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Jeremy Skinner  
*Curry Public Library*

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# Community Needs-Based Planning for Rural Library Success

**by Jeremy Skinner**  
Library Director  
Curry Public Library  
[jeremy@cplib.net](mailto:jeremy@cplib.net)



JEREMY SKINNER

Jeremy has been the Library Director for Curry Public Library since 2014. Previously, he worked as a special collections librarian and archivist at Lewis and Clark College. In addition to his work as a librarian, Jeremy is a historian who has written about the history of books, publishing, and literature. His area of focus is Oregon's literary history. Jeremy serves on the boards of a number of non-profits that support education and development in rural Oregon. Contact Jeremy at 541-247-3452 or at [jeremy@cplib.net](mailto:jeremy@cplib.net).

I am a librarian from rural southern Oregon, and my community is a stereotype. NPR correspondent Jeff Brady visited our town during the summer of 2017 for a story highlighting rural communities in decline (Brady, 2017). We were a convenient case study. Our natural resource industry has been dying a slow and loud death for decades, our voters have notoriously voted down numerous tax levies, and Jeff Brady just happened to grow up here. Brady being a national business correspondent from Philadelphia, we were the perfect stereotype for a piece that closed with his grim statement: "Overall, the economic prospects for my hometown of Gold Beach, Oregon, look dim. Fortunately there's always the beautiful beach, the river, and the forests to console those who still live here." Despite the inevitable feeling of this conclusion, Brady could have asked much different questions and listened to different voices that would have resulted in a story about much more than malaise. In fact, when presented with innovative changes taking place, Brady commented to our library staff that a storyline of innovative change in its early stages would not help NPR make the point their audience wanted to hear.

I start with this story because librarians are extremely susceptible to the very mistake made by this NPR correspondent. We see what we want to see, and the decisions that follow (particularly in small rural communities) are more often than not rejected by the community because they do not truly address immediate needs. As for that Southern Oregon stereotype, our voters certainly fit the stereotype of being skeptical of paying taxes, but few taxpayers I have encountered are unwilling to pay taxes when the government entity in question has proven to be successful in addressing what they perceive as community needs. Working with this model, I believe Gold Beach is in the early phases of a renaissance rooted in the library's community needs-based planning. Here is our story.



When I began working as the library director for the Curry Public Library in Gold Beach in 2014, I maintained an open-ended agenda for the library. I had worked in places where administrators had come in with a fully-articulated vision and taken decisive actions that ultimately fell flat. My single goal was to spend as much time as possible listening to and learning from the library staff and the community. This strategy was a part of a concerted effort to ensure that our constituents would be heard and that our library services would be relevant.

For a little perspective about the experiences that have shaped my methods, my life has straddled the rural/urban divide, primarily in Oregon with short stints in Montana and Washington, DC. I spent my entire childhood in rural southern Oregon and the twenty years of my adult life in Portland. I knew from my own experiences that prescriptive solutions to problems lifted from either of these environments rarely work. In particular, I knew that understanding how to build a thriving library in a community naturally skeptical of tax-funded programs would require extensive conversations with the community, and definitely not a canned solution delivered by me via Portland. Nearly four years later, this approach has moved the library in some surprising directions and paid significant dividends for the 5,000 people located in the library district of Gold Beach and the surrounding area.

The inquiry process began with our library staff. I asked them what the library did well, and what it could improve upon. I began providing them with regular updates on library finances and invited them to attend library board meetings (something they had been discouraged from doing in the past). I also invited them to offer proposals for projects to be funded during upcoming budget cycles. This basic level of transparency, communication, and engagement resulted in newfound energy for the staff and a steady stream of new ideas.

Gathering information from the public was a much more time-intensive and complicated process. The first step for me was community service. I began volunteering for non-profit organizations, school-related planning committees, and service organizations. I also participated in a regional cohort of the Ford Institute Leadership Program funded by The Ford Family Foundation, which helped me develop tangible new leadership skills and a close circle of trusted community leaders who have continued to provide me with input and support.

Following a year of building a network of relationships with community leaders and gathering information from library staff, I began a more formal process of gathering input on library services from the community. This process included written and online surveys, community stakeholder meetings, discussions with the Friends of the Library leadership, and eventually strategic planning discussions with the library Board of Directors.

All of this information gathering and planning took time, but I was amazed at the change in energy that began to occur without making any substantive changes to our services at the library. Interactions with our staff took on a different tone as patrons began to internalize the fact that we were listening to their ideas about the library. Government officials and school administrators began to talk about us with cautious respect because they knew we were attempting to tackle problems they cared about from an angle they did not have tools to address. Again, we had not made any substantive changes to the services we were providing, but by asking questions and listening, the relationship began to change.

