, lead in paints and electrical conduits, and other building materials deemed deleterious to public health.

Inspectors must also scrutinize everything from restrooms, to sprinkler systems, to electrical wiring to ensure compliance with applicable building codes. Wholesale conversion of “brown site” facilities ordinarily triggers stringent requirements, and this in turn can add significant expense towards overall conversion costs.

Disadvantage 1.2: Library Service Retrofitting

Since it was not designed with library service in mind, the historic Fire Hall presents structural barriers to effective library use.

First, it should be noted that incorporation of the Fire Hall’s square footage into the Bitterroot Public Library as an annex will alleviate but not entirely remedy spatial constraints. Given the investment required to actualize this vision, as well as the decades-long lifespan expected from the overhauled building, this space question must factor into the cost-benefit analysis.

In addition, library services require a flooring support standard that is atypical for construction more generally. Shelving ranges are a defining feature of public libraries, particularly their second stories. In order to handle the weight associated with so many linear feet of shelving and books, library floors must be graded to carry live loads equivalent to 150 pounds per square foot. This is a standard that few repurposed structures meet.

In itself, this is not an insurmountable challenge. Flooring can be reinforced, though at significant cost. Weight deflection strategies can also be explored. It may also be possible to devise a floorplan which concentrates library *materials* in the Carnegie space while devoting much of the Fire Hall to library *services*. However, divided floor plans bring staffing implications.

Disadvantage 1.3: Staffing Implications

Larger libraries require more on-duty staff than do smaller facilities. As a rule, larger libraries coordinate more programs, extend services to more patrons, and monitor more spaces and activities. Expansion therefore brings ongoing cost tails in the form of increased annual staffing expenditures.

The scaling equation is complicated further by retrofitted structures and irregular floorplans. For reasons of safety as well as customer service, library space planners advocate for reliable staff sight lines to *all* public areas of the building. A staffer should also be stationed in close proximity to *each* public entrance.

Newly constructed libraries (up to at least 35,000 sq. ft.) address these access, safety and security concerns through a single-story floorplan. Such a layout also simplifies compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. In contrast, conjoining two existing structures – both of which include multiple floors – will be an ongoing challenge for staff.

Disadvantage 1.4: Parking

When the Hamilton Volunteer Fire Department vacates its downtown premises, several parking spots will be freed up for alternate purposes. However, this capacity will not solve the current parking challenges. In point of fact, converting the facility to a public purpose liable to drive *more* foot traffic to this block will exacerbate the existing shortage.

OPTION 2: GREEN SPACE EXPANSION

Advantage 2.1: Precedent

While it may seem like a hyper-local issue, Bitterroot Public Library's space challenges are commonplace in communities that boast Carnegies and still use these historic structures for their intended purpose. As populations rise and library service evolves, more and more cities are greenlighting expansion projects that account for the challenges and other characteristics inherent in such a remodel.

This matters in two ways. First, there are now architects who can credibly claim the rehabbing of Carnegie spaces as something of a specialty. These firms already know, for example, that Carnegie-era builds employ load bearing (versus curtain) walls as room partitions, that upgrading and concealing wiring presents a particular challenge, and so on. They can also point to case studies where those obstacles have been addressed successfully.

Case studies from other communities, and the "proof of concept" they represent, can 1) blunt the concern of community members worried about the historic integrity of their Carnegie, and 2) be used to rally support for a newly revitalized Carnegie library in Hamilton.

Advantage 2.2: City-Owned Land

Identifying land appropriate and available for a library is a time-intensive endeavor. Even when the targeted parcel is identified early, any transaction is usually preceded by due diligence measures like public hearings and input sessions. These critical preliminary steps account for much of the averaged 7-10- year timetable outlined on Page 7.

By contrast, the City of Hamilton already owns the undeveloped parcel west of the Carnegie. Opting to expand into this space renders moot many questions relating to land identification and purchase. It may also diminish the need for additional and iterative community engagement exercises.

Disadvantage 2.1: Outdoor Space Eliminated

Many residents are appreciative of – and some protective of – the green space located to the immediate west of the Carnegie. It is attractive, well cared for, and one of only a few green spaces remaining in downtown Hamilton for lounging, unstructured small group activities, etc. Expanding the Library into this area will necessarily compromise (and likely remove entirely) a valued asset that is easily taken for granted.

Plans to encroach on this area will likely receive pushback from a vocal subset of the community. Expansion in this way will also curtail library staff's ability to host outdoor programming, which is a common occurrence (particularly during the summer months).

Disadvantage 2.2: Cost Per Foot

Small and rural libraries designed “from the ground up” are typically located on plots that allow room for expansion. They are also constructed in such a way that remodeling/expansion at some unspecified future date should be relatively easy from the standpoints of design, engineering and construction. Carnegies offer an unfortunate contrast.

Comparatively speaking, Carnegie structures are among the most expensive library structures to expand. They long predate the era when planners provisioned for growth as they do today. Moreover, given the historic nature of Carnegies, all renovation and expansion plans must pay deference to the integrity of the original structure.

Consequently, while it is premature to estimate a project price tag, it can be said with reasonable certainty that this growth option brings the highest cost per added square foot of assignable space. This fact should be considered alongside the already presented considerations that 1) Bitterroot Public Library is already well behind the curve on square footage benchmarks for a community of Hamilton's size, and 2) capital improvements for public assets should account for the County's steady growth trajectory over the decades to come.

Disadvantage 2.3: Code Compliance

Part and parcel with the above is the important matter of code compliance. Due to their age and the infrequency with which they are substantially renovated, many Carnegies are out of conformance with the building codes applicable to their state and municipal jurisdiction. Some of these shortcomings are known or easily discoverable prior to embarking on an expansion project. Others are uncovered only once work begins, or are triggered based on the building's new size or the automatic removal of grandfather exemptions once construction work begins.

OPTION 3: NEW LOCATION / CONSTRUCTION

Advantage 3.1: Parcel and Overall Building Size

As already noted, the Bitterroot Public Library is already contending with space deficits severe enough to impair its mission work. Time and further population growth will only exacerbate most of the issues identified.

Notably, neither of the expansion measures discussed above is positioned to expand the Library's footprint to the recommended 29,000 sq. ft., and neither appreciably alleviates the parking pressure. In contrast, relocating to a *new* site opens possibilities that are not realistic in any scenario where the Carnegie building remains Bitterroot Public Library's base of operations.

Parking most clearly illustrates the point. While relatively convenient parking is a nonnegotiable point for many visitors, the spatial implications are significant. On average, a single parking spot occupies between 270-320 square feet. As a rule of thumb, space planners designing libraries today advocate for a parking lot roughly equivalent in square footage to the library itself.⁹

Advantage 3.2: Section Size, Configuration, and Furnishing

Expanding a Carnegie necessarily involves half measures and compromises. In contrast, a fresh start affords the Library far more leeway to pursue a floor plan better aligned to modern industry standards and expressed community needs.

Examples are many. With only rare exceptions,¹⁰ public libraries designed today boast all of the following:

- At least one multipurpose room with a max capacity of >100, advanced audiovisual set-up, and movable chairs;
- Two or more meeting rooms, each of which can accommodate at least 12 participants and provides 20-25 sq. ft. per seat;
- Work and study areas offering a mix of hard and soft seating; tables, desks and carrels; views and sightlines, etc.;
- Shelving units which are navigable, accessible, and allow room for growth and/or reconfiguration at some later date;¹¹
- Children's and teen spaces clearly delineated from adult areas and comprising approximately 10-15% and 4-6% respectively of the building's total floor plan;

⁹ In practice, variables like the availability of nearby street parking, single or mixed-use nature of the building, etc. also impact these calculations.

¹⁰ Exceptions include "neighborhood" libraries and other branches located within larger administrative systems, as well as central libraries >20,000 sq. ft.

¹¹ New builds are typified by ranges no higher than 48" (with the exception of perimeter shelving), cantilevered units 3' in width, and ample wayfinding for patrons browsing the stacks.

- A computer area outside of traffic lanes and large enough to comfortably accommodate at least 12 workstations (though in practice, much of this space will be devoted to seating for patrons using a personal computing device and to specialty equipment like printers, scanners and microfilm/fiche);¹²
- Staff and storage areas separate and closed off from the general public, while still offering a vantage point or easy access to the public zones.

Disadvantage 3.1: Unsocialized Idea

Few patrons are keen to see the Library vacate its traditional home and prime location downtown. Indeed, many are adamant that the Library stay in the Carnegie space irrespective of the current and future operational implications. Residents who broach the subject of moving nearly always describe it more as a regretful necessity than as an opportunity to reimagine or reinvigorate library service.

In contrast to expansion into the Fire Hall, which is a “socialized” idea with broad traction within the community, *moving* the Library entirely is not on the collective radar as a viable solution. Before such a project can be greenlit or funded, the Library and its advocates need to generate community awareness of and buy-in into this possibility.

Disadvantage 3.2: Site Selection and Acquisition

Library expansion into the neighboring Fire Hall and/or adjoining green space renders moot questions of location – and also simplifies acquisition. In contrast, relocating the Library requires an in-depth exploration of viable options, site selection, purchase negotiations, and related due diligence measures. Those include professional appraisals of the finalist location(s) by engineers and architects, as well as community listening sessions (or other input opportunities).

Residents are accustomed to Bitterroot Public Library’s central, downtown location. Within this zone, however, no parcel of sufficient size is available on which the Library can build – nor is one likely to become available for the foreseeable future. Were the Library to build from the ground up, it would therefore require looking elsewhere (ex., within the North Hamilton Urban Renewal District a mile up the road).

Relocating library services invariably receives some level of pushback from community members. As a general rule, complaints are most vocal from residents who live or work closer to the old location than the new and feel themselves disadvantaged (or even disenfranchised) by the move. Pushback can also be expected from community members concerned about the price tag of such a venture, particularly considering the modest size of the Hamilton area’s tax base.

¹² As of 2019, the national average is 4.7 on-site computers per 5,000 residents. While not every berth need be filled with a library computer, extra room is advisable in new builds to accommodate laptop users, printer- and catalog-only workstations, future expansion, etc.

Disadvantage 3.3: Cost Variables

Although a renovation of the Carnegie or rehabilitation of the Fire Hall is likely to result in a higher cost *per square foot*, the probable costs associated with land acquisition mean that the *total* project price tag is likely highest with new construction. Library leadership may be called upon to justify the price differential between a renovation and rebuild.

