

## **Better Together: Developing A Long-Term Plan for Statewide Public Library Consolidation**

Responding to the need to consider alternative strategies for coping with the current economic downturn and its ramifications, the Karla Harry Commission established a committee to develop a long-term plan to consolidate statewide funding and administration of library services. In November, the committee convened several focus groups around the state seeking input on what libraries could do better together. Sessions were scheduled at the Cumberland, Jamestown and East Providence Public Libraries and directors from around the state were invited. 33 library directors representing 31 libraries participated in the sessions along with representatives from Ocean State Libraries and the Office of Library and Information Services (OLIS).

During the focus group session, the committee explained its deliberations to date and provided a frank assessment of the future of state aid to libraries. With the backdrop of an economic recession, a state budget deficit of more than \$350 million for the current fiscal year and a projected deficit of over \$400 million in fiscal year 2010, and diminished resources available to local and state government, the committee established the premise that libraries should not expect continued state funding in accordance with the 25% formula. Moreover, libraries should expect municipalities to consider the state grant-in-aid's Maintenance of Effort requirement to be an unfunded mandate. The focus groups were convened to gather ideas, opinions, and general input about ways that the library community could work together to consolidate services to achieve savings while providing the best possible library service to the people of Rhode Island. In addition to gathering ideas, attendees were also asked to help identify obstacles and possible solutions so as to move toward the benefits that consolidation could bring.

Following is a summary of the questions and answers from these focus groups.

### **1. Describe the end products that could be achieved through consolidation.**

There were lively discussions in all sessions as to whether consolidation was the solution to the problem. Libraries are already in the forefront of cooperation and collaboration. Examples include the many cooperative services provided by the public library consortium, Ocean State Libraries (OSL). Other examples include statewide delivery, provided by OLIS, statewide databases provided by AskRI through the grant for the Statewide Reference Resource Center at Providence Public Library, and the collaborative Summer Reading Program coordinated by OLIS.

While the library community has made great strides in collaborative services and is, as several attendees pointed out, the role model for cooperative services in the state, there are still possibilities for improving collaboration and consolidating services. Possible end products of consolidation include:

- A. Benefits for staff and staffing
  - Salary and benefit equalization

- Group buying of benefits via pool
  - Consistent and equitable levels of service
  - Shared staff and expertise, e.g. share webmaster/technology staff
  - Pool of subs to work in libraries/substitute staffing
  - Staff training
- B. Benefits for the public
- More electronic services
  - Statewide databases
  - Good customer service and well-trained staff
  - Consistent hours
  - Consistency of experience with websites (similar navigation)
  - Expanded depth and scope of collections with better access to special collections
  - Serve underserved populations that can't get to library
  - Community involvement and connections with community
- C. Benefits for library administration
- Cost effective spending
  - Coordination of technology and web sites
  - Shared technology/resources person or more at OSL
  - Savings in administrative and salaries
  - State pays for OSL
  - Cooperative buying
  - Cooperative buying of multiple copies on best sellers
- D. Benefits for libraries
- Rewrite/define Minimum Standards/core services for libraries
  - Better PR and marketing
  - Funding of OSL
  - Cooperative cataloging and processing (standardized)
  - Maintain rich collections

The concept of consolidation, however, was met with a healthy dose of skepticism and concern in all sessions. Attendees questioned whether consolidation was the only way to sustain state funding for public libraries. It was suggested by more than a few attendees in all sessions that libraries should continue to collaborate and cooperate, but

that a statewide consolidation of libraries is not an acceptable solution. Many expressed concern that a single public library system for the state was not an achievable or a desirable goal. The ability of the state to financially support and administer such a system was called into question. In addition, there was overwhelming concern that libraries should not lose their uniqueness, with librarians expressing their fear that libraries in the state might become “McLibraries.” Many spoke of the personalized service provided by libraries and a concern that a one state system would result in libraries losing the connection with their local community. Some expressed concern about the impact on collections and local specializations and the fear that centralized purchasing would not take local strengths into account. Along with those considerations came the concern that the library support that derives from local pride would diminish, and with it, state support for a consolidated library. Finally, there were questions as to whether a one state system would enforce certain practices and would not be sensitive to the unique needs of local communities.

Other questions swirled around the consolidation proposal. Attendees questioned where savings would be achieved, and suggested that there may be no savings for municipalities or the state. The ability of the state to fund such a plan seems unlikely in the present economic climate, with attendees pointing to current reductions in state funding to social services as evidence of a state unable to fund even the current level of service. The role of local library endowments and fundraising from friends groups was also a concern. Overall, attendees urged the committee to focus on cooperation, and let libraries continue to lead the way in cooperation and resource sharing while looking for opportunities to partner with other organizations with similar missions.