The plan that emerged from this period of inquiry focused on more closely aligning library services to community needs and included some extremely basic things that would not be seen as particularly innovative by any librarian under 100 years old. Things like public meeting spaces, more programs for children and adults, and greater access to computer equipment and software featured prominently in our plan. Some of these basic needs,



however, took a distinctive local shape. For example, after meeting with local musicians, we learned that none of the restaurants in our community were licensed to provide live music, meaning that if the library could provide an acoustically sound performance space, local musicians would suddenly have new opportunities for public exposure. After talking to our city officials, we discovered that there was a strong need for spaces with current technological amenities that could be used for small professional conferences during the tourist off-season, which would bolster hotel and restaurant revenue.

What was noteworthy about our plan was the need for additional facility space. Ultimately, our strategic plan hinged on our goal of adding 6,200 square feet of meeting and program spaces that would allow the library to provide 1) an instructional technology/maker space, 2) a space for arts and cultural programming, 3) additional space for youth and family programs, and 4) spaces for community groups to meet and work.

The crucial need for space required extensive fundraising, which was a challenging proposition in a community with one of the highest unemployment rates in the state, and few large corporate donors. Ultimately, our careful planning and engagement with the community paved the way to a quick 1.5-year fundraising effort that resulted in approximately two million dollars (without a tax levy) to fund our library expansion. Without going into great detail about the effort, I think it is worth noting that our success, particularly with large foundations, was grounded in documenting community needs and providing a progressive vision for the library filling community needs.


Today we are in the midst of construction of what we are calling our new learning center space, which we expect to open in August 2018. We are also in the early stages of program development for our new space. A few of these programs are on the innovative side and push against the general public perception of the role of libraries in a way that the community has generally found surprising, useful, and worthy of support.

One of the most interesting of these programs is our partnership to provide career readiness services at the library with the Southwest Oregon Workforce Investment Board (SOWIB). One prominent area of need identified during our community outreach was the need for expanded career readiness education, counseling, and support. Twenty-six percent of 16 to 24-year-olds in Curry County are classified by the state of Oregon as opportunity youth, meaning they are either unemployed or not in school. Our local schools and state WorkSource centers have struggled to meet the needs of this group. In discussing this problem with SOWIB, we came to the conclusion that the library might be an effective vehicle for delivering these services. The library does not have the same stigma as the schools and employment centers, and we also have a staff that has forged strong relationships with youth in our community through successful school outreach programs and summer reading programs.

Together, the library and SOWIB created a pilot program featuring a part-time career navigator at the library, funded through a “Youth and You” grant from the State of Oregon. The career navigator began work in August 2017 providing services to opportunity youth including career counseling, help with job applications, interview skills, soft skills development, and basic computer skills. The grant also provides support for GED preparation and other forms of training. To date, we have seen steady success in connecting with opportunity youth and placing them in situations that have led to work or will eventually. This is a new avenue for our work at the library, but I can already see how our new space will enhance this work and help the library meet the ultimate goal of being an indispensable hub of self-paced learning, discovery, and discourse.



Another program in its embryonic phase is the creation of a series of robust early childhood learning and development programs. At this point in time we are building partnerships with other service providers and funders to provide parenting programs, kindergarten readiness programs, access to social workers through the library, and fully developed resources and staffing for Spanish-speaking community members. For us, these programs are an ambitious expansion of the scope of the library's work in response to conversations with community members that take on responsibilities that have traditionally resided with schools and social service agencies.

There are many additional examples in this vein of library work informed by community needs, but the reality is that the details of these programs really do not matter. It is the method outlined above that is important, and if followed, I would expect it to result in a huge variation of programs from library to library. There is one important takeaway from my experience in Gold Beach that I think is worth stating. Rural Oregon has a lot of potential for enterprising and thoughtful librarians, but I am pretty sure we are not perceived this way. I fear that the librarians and the Oregon populace as a whole have placed a burden of blame on our rural residents for a lot of problems, including the struggles of rural libraries. I think the bulk of the blame with respect to libraries should be shouldered by our librarians. We failed to listen to needs and solve problems. It is a simple albeit time-consuming process that leads to vital libraries. Listen and act. 

### References

Brady, J. (2017). As log trucks and fishing boats leave, Gold Beach tries to remake its identity. *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/y942evut>