That argument is particularly difficult to make in the present climate. Public sector design and construction projects today are hampered by labor scarcity, materials shortages, inflation, and related challenges. The City of Hamilton's experience with the new HVFD building offers a useful but sobering case in point. Due largely to the cost of materials, the original budget estimates for the new Fire Hall have ballooned to over \$7.1m, leaving a budget deficit of over \$1.7m.

In this same challenging environment, the Library will find it difficult to pinpoint costs and secure broad-based buy-in for another public building with a multimillion dollar price tag.

SHORT- AND LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

As this report and the community engagement underpinning it make clear, the City of Hamilton is at an important crossroads. In its current incarnation, the Bitterroot Public Library is demonstrably small and increasingly inadequate to the community's expressed needs. There is no low-cost or easy path forward, and any of the three expansion pathways examined by the consultants would require years and multiple phases of work to actualize.

In spite of the ambiguity around *if*, *how*, and *when* the City will reinvest in the Library – and indeed, partly because of it – Library Strategies wishes to offer BPL recommendations for next steps. These long-range suggestions are not strictly tied to any of the several expansion options explored in Pages 17-24, but rather are practices which better equip the Library for success regardless of what comes next. Library Strategies terms these “long-term recommendations.”

Short-term recommendations are also necessary. Even under favorable conditions, redesign or renovation of a building represents a multi-year undertaking. Obviously, this necessarily long timetable does not negate the need for the Library to fulfill its mission and deliver library services over the interim period.

Fortunately, Bitterroot Public Library need not wait for movement on multi-year efforts before realizing some gains. With this in mind, Library Strategies also wishes to offer facility and operational changes which could be implemented with a considerably shorter turnaround. These are divided into low- and no-cost opportunities, followed by investments which bring more significant cost implications.

Long-Term Recommendations

Create a building program. In the parlance of public space planners and architects, a “building program” is a pre-development exercise used to capture the functional and spatial needs of the project under consideration. It is standard for new construction, but is equally instructive for renovations.

Library space planner John A. Moorman makes the argument well: “In all conversion situations, one of the major problems involves the building shaping the library, rather than the library shaping the building. If too many of the basic functional needs of libraries are compromised by limitations imposed by existing spaces, the result is at best dysfunction and at worst an amazing waste of money.”¹³

A well-researched, well-written building program is a practical check against this possibility. It is also a useful tool for securing buy-in from City leaders who do not fully appreciate everything the Library does, how those services translate to physical space, and why the existing space is a daily challenge.

This need not be done from scratch. Reference building programs are available for libraries sized 20,000, 25,000, and 30,000 sq. ft. Samples can be found online or through industry publications like the two books cited in the footnotes on this page.¹⁴

Bitterroot Public Library’s completed building plan will doubtless include the spaces bulleted on Pages 22-23, but will also sketch out the square footage, relative positioning, fixtures, and furnishings associated with each section of the library.

Establish a building planning committee. Trustees are instrumental as champions for the Library and as conduits for relaying vital information to City leadership. However, an initiative as multi-dimensional, expensive, and impactful as the complete overhaul of the community’s library requires a broader coalition of supporters.

As a means to that end, the Board of Trustees should establish and recruit for a “Building Planning Committee” (or working group) to spearhead the research, public advocacy, fundraising, and other stakeholder engagement necessary to shepherd through this long-term investment in the community.

¹³ Schlipf, Fred & Moorman, John. *The Practical Handbook of Library Architecture: Creating Building Spaces that Work*. American Library Association Editions, 2018.

¹⁴ Charbonnet, Lisa. *Public Library Buildings: The Librarian's Go-To Guide for Construction, Expansion, and Renovation Projects*. Libraries Unlimited, 2015.

Idealized composition for such a group might include representation from:

- Library Board of Trustees
- Bitterroot Public Library Friends and Foundation
- Local business community
- Other community opinion leaders (preferably representing Victor and Corvallis as well as Hamilton)

While the member roster is sure to see additions and turnover, this group's purpose and guiding charter will remain fixed. Early and principal goals include 1) the identification and greenlighting of a specific expansion plan, and 2) an exploration of the funding mechanisms available to realize that plan.

Determine expansion plan. It is difficult to estimate, let alone pinpoint, project costs without first knowing the site (if relocated) or manner (if remodeled) of construction.

In addition to design and construction costs, that ultimate price tag may include land acquisition, demolition, or remediation expenses. Moreover, architects cannot draw up complete and viable building plans without first knowing plot acreage, dimensions, and variance. Naturally, these major unknowns hamper a library's ability to explore public or private funding at anything more than a surface level.

As a point of departure, Bitterroot Public Library and its Building Committee need clarity from the City of Hamilton on the fate of the Fire Hall. Competing interests and alternate plans for this prime real estate may directly impact how the Library proceeds.

If the Fire Hall is removed from consideration, the Building Committee may be forced to take a concerted look at sites located outside Hamilton's downtown core. Relocation up the road to a site within the North Hamilton Urban Renewal District seems the most likely alternative.

Identify funding channels. Realizing public construction/renovation on this scale requires careful financial planning. It will be necessary for the Building Committee, with the support from the trustees, to determine funding channels and conditions. With few exceptions, library buildings today require all three of the following:

- A. Local Funding:** Whether through a city-wide referendum or the reassignment of an existing sales tax, a new library will not take shape without public support over and above the library's yearly operating budget. Local funding sources are the bedrock for library construction and a prerequisite for the pursuit of supplemental financing.
- B. State Funding:** Grants and other financing support may be available from State sources. Examples include the Montana Department of Commerce Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, which provides support for public facilities and other infrastructure, as well as from federal Library Services & Technology Act (LSTA) funds

administered through the Montana State Library. It falls to the Building Committee to explore such options.

- C. Private Support:** In today's environment, library rebuilds accomplished without support from the private sector are the exception rather than the rule. On average, this private support accounts for $\geq 15\%$ of the total project budget.

Most of that subtotal (80-90%) comes from so-called major donors – defined as individuals, families, corporations, and foundations. Unfortunately, but unavoidably, this funding reality means that communities with a robust philanthropic community and strong giving culture are at a distinct advantage over communities that do not boast these characteristics.

As a mechanism for determining a community's capacity and willingness to give at this scale and to this cause, building committees typically turn to a feasibility study. Conducted by an outside consultant who is an expert in fundraising forecasting, these 3–4-month projects lean on one-on-one interviews (focused on residents of “influence or affluence”) to gauge what level of private support a new library can reasonably expect.

Short-Term Recommendations

Low- and No-Cost Improvements

The following recommendations are exactly that: recommendations. It is not expected that library leadership will investigate all – or implement all changes they choose to explore.

Each is put forward by the consultants as a strategy to alleviate spatial constraints identified over the course of this project. However, it must be underscored that these are essentially stopgap or band aid measures calibrated to help Bitterroot Public Library make the most of its limiting physical footprint *over the short term*. They are not substitutes for a capital reinvestment in facilities.

Exterior enhancements. Bitterroot Public Library's front façade benefits from native, sustainable landscaping and accent planters. Given the heavy seasonal usage of the shaded green space between the library building and South 4th Street, there may be additional opportunities for the Library to “own” this area through landscaping touch-ups consistent with welcoming aesthetic established by the front of the library.

At minimum, staff should consider marshalling a volunteer workforce to care for this de facto extension of the library's space. Tasks would include periodic litter sweeps of the entire block, as well as any “spot” work not covered under the terms of BPL's lawn service maintenance contract.

Information desks. Slowly but surely, public libraries are trending away from a service model centered around large “information” or “welcome” desks. These traditional desks are imposing and immobile. Paradoxically, given their overtly welcoming intentions, such fixtures constitute a physical and atmospheric barrier to effective library service.

Library Strategies recommends replacing the existing fixtures with sleeker, more nimble, and less commanding kiosk- or podium-style units. Library furnishing catalogs offer numerous examples. This will free up a modest but nevertheless helpful amount of square footage for the children’s area.

Holds shelves. Consider a reallocation of collection and spaces adjacent to the current (outdoor ramp) entrance. Relooking at that first range of materials inside the door and rethinking that space might help with an increase in patrons browsing and using the adult collection.

Suggestions:

- Two built-in kiosks at the northeast corner of the adult section could be removed and additional shelving installed to match current wall shelving. Once in place this area could be used for periodicals, oversized volumes, or monthly displays.
- The current shelving (facing the west wall) could be used to place the reserve books. Position a self-checkout machine here for easier self-service.

Study carrels. Remove two study carrels currently located along the wall in the northeast corner of the adult section. Add shelving here and rehome the oversized, often awkward materials currently housed in the first range.

Refresh meeting room. Repaint the meeting room walls with a scheme that is inviting and trendy. Consider incorporation of a vibrant accent wall. Replace existing carpeting with carpet squares in tones which complement the new color scheme. Purchase sufficient “attic stock” to provision for inevitable but inexpensive piecemeal repairs.

Lower-level clutter. Staff should prioritize a rigorous decluttering of the lower-level space adjacent to the staff work area. This area contains outdated furniture, various broken items, and seldom or never used children’s props. If an item has not been used in the past 2 years at a level that justifies the space it occupies, it should be donated or thrown away. Space freed up in this way can be repurposed by the Friends of the Library for storing and sorting donated materials.

Improvements For Budget Consideration

Meeting room equipment. Budget for a complete technology retrofit in the meeting room. Enhancements might include a wall-mounted monitor, smartboard, and omnidirectional videoconferencing equipment.

Sound-absorbing materials. Install sound absorbent materials along the south wall (alongside the young adult materials).

Electric monument sign. Seek bids for the design and installation of electrical signage near the corner of State Street and S. 4th Street. This can advertise open/closed status and offer a high visibility way to promote upcoming programming. Ascertain purchase feasibility in partnership with the Friends and Foundation.

Entryway improvements. Secure vendor estimates for installation of custom millwork counters in the interior of the entryway. Restrict free newspapers, leaflets, and other 'takeaway' community materials to just one side of the entry. Consider addition of electric sign board on the interior wall for rotating event promotions and other announcements.

