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LEO: Shining Bright on Communities

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Like libraries everywhere, Libraries of Eastern Oregon (LEO) seeks to enhance civic engagement, social capital and the personal development of individuals—recognizing the benefits to society of a well-informed citizenry and the worth of each person regardless of socio-economic factors.

LEO walks a fine balance between helping remote, rural libraries maintain traditional, internal services and values that are reflective of the communities they serve—while at the same time convening connection with distant partners who help build community with unprecedented offerings, delivery and promise.

Maintaining this balance requires rural library staff to have passion for community outreach, a willingness to explore new means of service delivery, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a deep respect for the patrons and places they serve.

By embracing these ideals, public libraries in Eastern Oregon meet this year's OLA presidential theme of "Finding Community" to a degree that now serves as a model for remote, rural places elsewhere. As LEO and the region's libraries look ahead, successes to date lay a clear path to a most exciting future.

LEO emerged following two years of informal meetings among public librarians. The State Library provided funding for three years for an in-depth study to explore various governance options for a 10-county library district, and also provided funding for a 500-household survey. About the same time that initial State Library funding became available, the working committee organized formally in order to secure foundation grants for enhanced library services. LEO was recognized by the IRS as a nonprofit in December 2000.

While there was insufficient public support for the 10-county district, survey

results indicated that residents value their libraries tremendously. Rather than disband after the study, board members opted to continue working together. Grants had been obtained for extended hours at several of the smallest libraries, Books for Babies programs, and other collaborative projects.

"We just didn't want to go back to working largely in isolation," remembers Jolyn Wynn, Harney County library director. "We valued networking and getting together. It's been great to collaborate on projects and stay informed as to what other libraries in the area are doing. LEO is important to all of us."

LEO's mission is "To create and deliver opportunities for 21st century public library services in Eastern Oregon." Today LEO represents 47 public libraries in 14 counties—Baker, Crook, Gilliam, Grant, Harney, Jefferson, Lake, Malheur, Morrow, Sherman, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa and Wheeler—and is reportedly the geographically-largest library consortium in the continental U.S., covering an area of 54,680 square miles or more than half the land mass of Oregon.

Nearly the entire LEO territory is impoverished with many parts of the region having among the lowest per capita income in the nation. The region's public libraries continue to lag behind others in more populated areas with several operating annually at less than \$15 per capita, or less than the cost of one hardcover book. Only a very few have funding for adult programming in their annual budgets. Funding for libraries is severely impacted by persistent poverty, vast distances between communities and sparse population.

After the governance study, LEO staff continued on in a volunteer capacity for several months. A strategic vision was developed—



“Lighting Up the Libraries.” Lighting Up called for rural public libraries to become revitalized as essential 21st century learning centers and was adopted by former Gov. Kitzhaber as the sixth highest priority sustainability project under the Oregon Solutions program.

Subsequently, the Oregon Legislature provided funding for a comprehensive, on-site assessment of all LEO libraries. LEO also obtained grants for region wide heritage and technology assessments. Needs identified in the assessments continue to guide LEO’s efforts. Adult programming was cited as one of the highest needs by nearly all of the libraries.

When the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) approached LEO regarding interest in jointly submitting a federal funding request to bring science programs to the region through public libraries and schools, the answer was a resounding yes.



Our partnership with LEO will allow library patrons to have the unique opportunity to examine objects first-hand, question, discourse or chat with scholars or each other, and then place those experiences in a national context through a distance learning visit to our collection.

— SUSAN NICHOLS,
LUNDER EDUCATION CHAIR,
SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

While LEO valued the partnership and programs OMSI could bring, OMSI valued working with rural libraries as the heart of the many remote communities where the metropolitan museum had not yet had a presence. “Our relationship with LEO has surpassed all of our expectations,” said Dr. Marilyn Johnson, OMSI director of research and development. “We’ve been able to bring programs to the furthest corners of Oregon. LEO managed all of the logistics and all we had to do in each instance was simply to show up.”

Thanks to the support of the entire Oregon federal delegation, over the past three years the LEO-OMSI partnership received \$1.9 million in funding through a special NASA education account. Another \$1.9 million request is pending.

LEO and OMSI named their partnership STARS—Science, Technology and Rural Students. The STARS program serves students and lifelong learners of all ages. To date 246 teachers and librarians have participated in professional development workshops; 600+ Eastern Oregon students have had overnight camp-ins at OMSI; telescopes and global positioning units have been provided to all LEO libraries for patron check-out; OMSI’s portable planetarium has been brought to 42 LEO communities; and portable OMSI exhibits have been developed for LEO libraries.

Additionally, LEO has used STARS funding to bring programs (and \$15,000 worth of meteorites) from Portland State University’s Cascadia Meteorite Laboratory throughout the region. LEO contracted with Bob Duke, astronomy columnist for the Oregonian to bring his stargazing program to nearly all of the LEO libraries. While STARS also provided funding for eight videoconferencing units, LEO obtained another federal grant for 13 more units.



In 2006 several STARS components were adopted as official NASA national education policy. NASA also provided funds to bring the meteorite program to rural communities statewide. LEO is facilitating that effort and is working with OMSI to expand STARS to other parts of Oregon and the Northwest.