## **2. Outline intermediate steps or joint ventures that could be undertaken in the next couple of years.**

There are many possibilities for cooperation that can be implicated now or in the near future, including:

- Purchasing
  - Cooperative buying of library supplies (e.g. date due slips, printer supplies)
  - Statewide subscription to magazines
  - Negotiate with vendors for statewide contracts (e.g. Baker & Taylor)
  - Cooperative contracts for book jobbers
  - Mechanism to replace aging computer equipment (in lieu of Champlin)
  - OSL purchase of products/negotiating license agreements
  - Regional agreements for purchasing of resources (via NELINET?)
  - Fund delivery service (state funding of delivery will free up some federal funds)
  - Health insurance

- Programs
  - Movie licenses
  - Museum passes
  - Cooperative statewide programming
    - adult programming (speakers, concerts, educational, computer, literacy, etc.)
    - programs to serve the underserved, including people with disabilities, non-English speakers
    - programs to serve the independent learner
- Staffing
  - Shared technology coordinator (share skills, salary)
  - Technology support
  - Technical expertise - including establishing staff competencies e.g. Web 2.0 initiatives
- Processes
  - Centralized cataloging and processing (from jobber?)  
 Concern: LC or Dewey or . . . ?  
 Concern: Speed of getting books on shelf  
 Concern: Fate of localized cataloging for specialized collections  
 Pro: consistent experience in all libraries
  - What can be added to OSL? State funding of OSL
  - Consistent design of web sites
  - Web design and development - develop one universal website for public libraries in RI
- Miscellaneous
  - Undertake study regarding benefits of consolidation
  - Regional coordination of hours (stagger times closed such that times when one library is closed, a neighboring library could be open)
  - Charge patrons for services such as OCLC fees
  - National Grid will do energy audits to help save energy costs

It was agreed that as libraries move towards consolidation cost savings may not be immediately apparent. However, it was also generally agreed that the survival of the system as a whole is at stake. It was suggested that it might be necessary to develop an organization without history to manage future collaborative and cooperative efforts. Rhode Island libraries have a rich administrative heritage which might impede progress and there were questions as to whether any existing organization will have the

resources to undertake the initiatives proposed.

### 3. Identify the obstacles to consolidation.

Many obstacles to consolidation were identified, in addition to a discussion of what libraries are afraid of losing. The two topics interweave through the list of obstacles.

- General
  - History (pros and cons)
  - Money is just being switched from local control, no real change or savings to be achieved by consolidating administration
  - History of state devaluing services provided by libraries
  - Reputation of state (negative) for running systems
  - Governance
- People
  - Friends groups
  - Librarians and staff
  - Trustees
  - Public - loss of identity for community
- Local
  - Losing quality services provided by local libraries
  - Losing local flavor and community connections - homogenized service
    - Libraries like connection to local government
    - Community feels ownership of libraries
    - Library as draw to community
  - Trustees ceding control to other entities - loss of local control
  - Loss of local boards = giving up local funding/local support (funding and political)
  - Loss of autonomy and ownership of institution
  - Reluctance of municipalities/boards to give up local control
  - Ownership of facilities
  - Building maintenance
  - Governance
- Funding
  - Endowments (loss of endowment funding?)

- Loss of local investment (funding, political, involvement) in libraries
- Diversity of funding that currently exists would be lost
- Fear of population-based system (per capita funding)
- Non-government funding - how will it be handled?
- How will fines be handled?
- Will there still be a non-profit organization for donations?
- Administrative
  - Loss of jobs (via attrition?)
  - Control of local collection development
  - What are benefits for private libraries? How would the mechanics work?
  - Loss of input by local libraries
  - Unequal representation for smaller communities
  - Unions

#### **4. Consideration of solutions to the obstacles.**

- General
  - Define basic level of library service statewide
  - OSL: expand on existing; state funding of OSL
  - Leverage history of cooperation
  - Develop short term and long term solutions
  - Make consolidation more palatable
  - Promote value of libraries
  - Better PR and Marketing on services of libraries
  - Undertake study of consolidation before developing plan (seek grant funding)
  - Time
- People
  - Morph trustees into advisory boards
  - Staff training
- Local
  - Create agreements with private not-for-profit organizations, municipalities to enable communities to retain local flavor
- Funding
  - Develop hybrid solutions that combine local and state funding
  - Creative solutions to funding issues

- Modify MOE law based on analysis of funding  
Establish a percentage of local budget that must be allocated for library services; develop GIA funding formula based on percentage of municipal budget
- Preserve MOE for short-term
- Administrative
  - Local collections maintained but consolidate preservation and cataloging
  - Increase OSL services, with funding via State

## 5. Other concerns or issues needing to be addressed.

Throughout the sessions, various themes persisted. A predominant theme concerned the question of whether consolidation was the solution to sustain state aid to libraries. One librarian stated that she was not in favor of a one state system, but would work tirelessly towards more cooperation and collaboration. This sentiment was met with vocal agreement in the session, with librarians pointing out that many more things can be done collaboratively. It was stated that one consolidated system may not save any money, at least in the short term. As an example, the merge of the Bristol Warren School system has apparently not saved those communities any money.