LIBRARY STRATEGIES





**Bitterroot Public Library
Community Survey | Summary Report**

BACKGROUND

In February-March 2023, Library Strategies partnered with Bitterroot Public Library on a community needs assessment and facilities recommendation report centered around BPL's historic location in downtown Hamilton (306 State Street). As part of a multi-pronged community engagement phase of work, Library Strategies crafted an online community survey.

This questionnaire aimed to capture satisfaction with, and perceptions of, the public institution as it exists today – and to pinpoint unmet or undermet needs. Trends uncovered by this survey influenced topics probed in the focus group step of community engagement activities (held the week of March 20). Survey input also directly informs many of the LSCG consulting team's short- and long-term recommendations for Bitterroot Public Library.

It bears noting that BPL has logged the highest per capita survey participation ratio of any Library Strategies client since 2019. In total, **701** residents participated in the 16-question questionnaire. This more than doubled the consulting team's "stretch goal" hope for 400 completed response sets by nearly 75%.

That turnout is especially impressive when considered against the size of the community. According to the Montana State Library Public Library Annual Statistical Report, the Library's legal service area is 25,577 (of which 8,329 are registered cardholders).

High response rates notwithstanding, the broad distribution strategies employed preclude a truly "scientific" analysis of data. Nevertheless, such a large respondent pool allows us to extrapolate trends and perceptions with reasonable accuracy.

Note: Respondents were ensured anonymity, to encourage candor and a high response rate. However, questions and answer sets – including anonymous free-form responses to qualitative questions – are available in full to Bitterroot Public Library.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The following areas of concern or other takeaways emerged repeatedly, usually across more than one question:

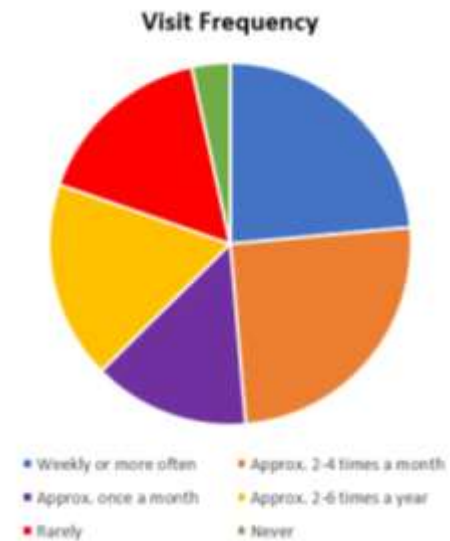
- Survey-takers describe Bitterroot Public Library as a vital, vibrant, multi-faceted community resource.
- Respondents express appreciation for library staff who are “well trained,” “knowledgeable,” “friendly faces” who foster a “good atmosphere.”
- Most patrons realize that the space constraints associated with a century-old Carnegie building represent a practical check on the Library’s amenities, abilities and ambitions.
- Conceptually, there is broad interest in the expansion of the Bitterroot Public Library. However, this comes part and parcel with apprehension about the funding feasibility of a capital investment on this scale, as well as concerns about leaving the historic Carnegie space vacant or in some way compromised.
- The Valley’s need for tech applications and assistance is on the rise (ex., digital/downloadable audiobooks, computer classes, on-site computers, WiFi access), but this increasing demand is not accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the community’s appetite for print materials.
- Residents express a desire and need for more, larger, and better equipped meeting spaces. Venues for holding meetings are in short supply across Ravalli County, as evidenced by the popularity of BPL’s sole meeting room.
- Adult programming hosted or sponsored by the Library is popular and appreciated, particularly given the relative dearth of “indoor recreation” opportunities available at low or no cost in Ravalli County.
- BPL’s existing physical footprint cannot accommodate a growing need for modestly sized, semi-private areas – i.e., flexible and quiet spaces well suited to study and small group collaboration.
- Parents value the entertainment and enrichment opportunities that BPL affords, but many report that their satisfaction with the children’s section is hampered by limitations associated with that area’s size, configuration, and collection.
- Many residents, including some who visit with relative frequency, do not know what the Library offers beyond books, children’s storytime, and other “baseline” services. BPL leadership would benefit from a concerted look at community awareness, marketing efforts, and outreach priorities.

LIBRARY USAGE + DEMOGRAPHICS

Three in five respondents (62.6%) self-report visiting Bitterroot Public Library at least once a month, and 48% do so more than once over an average month. Conversely, nearly 20% reported that they “Never” or “Rarely” visit.

Participation rates are roughly even among generational cohorts, excepting (1) Millennials and Gen Z aged ≤ 29, who represent a collective 5.5% of the respondent set, and (2) seniors aged 70+, who account for a full quarter.

Fifty four percent of survey-takers reside in zip code 59840, and 43% of that subset report living within the city limits of Hamilton. About a third (34.6%) live in some other Ravalli County zip code (primarily 59828 and 59875).



***Sources: Library Strategies Survey [Questions 14-16]
Montana State Library Public Library Annual Statistical Report*

QUESTION-BY-QUESTION BREAKDOWNS

Note: Question-by-question breakdowns are in some cases reordered, and in others joined together, for best flow and minimal redundancy.

If you rarely or never visit the library, why not? [Q2]

When asked why they do not visit the Library in a *check-all-that-apply* style question, many nonusers and sporadic users stated that they simply didn't *need* to (37%, 40 ct.), and the same proportion cited a preference for buying their own books and other media (37%, 40 ct). Secondly, 36% (39 ct.) report finding everything they need free and online.

In the open-ended portion of this question, respondents added the following reasons for infrequent use of the Library: preference for or convenience of another library (ex., Darby or Missoula); no longer use print materials; discomfort with BPL's collection development priorities for political or other reasons; COVID-19 concerns; and physical disabilities that preclude regular Library visitation. However, only one "write in" reason garnered more than three mentions: more than a half dozen survey-takers report that they simply haven't considered going, are unaware of what services and resources are on offer, and/or "got out of the habit." [cf. Q6]

Note: 18.5% (20 ct.) report utilizing the Library, but *only* for its online resources, and so consider themselves to be nonusers.

In the last two years, for what reasons have you visited the library? [Q3]

A preponderance of survey respondents visit the Library for traditional, transactional reasons. Seventy-one percent (478 ct.) check out physical materials. While the holds shelves are well used (58%, 389 ct.), browsing the stacks is a popular practice as well.

Also high among the offerings listed on the survey, and in descending order, patrons report using the Library to: attend or hold a meeting (25.8%, 173 ct.); for print, copy, scan, or fax capabilities (23.3%, 156 ct.); to attend an adult program or event hosted by Bitterroot Public Library (21.5%, 144 ct.); and to utilize the Library's computers (21.2%, 143 ct.).

Note: A cross-analysis within SurveyMonkey finds no statistically significant difference in these habits based on generational cohort or area of residency.

Sixty-eight respondents took the opportunity to expand the list provided with free-form answers. Other reasons noted there include: for socialization; for the entertainment and enrichment of children or grandchildren; to relax in or browse books from the gazebo; for take-home craft kits; to read current/backlist issues of newspapers and magazines; and to seek technology assistance.

How satisfied are you with the following aspects of Library operations? [Q4]

With a sample set this size, Library Strategies flags any operational areas that meet or pass the 5% threshold for dissatisfaction, and is most interested in areas that exceed the 10% yardstick. In the case of Bitterroot Public Library, none of the 12 listed elements surpass 5% dissatisfaction.

This question concluded with an open-ended opportunity for respondents to expand on their thoughts around operational considerations. Staff are called out specifically and repeatedly for praise, with survey-takers commenting on their knowledgeability, helpfulness, and friendly demeanor. Here and elsewhere in the questionnaire, more than a dozen respondents also express an appreciation for access to materials housed beyond BPL's four walls (via interlibrary loan, MontanaLibrary2Go, etc.)

How satisfied are you with various aspects of Library materials/resources? [Q5]

Patrons are, in the main, content with the Library's current slate of resources. "Opt outs" notwithstanding, a majority of survey respondents report being satisfied with (or completely neutral on) 13 of the 14 elements listed. None even approaches the 10% threshold for dissatisfaction. "Books for adults" is the only category to surpass the 5% benchmark (4.1% somewhat dissatisfied + 1.2% very dissatisfied).

Common criticisms of the adult collection include the following, in ranked order: on-site collection is too small (as dictated by space); materials feel dated; older entries in multi-installment series are not available; books on display are deemed offensive by the survey-taker; wait times are too long; and many desired materials are not available even with interlibrary loan.

Ninety-two survey-takers volunteered additional information as part of the free-form portion of this question. Most such comments simply elaborate on the Likert scale rankings. It is apparent from this supplementary data that frustrations with e-books are more widespread than the quantitative dissatisfaction score (3.33%) would suggest. Many patrons report tech challenges, are underwhelmed by the variety and availability of e-titles, and/or are offput by the long wait times usually required to obtain a popular new release.

How satisfied are you with the Library's programs, events, and outreach? [Q6]

Here again, the majority of patrons have a positive opinion about the programs and priorities put forward by the survey – or else report not having a meaningful basis on which to evaluate.

“Promotion and marketing” is the only consideration that hits the 5% threshold for dissatisfaction (5.3% somewhat dissatisfied + .8% very dissatisfied). This figure is compounded by a relatively high percentile of survey-takers who selected “Don’t Know | N/A.” (Although the “Don’t Know” column is *usually* of limited utility in analysis, it is telling here given the *nature* of marketing.)

Free-form comments on this question underscore and elaborate on this point.

Representative examples include:

- “It feels difficult to know what programs are happening at the library.”
- “I only learn [of] library events through the monthly email. Not sure if it’s broadcasted anywhere else.”
- “I admit, I simply don’t hear about the library’s events very often! Which I suppose is an answer in itself. As a community member who would love to be more involved, I hope the library can secure mores resources for offering better outreach/events.”
- “I believe more promotion of programs offered to families and others should be better represented.”

Which library services are currently important to you and your family? [Q7]

Which services do you expect to be important to you or your family in five years? [Q8]

It is valuable to pair and contrast these questions. While the first is straightforward, the second probes patrons’ aspirations and reasonable guesses about their family’s evolving needs as they will look in half a decade. As a rule of thumb, Library Strategies flags any +/- ≥5% difference for attention.

Differences where they exist for BPL revolve primarily around two areas: (1) digital resources and access, and (2) library programming and events.