Participation at STARS programs in the LEO region has been overwhelming. A stargazing program held outdoors on an icy evening in January 2007 at Ione (pop. 330) brought out 74 residents. Meteorite programs at Arlington (pop. 524) attracted 56 attendees, at Fossil (pop. 370) 58 persons, and at Madras (pop. 5,078) 104 persons. A March 2007 videoconference program on paleontology broadcast from OMSI to five rural libraries attracted more than 200 persons.

“Our normal attendance at an event is now between 50 to 100 people,” said Marie Baldo, director of the Hermiston Public Library. “Our patrons are amazed and appreciative of the quality programming that has become available in their own small city.”

Last year LEO launched a partnership with the Oregon Council for the Humanities (OCH) to bring Chautauqua programs to libraries across the region. The program has been extremely well received. LEO provides lodging for program presenters and libraries agree to host a Chautauqua on their own the following year. OCH recently assisted LEO in bringing one of its On Principle programs to several LEO libraries.

A mention of LEO successes on National Public Radio early last year caught the attention of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM). LEO staff met with SAAM officials in Washington, D.C. while there to encourage continued Congressional funding for the STARS program.

SAAM’s director of education and

distance learning manager toured the LEO region last fall and visited several libraries over 860 miles and six days. Launched in May ’07, SAAM videoconference programs were developed specifically for LEO communities and broadcast to one library at a time for increased interaction between rural residents and museum staff. The Smithsonian art museum has not previously collaborated with rural libraries and considers the partnership as a national model.

“I think LEO is considered as hope and opportunity,” said Crook County library director Rick Chrisinger. “So many things have happened that wouldn’t have happened if we were still on our own. LEO is meaningful and has become one of the most positive things in my life.”

Each year LEO offers professional development workshops in library services and continues to write grants to serve the region’s libraries—such as the recent “Folk Art at the Libraries” project through the Oregon Arts Commission and ArtsEast, and free family museum passes for patron check-out. Initiatives for 2007 include early literacy, continued professional development and increased civic engagement by LEO.

Last year LEO updated its strategic plan. The Ford Institute provided technical assistance funding for every board member to participate in intense fund development training from the Portland-based TACS. This year the Oregon Community Foundation is providing technical assistance in helping LEO to establish an endowment fund that will help sustain library programs in the region for the long term.

“If someone had done this for the libraries of Eastern Oregon at, say, the end of World War II, the libraries wouldn’t be lacking in funds for programs today,” said Dick Pugh, scientist and founder of an endowment fund for PSU meteorite lab.



To bring its partners together, in early 2007 LEO developed “A Sense of Place” as an educational platform for program delivery. Grants are pending. The themed approach appeals to lifelong learners and diverse interests throughout the region. SAAM is developing programs that connect art and place and in April convened a round table of nationally known artists, distributed as a live Webcast, to discuss what “sense of place” means to them. OMSI programs will focus on our place in the cosmos; OCH will assist with presenters to discuss place from a humanities point of view. PSU, other program providers and area museums will be involved.

“A Sense of Place’ will provide valuable opportunities for Oregonians to engage in critical thinking and deep conversations that are necessary in the 21st century,” said OCH program director Carol Hickman. “It’s a stellar roster of partners and OCH is proud to be among them.”

Over the past four years, nearly one third of LEO libraries has undertaken architectural studies or has implemented facility expansion, renovation or construction. The region’s librarians continually think outside the box and are leaders in innovation. Examples: The Oregon Trail Library District’s non-mobile bookmobile placed at Irrigon while fund raising is underway to establish a branch library, and the renowned Western History Room at the Harney County Library, which attracts writers and researchers from across the West.

At Athena, with grant resources provided by LEO a handful of citizens raised \$900,000 in just a few months for their new library. Baker County Library District continues to serve as a regional leader and recently opened its espresso shop. Outreach services via eye-catching vans for seniors and preschoolers by the Hermiston Pub-

lic Library and Wallowa County Library, respectively, are exemplary. The Umatilla County Special Library District’s Up and Away early literacy program has already triggered increased skills in reading. Several LEO libraries have formed partnerships with local museums for archival preservation.

These library and LEO efforts have helped build community at home by presenting offerings that reach across a previously underserved population. Community is strengthened, too, by outside partners who enhance library services and who value the region’s libraries for the important role they play in connecting persons and society. Through the public library, rural residents come together for civic engagement and shared lifelong learning experiences.

“LEO’s mission goes far beyond supporting libraries: it is to provide expanded horizons for individuals in our region,” said Jo Cowling, La Grande library director and LEO chair. “More than making the libraries themselves relevant, LEO’s work reminds our citizens that education, entertainment and communal gathering are vital to livability in all communities.”

LEO meets monthly. Its board of directors includes Jo Cowling, La Grande Public Library; Aletha Bonebrake, retired librarian from Baker County; Jolyn Wynn, Harney County Library; Ken Reading, Umatilla County Special Library District; Marie Baldo, Hermiston Public Library; Marsha Richmond, Oregon Trail Library District; Rick Chrisinger, Crook County Library; Pam Hankins, library director for Grant, Gillingham, Wheeler and Sherman County school districts; Megan Brandsma, Grant County Children’s Services and Referral; and Sondra Lino, Greater Eastern Oregon Development Corporation. For further information: www.librariesofeasternoregon.org 