There was some discussion of the structure of a one state system that was provided by the committee at the Directors' Meeting in October. There was concern about how the administrative structure of one director and five regional librarians would work, with the question of who would actually run individual libraries. There was concern that the information already put forward by the committee makes it appear that consolidation is a predetermined goal and that the committee has over-reached in its solution. (The committee assured attendees that the November input sessions would indeed influence the outcome.)

It was noted that the issue of state Grant in Aid (GIA) alone should not drive the plan. A librarian from a smaller system stated that the reduction of GIA impacts larger libraries more than small, which was met with agreement by other directors of smaller libraries. Librarians expressed a need to define what the true end goal was, and whether libraries should be talking about consolidation or cooperation. If consolidation is the goal, what is the incentive for the state to support a single library system in entirety?

Librarians cautioned the committee to further examine existing models and develop a cooperative response that would change how state money goes to support library services. The committee was encouraged to undertake a study of consolidation before developing plan, with the suggestion that a grant may be available to fund such a study. It was stated that a regional system has already been tried in RI and didn't work.

Attendees in all sessions suggested that there was a need to define a basic level of library service. While statewide standards exist, they do not provide a quantitative

measure of service. It was suggested that libraries need to do something to move in the direction of a standard level of service throughout the state. It was also suggested that there should be better PR and marketing of library services.

The committee laid out the following time line for the actions of the committee:

- Summary of focus groups distributed in December 2008
- Meet with appropriate government officials to present the findings of the committee and request that the existing MOE formula be maintained for 3 years while the plan is being developed
- Develop an approach to funding that will equalize funding among communities
- Schedule focus groups with trustees and other stakeholders
- FY2010: develop a consolidation model including a list of core services that will be paid for statewide (public input will be sought)
- FY2012: shift funding of core OSL services from individual libraries to the state (using grant-in-aid funds)
- Consolidate library services over the next ten years

## **Summary**

The focus groups presented a strong message that cooperation is better than consolidation. Librarians were unified in their and their patrons' concern over losing the unique character of their local library. While consolidation could have a very good impact on the profession, the overwhelming sentiment of those attending was that libraries should look for additional ways to cooperate and collaborate to achieve the goal of equal and quality library service throughout the state at an affordable cost to state and local governments.

*Summary compiled by the committee December 9, 2008.*

## **Better Together: Karla Harry Commission Subcommittee to Explore Public Library Funding**

Dan Austin, Providence	Karen Mellor, OLIS
Howard Boksenbaum, OLIS	Eileen Socha, East Providence
Fran Farrell-Bergeron, West Warwick	Kathryn Taylor, Westerly
David Macksam, Cranston	Dale Thompson, Providence
Laura Marlane, Central Falls	

## **Public Library Directors Attending Better Together Focus Groups**

Cheryl Abouelaziz, Tiverton	Carolyn Magnus, Portsmouth
Susan Aylward, No. Kingstown	Leslie McDonough, No. Scituate
Deborah Barchi, Barrington	Sandra Mundy, Burrillville
Judy Bell, Jamestown	Elsie Oltedale, West Greenwich
Carol Brouwer, No. Smithfield	Joan Prescott, Bristol
Kristen Chin, Foster	Patricia Redfearn, Warren
Paula DiBiase, Hope	Susan Reed, Pawtucket
Joan Gillespie, Ocean State Libraries	Carolyn Romelczyk, Pontiac
Diane Greenwald, Warwick	Regina Slezak, Newport
Mary Ellen Hardiman, No. Providence	Karen Taylor, East Greenwich
Jim Knowlton, Middletown	Lynn Thompson, Richmond
Chris LaRoux, Greenville	Ulla Virks, Charlestown
Shirley Long, So. Kingstown	Christine Warren, Narragansett

## **Focus Group Meetings**

Wednesday, November 5, 2008 Cumberland Public Library  
 Wednesday, November 12, 2008 Jamestown Philomenian Library  
 Wednesday, November 19, 2008 East Providence Public Library