Digital resources and access:

- At present, 28.52% (170 ct.) of respondents identify value in digital/downloadable audiobooks, but this is projected to jump to 39.06% (232 ct.) by 2028 – a rise of 9.56%.
- Likewise, 14.6% (87 ct.) report using computer classes or assistance, but this is projected to rise to 23.4% (139 ct.) by the same year – an increase of 8.8%.

- From the sample set, 25.34% (151 ct.) use the Library’s on-site computers and related technology, but this is forecasted to grow to 31.65% (188 ct.) by 2028 – a rise of 6.3%.
- Last, 24.16% (144 ct.) utilize the strong, on-site WiFi access, but this figure is expected to grow to 29.46% (175 ct.) – a 5.3% jump.

Programming

- At present, 39.43% (234 ct.) of survey-takers feel that adult programs and events are vital, but this grows to 49% (291 ct.) when respondents are asked to forecast their needs in 5 years’ time;
- Likewise, 10.74% (64 ct.) state that teen and tween programming is important for their family today, but this rises to 19.87% (118 ct.) by 2028 – an increase of 9.13%.

In contrast, interest in none of the areas probed is forecasted to “slacken” more than one half a percentage point over the next five years.

What additional or enhanced features, amenities or services would you like to see the Library provide? Feel free to “think big.” [Q9]

Roughly two in five respondents (264 of 701) volunteered assessments as part of this optional, open-ended question. Several aspirations, pain points, and other themes cropped up repeatedly throughout those comments. With few exceptions, topics of interest pertain either directly or indirectly to the Bitterroot Public Library’s facility and its size.

Some respondents state outright that they wish for the Library to expand its physical footprint in Hamilton: either at its current location, into the neighboring Fire Hall, to a vacant big box store, or under unspecified circumstances. However, still more survey-takers address the size question indirectly through the lens of their own current and hoped-for usage of the Library.

At the top of that list, dozens of comments reference a desire for more, larger, and better equipped meeting rooms. Venues for holding meetings are in short supply across Ravalli County. Aside from BPL’s sole existing space, which is in high demand and deemed difficult to book, City Hall and the River Inn & Conference Center are identified as the only alternatives available to large groups. A number also express a desire for one or more in-library spaces equipped with a kitchenette, videoconferencing capabilities, and other such amenities that expand the possible uses of a meeting room.

Other survey-takers instead emphasize programs and classes hosted/sponsored by the library in the existing meeting room. These respondents express a desire for *more* adult programming offerings, expanded seating capacity, and/or multiple sessions with the same focus/speaker (to mitigate scheduling and capacity barriers for would-be attendees). Each line of thinking speaks to the same pinch point: BPL's current meeting room set-up is too limiting to match community demand, and this is unlikely to be allayed without new investment in brick-and-mortar meeting facilities somewhere in the community.

A second and interrelated theme is the under-met need for modestly sized, semi-private areas geared towards study and small group collaboration. Residents expressed myriad needs for such spaces. These include tutoring sessions and informal study circles; phone and Zoom calls; and reading, independent study, and other 'solo concentration' pursuits.

Second only to meeting and study spaces, survey-takers spotlight a need for a reconceptualized and expanded children's space. What is presently offered is generally appreciated and understood to be the limit of what the Library can aspire to in the Carnegie location. However, parents call out a need for a children's area that is more clearly delineated from other zones of the library (for noise reduction and perceived safety). Missoula Public Library is repeatedly called out as an exemplar worth studying, but it is also understood that something on Missoula's scale is not feasible in Hamilton.

Survey-takers, and particularly those who reside outside of the Hamilton city limits, were almost as likely to identify the technology area as the section of the library most in need of reinvestment. Some volunteered the limited aspiration that new computers replace the old, but many others desire a library "makerspace" outfitted with technology and craft equipment which community members may not otherwise have affordable access to (ex., sewing machines, advanced software programs).

Last, but in less specific terms, there is a hunger for the Library to fully assume its place as a social nexus point for Hamilton – a community that does not presently have many hubs for community connection beyond schools. Examples of what this would look like in practice are many and varied. However, even the more modest aspirations put forward bring unavoidable implications for BPL's limited square footage.

What about the Bitterroot Public Library as it exists today would you like to make sure is kept or maintained into the future? [Q10]

Nearly half of respondents (319 of 701) offered comments as part of this second optional and open-ended question.

Here as elsewhere, survey-takers express appreciation for library staff who are “well trained,” “knowledgeable,” “friendly faces” who foster a “good atmosphere.” Staff members “make” the library; “great customer service can’t be overlooked or be replaced.”

There is likewise strong support for Bitterroot Public Library as an institution. In the representative words of one: “The community needs it. That is without question. The library should exist for as long as the town exists.”

Opinions are mixed about the location of the library. Nearly all are pleased to have this important institution located downtown, and some are adamant that BPL remain exactly where it is. With that said, opinions vary as to whether to “scrap it all and start over,” retain the Carnegie façade and “gut the rest” to modernize the library, repurpose the Carnegie and relocate the library to another nearby site, etc.

Last, dozens of survey-takers took this opportunity to reiterate their appreciation for physical books and the expanded reach which interlibrary loan makes possible. There is no desire to see the overall collection downsized to repurpose square footage for other uses. (This is explored in more detail as part of the following question.)

Are there section(s) of the library’s lending collection that you think could be better organized, downsized, or phased out altogether? Feel free to explain your reasoning, or to simply list what comes to mind. [Q11]

Twenty percent of survey-takers (138 of 701) responded to the third optional question. Aside from differences of opinion about (1) the perceived appropriateness of certain children’s materials and (2) the currency and continued need for “hard media” music and movie collections, the narrative here is a clear and cohesive one. Patrons do not feel that any section within the BPL space is superfluous or overrepresented. Indeed, some parts of the collection (such as adult nonfiction and children’s materials) would benefit from renewed investment.

However, there is also a general agreement that “it feels chaotic there due to the overcrowding” – or in other words, the existing facility’s size represents a practical check on how many books BPL can justify purchasing and housing.

One concise yet representative comment reads as follows: “It seems like the library is trying to pack the variety of what I would call essential services into a small space, with no room for innovation or enhancement.”

How could your satisfaction with library services or resources be increased? [Q12]

This last question is an opportunity for residents to revisit and expand upon topics from earlier in the questionnaire – or to offer feedback around areas they did not feel were encompassed by the earlier survey questions. Many took this opportunity to address limited parking, which is a universally acknowledged drawback of the downtown location.

Aside from parking, patrons took this as an opportunity to restate the already summarized grievances and hopes concerning: meeting rooms; study areas; the children’s zone and amenities; and the small and confining nature of the Carnegie in more general terms.

LIBRARY STRATEGIES





Bitterroot Public Library

Focus Groups | March Session Notes



FOCUS GROUP NOTES, SESSION 1

Tuesday, March 21, 2023, 6-8 PM

NOTE: Focus group attendees were invited to participate in this exercise either because of a recommendation from the Bitterroot Public Library's project steering committee or with the library leadership team's prior approval. See the end of this document for an alphabetized list of participants.

As the session commenced, attendees were informed that their comments would be paraphrased (and in some cases typed verbatim) and would be shared in aggregate with library leadership at the conclusion of the assessment work.

However, for comfort and maximum candor, the moderators assured participants that comments would not be attributable back to specific individuals. In rare cases where an exception seems warranted and a name is listed alongside a comment or suggestion, it is done with the express approval of that individual.

Perspectives and ideas as presented in this document do not necessarily reflect the beliefs or recommendations of the Library Strategies consulting team.

Lead Moderator: Melissa Brechon, MLIS

Support / Note-taker: David Katz, MLIS

“Think about the community as you'd like it to look a decade from now. Please describe – including how it differs from how the community looks today. You do not need to focus on the Library.”

- Thinking specifically about downtown Hamilton, I would push for a more walkable community more friendly to the needs of walkers and bikers.
- Hamilton needs an internet café, because many people struggle both with internet connectivity and with finding places to go outside of the house.
- Hamilton needs more outdoor spaces/amenities that are fully accessible to folks in wheelchairs (and those living with other physical constraints).
- I picture bike trails connecting Hamilton to Darby and Corvallis. This would lean into our outdoorsy appeal and help the economies of our towns.
- I envy other, similarly sized towns that have a downtown which is closed to vehicular traffic: either permanently, or for one day out of the week, or for special occasions like festivals. I think something of that sort could catch on here.
- Hamilton would benefit from a parking garage, maybe on 6th Street. If inexpensive or even free of cost to most users, it would be a huge boost to businesses. I don't know the cost implications, obviously.

- From a nature-scape perspective, I would advocate for more flowers and wild flora in place of so much manicured, nonnative grass.
- Residents in Victor and Corvallis need to travel to Hamilton or Stevensville for most everything. It would be nice if there were more outreach and home-delivery services on offer, including from the Library.
- It feels like the Library is a community within the community. By that I mean: Many different kinds of people use it, and for different reasons. This means that space is a constraint. I'd like to see the Library grow its space, but I do not want it to vacate the beautiful Carnegie.
- I picture a Library with more computers and technology offerings, and fewer books/stacks to allow for the needed space.
- I am not opposed to the Library moving locations, so long as the Carnegie gem stays intact and another meaningful purpose is found for that space.
- I would like the Library to remain a center point, but one that is more accessible. Currently, the building presents several ADA concerns.

“Melissa has visited Hamilton, but David is less acquainted with the BPL location and facility. What would you call out to him as most noteworthy? (We are particularly interested in shortcomings and strengths, but anything is fair game.)”

- BPL is centrally located within Hamilton. That's the strength and the problem. It would be a blow to remove it from downtown, but that might be the only way it can continue to serve and to grow.
- Note the ambiance and noise. There is no clear division between areas. This can mean your experience is noisy where you are looking for it to be quiet, full of kids and you're visiting for a kid-free purpose, etc.
- People talk with pride about the lawn abutting the Library, but it is not safe (especially for kids) because of all the vehicular traffic. It is also too loud to take a call there when the weather is nice.
- Transportation is an issue for many in the Valley. Bitterroot Bus, the public transportation option, is on-demand and not especially frequent/convenient for those who need it most. Obviously, this impacts who you see in the library regularly.
- Our library is architecturally beautiful, but an imposition (and maybe even a liability) on account of the rough ramp access.
- You see people doing solo work all the time. Some probably need the high speed internet, because connectivity is not to be taken for granted out here. Some probably just want a change of scenery.
- Our space is just too restricting, and it's not just about size. The design is really locked in. Nothing is movable.
- There's no room to “sprawl.” You cannot just grab a window seat or study nook for unstructured personal time.
- We've outgrown our current space. That's true for just about any common use of the Library's spaces (meeting rooms, book storage, staff spaces).
- I'd like to see a street level public entrance, eliminating any need for ramps.
- We need more small group study spaces and more large group meeting rooms.

- It is historic – but not the only historic building in town. There is also the Daly Mansion. Mrs. Marcus Daly was a key early booster of this library, though that is a history that is little known today. It would be great if the two institutions could partner more/better on programming.

“In your opinion, what does your library do well? What services, resources and other amenities are you especially keen to see the library maintain into the future?”

- Their programming game is strong. Youth-oriented offerings feel especially robust, which is something appreciated by the area’s homeschooling community. You can also find builder clubs, STE(A)M activities, cooking classes, etc.
- Interlibrary loan is an important asset, because it means that the reader’s reach extends beyond the shelves in front of them. “It makes me feel rich.”
- It’s no secret that people use the parking lot and the lawn to tap the free WiFi. I wish this network could be expanded even further. Ideally, the whole of downtown Hamilton would offer WiFi, with BPL as the tech hub for it all.
- Staff are top notch, and really seem to care.
- There’s not much for Hamilton kids to do in the summertime. For this reason, the Library’s summer reading program is important. I’d even like to see it grown. This might require recruiting and training more volunteers, but it is worth prioritizing.
- Staff are creative with program ideas, but don’t offer popular options often enough. One-off programs (ex., how to make tea or pie crust) come along once, and that time often doesn’t work for most working folks. Focus on repeating opportunities versus adding new ones.
- If space were not such a concern, I would like the Library to invest in a Library of Things with items useful to life in Montana: not just puzzles and baking pans like other libraries, but yard equipment and maybe even animal snares too.
- What we lack is a makerspace equipped with tools we don’t have at home (software, sewing, etc.) You see this in other libraries. It really helps with productivity and creativity.
- I would like to see an oven or microwave for the preparing of hot snacks to share at meetings, as well as maybe for hosted cooking demonstrations.
- We need our programming offered at different hours of the day. Children’s program times feel homeschool centric.
- I would like to see extended hours. Speaking just for my family, that’s our biggest barrier right now.
- Has the Library considered expanding its programming reach by crowdsourcing who leads classes, workshops, etc.? Teens and seniors are both good groups to target, each for different reasons and with different “specialties” in mind. This is assuming the building can accommodate more events.

“How could the library serve you and your family better? Can you think of ways the library could better assist others in your community? (If nothing immediately comes to mind, consider Education, Technology, etc.)”

- Has the Library considered approaching the University of Montana about bringing AmeriCorps VISTA associates to the Library? They could be a great help with literacy and tech.
- I’m less concerned about improving the situation for central Hamilton, and more interested in increasing library service to outlying communities. I would like to see a bookmobile, home delivery service, or permanent material drop-off sites in Victor and Corvallis.
- If home delivery is not feasible as a general patron service, is there any possibility of offering it on a selective basis to folks willing to pay for the added benefit? I think it would be popular.
- I’d like to see an app, versus logging into the website every time (especially when on a mobile device).
- There’s a calendar of events that lists both adult and children’s programs, but it is awkward to use – especially if you’re not already a regular user.
- Hamilton lacks an indoor play place for kids, as well as any sort of public space equipped to host traveling exhibits. I would like the Library to step into both voids, but there’s just not room right now.
- Instead of ‘doubling down’ on existing users, perhaps the Library should focus on nonusers. Many households do not have even one cardholder. Can the Library fund an annual mailing to all households?
- “I’ve gone to libraries to read or work on emails. When I was a student, I also visited the local library to study. I wouldn’t ever do this in Hamilton, though: there are too few spots, and it’s just so loud.”
- Some groups are better served than others. I’m not sure why working-aged people without kids in the home would go to the Library (aside from picking up a book).
- The upside is: Once you get people in the door the first time, it’s then much clearer what’s on offer and they are much more likely to come back.
- COVID left a strong mark. Afterwards, people don’t connect with one another like they once did. We also have a growing divide in beliefs. The Library is a neutral middle ground in a central place.
- “I’d like to see yoga classes and other wellness offerings.” These are greatly needed in society, and small towns in particular [due to a lack of existing opportunities].
- I might like to see a collaboration with the schools where older kids read to younger kids – a confidence builder for the readers, and fun for all.
- “My family doesn’t go because we can only get there during the busiest time – when it feels like the children’s room packs them in like sardines.”
- There are a lot of people here who are living above the poverty line, but have no resources for enrichment. It would be great if the Library could offer free or discounted tickets, coupons, etc. for things happening in the community.

“How might the library induce more people to visit and to use its resources? What are potential barriers to use for some/all residents? Is anything about the library a major ‘detractor’?”

- I doubt that BPL is used by a majority of those who are eligible to use it. I took a straw poll of co-workers, and only 2 in 20 had a library card.
- I’d like it if more kids visited the library. I don’t know what the current stats are, but it should be all kids in Victor, Corvallis and Hamilton – because you instill the habit young. Have staff tried striking up a partnership/arrangement with the schools?
- I’d like to see the Library up its outreach game, especially towards children. By that I mean, have someone from the Library go to classrooms and share out with kids, versus expecting them to come to the Library all the time.
- Personally, I appreciate the regular announcements in the paper (though the print type is small and doesn’t necessarily catch the eye). However, I wonder how many people see the paper at all these days.
- “I get the sense that if someone has to wait for a computer, they may just turn around and leave. And if they leave like that, will they ever come back?”
- I’d like to see the Library become closer with the bookstore. I’m specifically thinking about library arranged- and sponsored- events hosted at the shop.
- I wish we had occasional book sales that were a big community happening, as you sometimes see in other towns. We have our give-and-take shelf, but that’s not equivalent.
- “We need enrichment opportunities in the Valley, like author programs and spotlights on local history. No place is a better fit than the library, where it’s: ‘Come as you are, come for free.’”

“Last: What should the library look like in 5-10 years?”

- If the Library expanded its opportunities to volunteer, and then promoted those openings, I am sure that they would find takers.
- It feels like there would be an audience for expanded adult programs – but the lack of physical space makes this impossible.
- I’d like to see Hamilton host an adult reading and author talk series. BPL would be the most logical convener, at least in terms of mission. Space is an issue.
- We need more meeting rooms, and they need to offer patrons up-to-date audiovisual capabilities. Videoconferencing is here to stay, but not everyone has strong internet at home.
- I would like to see the Library take over the whole of the Fire Hall and connect it to the Carnegie with a skyway or other safe cross-road access point. I’d like the Fire Hall building to retain some details like fireman poles.
- Unless the Library vacates downtown, the Fire Hall is the only reasonable real estate in which to expand.
- I can see the Library spread across two nearby sites. One could be oriented towards traditional services (ex., house and loan books), while the other could focus on more innovative and collaborative ventures (ex., classes).
- I do not want to see the library split across two buildings. It would feel so disconnected, and a skyway feels like an expensive extravagance for this area.

- If any investment is made, I would like to see the Library add a branch someplace up the Valley.
- I would hate for the Library to expand its footprint at the expense of the existing yard or stream. Those are such nice, natural assets. Perhaps they should invest in a fence to protect the green space (and those who are using it).

Participants

Bloom, Tonia

Dufresne, Jessica

Fifer, Linda

Garber, Laura

Goheen, Stephen

Rhodz, Arielle

Saville, Melissa

Travitz, Paul

Weide, Bruce

FOCUS GROUP NOTES, SESSION 2

Wednesday, March 22, 2023, 4-6 PM

NOTE: Focus group attendees were invited to participate in this exercise either because of a recommendation from the Bitterroot Public Library's project steering committee or with the library leadership team's prior approval. See the end of this document for an alphabetized list of participants.

As the session commenced, attendees were informed that their comments would be paraphrased (and in some cases typed verbatim), and would be shared in aggregate with library leadership at the conclusion of the assessment work.

However, for comfort and maximum candor, the moderators assured participants that comments would not be attributable back to specific individuals. In rare cases where an exception seems warranted and a name is listed alongside a comment or suggestion, it is done with the express approval of that individual.

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Lead Moderator: Melissa Brechon, MLIS

Support / Note-taker: David Katz, MLIS

“Think about the community as you'd like it to look a decade from now. Please describe – including how it differs from how the community looks today. You do not need to focus on the Library.”

- I hope we're not always forced to drive to Missoula to meet basic needs, like shopping.
- I feel like much of the community is reeling from the loss of Kmart. Growth is going to be inevitable, but I feel like we need a big box store in close reach if we are to grow *smoothly*.
- I am leery of big box stores. They are almost too convenient and too cheap, and are going to drive out the local businesses that give Hamilton color.
- If the future holds growth – as I agree seems inevitable – I hope that we can avoid the traffic congestion and HOA communities that are so common elsewhere.
- The jobs available in Hamilton cannot support the home prices, which is an unsustainable situation.
- Growth should be funneled into affordable, attainable housing solutions. We don't need homes that are outside the reach of the middle class.
- I would like to see more, and more *kinds* of, businesses around main street.
- We need more sidewalks and bike lanes, especially running east to west.
- I'd like to see more publicly accessible, publicly maintained green spaces – especially on the east side of town.

- Hamilton is a backwater, but in a good way. We are in a position to learn from how other communities have managed growth (well or poorly) and plan accordingly. Missoula, for example, offers several case studies worth exploring.
- We have a small town, “Mayberry” feel, and I hope we can maintain that. At the same time, I would also like to see us invest in our public assets like schools and libraries, and that takes a healthy and growing tax base.
- Orderly growth feels particularly tricky in Ravalli County. Most of the conversation centers around the City of Hamilton, but it is actually the County that is the main planning entity for this area. (This means that when we’re talking about the expansion of sidewalks, it is not just a City matter.)
- Unfortunately, the County does not have a long-range planning framework equivalent to Envision Hamilton. This is a problem, since much of the residential growth is likely to take place outside of Hamilton proper, and brings with it implications for infrastructure (sewers, internet, etc.)
- I am concerned about the health of the public education system. If we want our schools to stay strong, I agree we have to embrace a certain kind and level of growth.
- In terms of medical service, we have a good hospital with sufficient beds – but not enough doctors and nurses to manage as many patients as the facility can hold.
- The rise in mental health needs, and lack of local resources to assist people, is also part of our fabric these days.
- Hamilton needs public shower facilities and other infrastructure/services for people who are unhoused. It seems to be a growing population, therefore a growing need.
- Our community feels lacking in general contractors, too.

“Melissa has visited Hamilton, but David is less acquainted with the BPL location and facility. What would you call out to him as most noteworthy? (We are particularly interested in shortcomings and strengths, but anything is fair game.)”

- BPL is the one place you can go for miles around without the expectation of spending money. Its special, welcoming feel must be preserved.
- “Clubs meet here. It’s a comfortable, neutral, central place to meet up. Coffee shops and homes aren’t, necessarily.”
- The spaces available for youth materials and programs are insufficient. Staff are great, but they can only do so much with what they have.
- “Even though the library is small, you could almost get lost in here. No one is to blame. Staff are forced to pack a lot into a small space, so of course there’s going to be a certain jumbled feel.”
- Our library contains far too many stairs and ramps for older patrons.
- It looks great on the outside, but the interior is overly busy, cramped, and unattractive.
- In contrast, ADA accessibility (or lack thereof) makes residents and visitors with disabilities feel distinctly unwelcome.

“In your opinion, what does your library do well? What services, resources and other amenities are you especially keen to see the library maintain into the future?”

- I am constantly amazed by staff, particularly those in the children’s area. I wouldn’t want them to do *differently*, and I really couldn’t ask them to do *more*.
- It feels like we’re in a good place where it comes to collections. Courtesy of Hoopla and Montana2Go, it’s not hard to access print books even when they’re not physically in Hamilton.
- Adult programming is already stronger at our Library than at some others. However, there could always be more. I am particularly interested in clubs and support groups that community members could lead.
- I hope that the Library maintains its existing yard, which is a pleasant and dynamic space for kids.
- “As a regular user, I can attest that BPL actually offers a lot. Some of the resources and services are hidden gems, but shouldn’t be. Marketing is a critical need right now.”
- It is staff who “make the library experience.” I would like to see all staff (particularly onboarding staff) take the same rigorous customer service training regimen. That way, every visitor gets the same high level of service no matter when they visit or who they speak/work with.

“How could the library serve you and your family better? Can you think of ways the library could better assist others in your community? (If nothing immediately comes to mind, consider Education, Technology, etc.)”

- Thanks to the Friends of the Library, the Library has about 50-60 kits. These tend to be popular. I’d like to see a reinvestment in this.
- Our meeting rooms are not just a little bit lacking – they’re totally inadequate. This is not a dig against the Library; it’s a truth for the Valley in general. I’d like to see a suite of 7-8 meeting rooms, ranged from small to large (with the Library’s current space probably classed as medium).
- Some seniors and residents with disabilities can’t get to the library due to distance and lack of transportation, rather than barriers presented by the building itself. Can the City invest in a library materials delivery service for senior homes and the homebound?
- “Do we have a teens’ section, aside from maybe a few bookshelves? If so, it can’t be much or well known about.”
- “Outside of school and school extracurriculars, there is nothing for young people to do. We don’t need what Missoula has, but we need *some place* for them to go and to own.”
- Some libraries have a quiet, designated proctoring areas for test taking. There is a need for that in our area. (If it’s something already on offer from the Library or elsewhere, that would be news to me.)
- I would like to see the Library host traveling exhibits. We need a focus point for culture and learning.

“How might the library induce more people to visit and to use its resources? What are potential barriers to use for some/all residents? Is anything about the library a major ‘detractor’?”

- I love hearing about Humane Society reading programs, and think this could catch fire in Hamilton (or really, anywhere with a library).
- BPL offers “anything you could want for kids, aged kindergarten through to high school.” There are story times for preschoolers, and cooking classes for older kids. What’s tricky is the timing. School, work, and other commitments keep many families from taking part.
- Hamilton needs a tech center. Some people need device access, others need handholding, and others just need a space or WiFi – but the need seems common to all.
- I think a makerspace is a worthy goal for BPL. You have to carve out the space in the first place, and that’s a challenge. However, equipping it and promoting it can be done in piecemeal fashion. You grow it over time.
- “We’ll never afford and maybe don’t need a full-on makerspace, but would benefit from a few computers with heavy-duty video editing software, Photoshop, and the like.”
- If they aren’t already, BPL should post regularly in the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce newsletter.
- Libraries shouldn’t just focus on looking *elsewhere* to see where they can advertise what *they’re* offering. Think about the reverse. Libraries are also well positioned to share news about what’s happening elsewhere in the community. If you lean into this, everyone benefits.
- Reconsider downtown street signage. It’s easy to overlook the Library unless you’re driving or walking right by. Even when you’re at the Library, it’s easy to miss the gazebo because the wayfinding signage is only so-so.
- Encourage school classes to visit the Library on a regular basis. Perhaps institute a program where every enrolled pupil in first or second grade gets a public library visit and card. If anything of this sort happens already, I suppose that underscores the need for marketing.
- We’re living in an increasingly polarized and angry society. Steer clear of hyper partisan issues where the Library isn’t obligated to take a stance. No matter what stance you take, you’re probably alienating half of the Library’s users.
- On the other hand, the Library is uniquely positioned to hold *nonpartisan* forums and other meetings focused around public affairs. For instance, a series of programs spotlighting and explaining the possible changes to the Montana constitution that voters will see in 2024 could be well received.

“Last: What should the library look like in 5-10 years?”

- I’d like to see strong internet all around downtown, not just at the Library.
- We need more spaces where we can get out and just *be* with each other. This is less an issue in summer, when the weather is fabulous. However, once it gets cold, adults only have home visits and the Library.
- Small town Montana feels like a tough environment to secure “buy-in and bucks” for a public reinvestment in libraries, no matter how clear the need. It’s just a reality of this climate.
- Library expansion feels like a tough sell. Since we’re contending with growth, there are a lot of big asks before taxpayers right now. They can only bear so much burden.

- I'd like to see the Library take over the Fire Hall. It needs more square footage.
- I would encourage the City to explore options other than the Fire Hall. Missoula had the opportunity to move their library into the town's old, vacated Mercantile Building. In retrospect, the new facility they got was better – and not any more expensive than a retrofitting.
- I think that the acquisition of the Fire Hall would make the Library an incredible community hub; but it's the people who make it 'go' who really define the Library. Perhaps they should expand outreach services instead of reinvesting in the Carnegie.
- I would encourage the Library to ask: "What role do we envision playing in the community?" From there, it's a question of "How do we convince folks?"
- I love the outside spaces surrounding the Library. Both the gazebo and the brook are used and loved. I wouldn't want the building to grow if it meant encroaching on either.
- We need BPL to be more than a place you visit to get information. I want the Library to function as a community hub – even a public square. I'm sure I'm not alone in this desire, but the physical limitations of a Carnegie put a check on this ambition.
- I agree that a little extra square footage won't make a difference. If anything is going to actually change, the Library needs to double or even triple its square footage.
- I would have trouble endorsing this idea that the Library expand into the Fire Hall and also retain its current space. This would impact staffing, operations and budget in big, ongoing ways which might not be sustainable for a community our size.
- I keep hearing that Hamilton Middle School may be moving. If that is in the cards, I would have the Library wait on expansion until that space becomes vacated. It wouldn't necessarily need to take up the whole footprint.
- I agree that the Library must remain central, but do not necessarily feel it needs to be in the heart of downtown. A mile or so north on 93 would be fine as well.
- I agree that north on the way to Victor, but still within the Hamilton city limits, would be a primo site.
- I like the idea of the Fire Hall as an annex, but only if they are attached.
- I'd like the Library to assert itself as a center for educational excellence, given the declining quality of public education in the country. Libraries can be part of the solution.
- BPL needs long Sunday hours. Weekends are when school libraries are unavailable. Where is a student to go if they have a paper to research and they need more than Google?
- It seems to me that the physical space required for all the ramps takes away from the overall square footage available.

Participants

Barker, Cristi

Craig, Laura

Fox, Amy

Neyenhuis, Marisa

Ogden, Jennifer

O'Byrne, Samantha

Leslie, David

Semmelroth, Jim

Watters, Rachael

FOCUS GROUP NOTES, SESSION 3

Thursday, March 23, 2023, 2-4 PM

NOTE: Focus group attendees were invited to participate in this exercise either because of a recommendation from the Bitterroot Public Library's project steering committee or with the library leadership team's prior approval. See the end of this document for an alphabetized list of participants.

As the session commenced, attendees were informed that their comments would be paraphrased (and in some cases typed verbatim), and would be shared in aggregate with library leadership at the conclusion of the assessment work.

However, for comfort and maximum candor, the moderators assured participants that comments would not be attributable back to specific individuals. In rare cases where an exception seems warranted and a name is listed alongside a comment or suggestion, it is done with the express approval of that individual.

Perspectives and ideas as presented in this document do not necessarily reflect the beliefs or recommendations of the Library Strategies consulting team.

Lead Moderator: Melissa Brechon, MLIS

Support / Note-taker: David Katz, MLIS

“Think about the community as you'd like it to look a decade from now. Please describe – including how it differs from how the community looks today. You do not need to focus on the Library.”

- In my mind, all our issues are overshadowed by housing: a lack of it, and the problems of building affordable units in rural Montana.
- Housing stock, particularly affordable housing, is a challenge. I'd like to see more HUD and subsidized housing, made possible through support from the State of Montana.
- We are blessed with the Hamilton Players and Shakespeare in the Park, which offers proof of concept for culture. I think that a reasonable stretch goal would be the hosting of a summer concert series which draws a few thousand to the area.
- It's nice that we have an “historic core,” but it is full of title companies and other businesses that aren't primed to draw a whole lot of foot traffic. I would like to see us cultivate more art and retail in the heart of downtown.
- We're an active community year round, but are only really equipped for the outdoors and summer months. We need an indoors meeting spot that doesn't feel as close quarters as the Library and is more approachable than a City Hall.
- I would like to see us close our main streets to vehicular traffic certain nights of the week, at least in summer. We have the potential to be a walkable community, but just need excuses that get folks in that habit.

- Growth and change do not excite me. I am one of those individualistic Montanans that wants to maintain everything that comes with quiet smalltown life. I fear we will be inundated by out-of-towners inspired by Yellowstone.
- I would like the roller rink rebuilt, or another indoor recreational spot that serves the dual purpose of socializing and physically moving around.
- Transportation is an issue, broadly speaking. Public transit, such as it is, seems an inadequate solution for those who rely on it most. Most people do have cars, of course, but with the closing of Kmart it's a 100-mile round trip to get to the nearest Walmart (and other needed resources in Missoula).
- Our commercial district is healthier than in many towns of Hamilton's size, though the types and variety of businesses on offer may not be particularly attractive if one were trying to lure in visitors to spend money.
- City government is committed to reasonable, responsible growth. It is a necessary ingredient if Hamilton is to maintain a robust economic structure and tax base – without which the town can't hope to keep its culture alive. However, there is also a broad commitment to keeping Hamilton's small-town character.
- Because we are so far from the next nearest town that is big enough to be considered a "service hub," we need to attract and retain skilled service workers (general contractors, teachers, mechanics, etc.) That's an uphill battle with a residential development landscape that doesn't seem to favor construction of affordable units.

“Melissa has visited Hamilton, but David is less acquainted with the BPL location and facility. What would you call out to him as most noteworthy? (We are particularly interested in shortcomings and strengths, but anything is fair game.)”

- You will find the façade striking, almost picturesque. “They don't make them like that anymore.”
- Our interior is not nearly as attractive or inviting as the exterior.
- “I wouldn't call it ugly, but the building's insides are certainly showing wear and tear from all the use it gets.”
- Parking is atrocious, particularly when there's a popular event going on.
- “It's as central as can be.” You can run other errands before and after your library visit, and many people do exactly that.
- I've always appreciated the proximity to the county museum. It has the feeling of a cultural corridor.
- The grounds are an absolute gem. The green space is often used, even if it's only more rarely talked about.
- People love the free book shelf outside, too.
- Staff are doing a great job. Personnel are always friendly and helpful.
- It doesn't appear like there's a lot of staff turnover, which we can't say for every service-oriented business in town. That's no small thing.
- BPL is on the way to everything, so a useful stopover point for making use of little gaps of time.
- “It's a good place to sit down and get stuff done between meetings or errands. Bring your computer, hook up to the internet, and park yourself anywhere.”

- I've never felt like the internal organization is terribly efficient. However, it must also be said that the building is small, so naturally it is going to be cramped. I realize that staff are being called upon to do a lot with a little.
- In my estimation, parking is fine if you're willing to park a few blocks away. However, many aren't willing to do that in the dead of winter. Others have mobility needs.

“In your opinion, what does your library do well? What services, resources and other amenities are you especially keen to see the library maintain into the future?”

- I look at the Library as an important “convener and incubator.” Our Adult Basic Education program was born and incubated at the Library, and over its existence has now helped 7,000 people.
- “There’s still a great divide between folks who’ve got home internet and folks who don’t. It’s unfair but that’s how it is.”
- While it’s a public facility, the Library has the “right” vibe. Fire and police departments, courts, etc. are either intimidating or boring. You go there, if ever, strictly when you *have* to. That’s what makes the Library special.
- BPL is “a busy and important place,” and I get distressed whenever I remember or hear talk about cutting back hours. I’d like to see an expansion, but only if the doors are open to the public for appropriate hours.
- Children’s programming is strong at our Library, which is extra appreciated because “non school” opportunities are so lacking – particularly in the colder months when the Great Outdoors is essentially off limits to littler kids.
- Our ace in the hole is interlibrary loan. If the limited stacks at BPL don’t have something I need, they can get it on a timetable that I usually find quite reasonable.
- I appreciate that books can be checked out from Missoula, as well as returned there if you happen to be running errands in the City.
- My family appreciates that materials are available in a variety of media. It’s not just books.

“How could the library serve you and your family better? Can you think of ways the library could better assist others in your community? (If nothing immediately comes to mind, consider Education, Technology, etc.)”

- I expect a modern library to offer more technology choices than what’s presently available. “With that said, I can’t in good conscience recommend adding anything: there’d be no place to put it!”
- Our community is in desperate need of a marketing hub. Events are *available*; basically, we have organizers organizing, but we need attendees attending! BPL needs to fill into the void because if the Library doesn’t, no one will.
- I don’t know how to book the meeting room, and doubt it would be available for my group even if I were familiar with that process. It’s always SO busy. That should tell us something.
- Libraries tend to be an excellent place for people experiencing disabilities to meet up with others from the disabilities community, because they are central and must be ADA compliant. However, the old Carnegie falls short of what I’d hope.

- The website navigation is unintuitive. Unless you know where to click, you fumble around. Some improvements look like they would be relatively easy.
- “I know Hamilton in and out, and even I don’t know all that the Library does. That speaks to either unnecessary services, or a lack of broad awareness about all that’s on offer... I think it’s the second.”

“How might the library induce more people to visit and to use its resources? What are potential barriers to use for some/all residents? Is anything about the library a major ‘detractor’?”

- New residents make up a significant proportion of the Valley population. They are not made to feel particularly welcome, particularly if they don’t already fit into the mold of a standard Hamiltonian. City functions like the Library have a duty to make them feel welcome.
- I picture the library as more than a clearinghouse for information – I want it to be a central meeting spot for intergenerational connections and events.
- Hamilton’s community calendar is a robust tool for a community this size. Ex.: The gardening club, which has been inactive for six years, still gets regular queries through the calendar.
- Hamilton Downtown Association has a fantastic calendar specific to Hamilton. [There was confusion among the group about whether these are separate calendar tools, or if the centralized calendar is advertised in multiple places.]
- If the Library doesn’t already offer email communications, they should start. You can spotlight a new service every month, and promote upcoming programs.
- “Kids and teens deserve a social hub they can be proud of. I picture a space where they can be loud, (within reason,) enjoy minimal supervision, and play the video games they are all so fond of.”
- For folks with 9-5 style day jobs, taking kids to the Library in the middle of the day (when events are clustered) is a complete nonstarter.
- Ravalli County has a fair number of cultural and educational orgs, so I could very well see untapped opportunities for collaboration. Exploring those opportunities takes money, though.

“Last: What should the library look like in 5-10 years?”

- In an ideal world, we’d have a new and vastly improved public library *yesterday*. However, public projects must always be understood against the backdrop of the public entities that fund and maintain them. I foresee obstacles – some of which we’ve already touched on.
- I hope that downtown Hamilton can preserve its existing green spaces, and also keep them *clean*. That’s always a challenge, even for a town our size.
- Hamilton is not a community that is particularly accessible to the disability community. BPL, and what it offers in terms of ramps and elevator, are maybe and sadly the best case in point. I don’t feel like this need is a “niche” one, because most everybody will have a health episode or slow decline in their lifetime.
- Hamilton and the Valley need more public yet semi-private spaces for tutoring, Zoom calls, and one-on-one conversations. Looking for an empty nook in the Library and trying to whisper doesn’t cut it.
- I can see the Fire Hall used for administrative and meeting spaces, with books remaining at the Carnegie. “Linking them may be expensive, but will be cheaper than a new building, right?”

- What challenges does the Fire Hall bring in terms of sewer and water lines? It is worrisome to put “all eggs in one basket.”
- Any new Library should account for projected growth – both more residents, and more people using their library in more ways. (“If it’s just a *little* bit bigger, why bother?”)
- “I think the location is sacred,” and if that means that the Library must rein in its ambitions, “that’s still better than relocating.”
- Bond issues in support of school projects are going to dominate headlines and be important to a lot of people. It would be difficult to compete with that.
- It’s unlikely the bond will pass without a gainful plan for the to-be-vacated middle school building. If the Library takes over that space, it would serve multiple interests and be a point around which to build a broad-based community coalition. The Carnegie can then hopefully be repurposed for City administrative functions of some kind.
- Some libraries store most of their books off site and shuttle materials to the public library hub at need, with couriers on a daily or more basis. Is that something the Library would consider?
- It seems likely that the grant-funded environmental study on deck for the Fire Station site will shape if a public function like a library can safely and economically take over.
- I think we could use a second location in the North Valley, but am afraid of the staffing and cost tails. I do not think the tax base can bear a big rise in yearly Library operational costs.
- Local organizations looking to raise funds must contend with a crowded landscape. Weekends are chock-full of fundraiser events, such as those going on this month in support of the Fire Station. If you schedule something on a Friday or Saturday, you will almost always be double booked with another worthy cause.
- It’s easy to picture the Library moving into the Fire Hall, due to its closeness. However, the PAR (preliminary architecture report) may uncover reasons why it’s not well suited. I worry about this, so hope the Library will also consider other growth options.
- I’m aware of other communities, such as Phoenix, where vacating a prime location to move into a larger facility inadvertently caused a steep drop off in foot traffic. That’s a cautionary tale.

Participants

Aerni, Greg

Evans, David

Farrenkopf, Dominic

Foster, Julie

Fugleberg, Alan

McCurdy, Philip

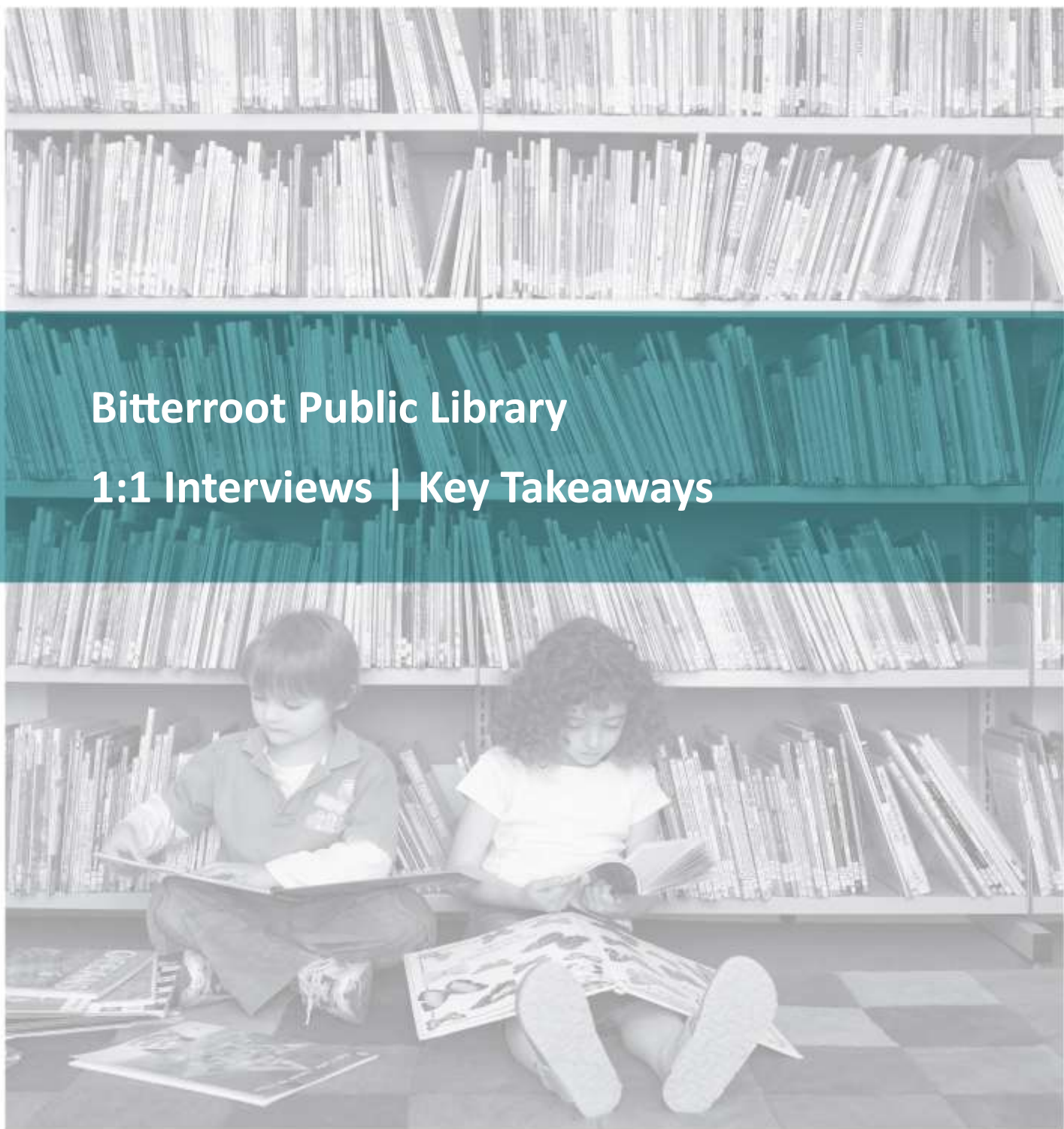
Millen, Mary

Mitchell, Jodi

LIBRARY STRATEGIES

Bitterroot Public Library

1:1 Interviews | Key Takeaways



What is your opinion of library services within the community? Tell us if/how you think BPL is important, as well as how you feel it performs.

- The library does a good job with the resources they have in place currently.
- It's hopeless to try to browse and pull from the collection. I only order through interlibrary loan these days.
- It's simply too small.
- The building needs updated heat/cooling, and there are cracks in the foundation.
- The flooring in the meeting room is terrible – dingy and dirty.
- Our library needs to be internally revitalized – paint, carpet, windows.
- BPL is vital to the community.
- I'm always amazed at the Hamilton community's support for the library.
- There's not enough books, spaces for meetings, or places to study.
- I think our library is warm and welcoming, but not everyone agrees.
- Our library is heavily used but it needs more dedicated space for children, teens, and adults as well.
- Community outreach is good.
- I suspect that library usage is heaviest among people who are in downtown Hamilton.
- For years, there didn't seem to be long-range city planning. Our new city planner (Matthew) is seeing to comp and downtown plans, which is great.
- BPL struggles with marketing: letting the community know what is happening, when, and what services they offer.
- Our library offers cutting-edge technology, such as hotspots, and has nice programming.
- BPL is important to the community as the last foothold of traditional media and access to literature.
- BPL staff are always keeping tabs on technology and providing different formats for the next generation of readers.
- Entryway is confusing, cluttered, and not signed well. There are also too many steps into the main level.
- BPL is an important resource to the community, but hampered by the lack of space for children's services, adult programming, technology, and collection size.
- Our library is the intellectual hub of the community (*said by an interviewee who self-reports rarely using the library*).

Does the library have adequate staff, space, collection, technology?

- Yes, it seems to have the resources it needs.
- Books may be an issue. I never browse the collection because it seems old/tired.
- Carnegie building has flaws. One example is the many steps into the front door, followed by more internal stairs! Ramp on the west side of the building is awkward, as well. More generally, size and noise are issues. The interior is dated and tired looking.
- The vacated fire station might be a solution, but the City keeps changing its mind on what will happen when the space is actually empty (in 1.5 to 2 years).

- Space is too small: only one meeting room, never enough parking, no study rooms appropriate for 1-2 people.
- Library needs to be updated. In particular, the meeting room is insufficient to the needs of the community.
- BPL is in a good location, including for afterhours use when people park outside to access the WiFi. During building hours, parking can be a huge issue.
- Population is aging and there is a need for more classes for that demographic. Access to the building is a problem for this group, too: ramp is difficult, front stairs are problematic (even under the best of circumstances) etc.
- Meeting room is “dreary” and needs a facelift.

How can the library expand community thinking around what a library is and can be?

- It’s terrific when staff can make any new service happen. However, BPL does not have the space to offer expanded services any longer.
- Staff would need more partnerships to expand services in any meaningful ways.
- BPL offers game balls (basketball, soccer) and games for checkout, but these are not well advertised so seem to be underutilized.
- O’Hara gardens (directly across the street) loans garden tools, seeds and provides gardening information. They have held classes in the library meeting room. They are a natural partner for these reasons.
- Many residents would be resistant to changes – even simply enhancements to the space – if there is a cost attached.
- What if the library offered not one but two locations? That would increase the area of effective service, so worth a consideration.
- It seems that any issue that comes along (homeless, mental health, senior access, etc.) has a small nonprofit following it. I don’t think the library needs to lead in these areas, though maybe support.
- If it goes ahead and incorporate any major changes to its service model, the library would need to reevaluate its mission statement and maybe adopt a new one.
- There’s not enough staff or space to offer more than what is currently part of the collection.
- There needs to be more community outreach to people in the Valley. That’s hampered by staff size.

Do you think the library serves all segments of the community? Does anything need to change?

- Many residents are not interested in traditional libraries.
- Bitterroot Public Library is not reaching certain clientele in outlying cities.
- Many people have more than one job. It’s hard to carve time to use the library, particularly during those hours when it’s actually open.
- It was hard for volunteers to let go of working at the welcome desk.
- Many in town care deeply about the library. However, not everyone does.
- Yes and no: I don’t have a precise answer but am certain that some areas are underserved.

- BPL is a living organism and serves the residents within the city well (but I have no idea about outside the immediate Hamilton area).
- What about a mobile van to serve seniors and outlying areas?
- Library programs are not attracting those who live off the land and/or lead a hands-on lifestyle (truck drivers, mechanical repairmen, etc.)
- The gazebo outside the library, which offers up free books, is visited daily.
- Offering used books for sale on the cart outside the local bookstore is effective, but in my opinion lacks the opportunity to advertise the Friends of the Library and library itself.
- No, they do not serve all in the community: some are underserved, while others do very well with the current model and priorities.

What would you recommend for changes within the library?

- Establish a electronic bulletin board for our community.
- Enhance the collection, making it more robust and relevant to patrons.
- Increase partnerships within the community (said x3 times)!
- Parking issues cannot be solved at the current location, but something really has to be done about that problem.
- Add an elevator and expand to the west if possible.
- Update and enhance meeting room aesthetics - walls, flooring, etc.
- Enhance and/or replace community room technology. Make it easier to use, too.
- Install barriers or padding to lessen noises from the children's area.
- Reevaluate rules for meeting room use. There seem to be too many.
- Be present at the farmers market and other community events (library table, pop-up book sales, and so on).
- Advertise services and utilize social media.
- Change or review business model to reflect usage patterns by 30-40- year olds.
- Library growth needs to be thoughtful and deliberate.
- Offer more than one program a day, and provide them at various times of day (ex., late afternoon story times).

Do you have other comments about the library?

- Many people in this area are just not interested in traditional library services and cannot be made to be.
- BPL needs to balance its limited resources with "outside the box" thinking. That's the central question.
- Partnerships are everywhere in this community. BPL needs to tap into this and explore new partnership opportunities.
- I think we need to look at an alternate or second location for the library.
- Demographics are changing. More people are moving in with more money (ex., Stock Farm Club). I don't know what this means for library service, but it's important to the area.
- Parking is not just the library's challenge, and the City needs to tackle it in a holistic way.

- If the library encroaches into its green space with an expansion, it would require moving the water ditch and gazebo. It might require adding a second floor. Is this affordable?
- What if any legal issues are associated with moving the library from its present site, if the City ever wanted to do so?
- It is difficult to know what to expect from the local City Council. They seem to switch between wanting to hold onto public property and being more interested in selling it. It's impossible right now to know what's going on with the Fire Hall.
- It's possible the City would only allow the Library a small footprint within the Fire Station. Would that be enough? It doesn't seem so.
- BPL is fortunate to have Mark as a leader. He has good ideas, management skills, and always remains calm.
- There would be an instant community uproar if the library tried to move from its current site.
- It is hard to guess how voters will act toward a referendum.
- City of Hamilton now has downtown and community plans in place. This was a long time coming.
- There are many residents in Hamilton who want to do good things. If a problem occurs, often a small nonprofit appears to address that need.
- Hamilton is a very walkable downtown and community.
- Friends of the Library and Library Foundation are strong library supporters.
- Library could be a resource for businesses and job searching, but right now there's not enough room or a budget for those more specialty resources.
- What about drop off locations in Victor and Corvallis?
- Over the next few years there will be a lot of public buildings opening up: school, fire station, and maybe more. Hopefully one will be a good fit for a library.
- The vacant K-Mart could be repurposed as a joint library and community center.
- City has contracted with outside firms for an environmental and architectural report on the firehouse itself.
- I think the library should partner with the history center and others on a children's museum for the Hamilton area.
- Any way it's done, increasing the size of the library needs to be a thoughtful and deliberate process. Do not rush in.



**Contact: David Katz, MLIS
Assistant Director of Programs & Services
Library Strategies Consulting Group**

**david@thefriends.org
651-366-6492**

librarystrategiesconsulting.org