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ABSTRACT OF PRIORITIES, PROCESS AND FINDINGS

In consulting widely among library leaders, staff, and patrons at all branches, the board of directors of Kanawha County Public Library found solid satisfaction with the recent renovation of Main Library and a desire to build out the success achieved at Main to all parts of the countywide library system.

The goal going forward will be to integrate all elements of the library system into one organic whole, functioning as an efficient unit to provide thorough and convenient library service throughout Kanawha County. Based on discussions, surveys, and analyses of the demographics of library patrons and the usage of materials and services throughout the library system, three main priorities were identified as essential to accomplishing this goal. These priorities commit Kanawha County Public Library to:

Priority I

Promptly plan and pursue the construction of an Eastern Kanawha County Regional Library to provide library access to the currently underserved eastern region of the county while serving as a model for other branches within the system.

Priority 2:

Undertake a professional study of the library needs of Kanawha County communities to determine the optimal footprint of our library system, as regards the number and location of branch libraries and other library assets, as a first step toward providing better library service and improved library facilities throughout the county.

Priority 3:

Continue to improve staff compensation on a priority basis as resources permit, making Library pay competitive with other local public sector jobs and with the best library systems within the state and region.

BACKGROUND

Mission and Vision

The Kanawha County Public Library's <u>vision statement</u> posits the Library "as the premier source of information in a community where learning and reading are respected and being well informed is valued."

With this vision giving direction, the Library's mission is to:

- provide free and equal access to information,
- provide citizens with job training and career development information that will prepare them for a competitive job market,
- enrich individual and family lives through satisfying educational, recreational, and cultural experiences,
- enable patrons to access new information technology,
- provide opportunities for lifelong learning,
- · serve as the center of community life,
- · use available resources efficiently, and
- seek additional resources.

Operating Environment

The Kanawha County Public Library finds itself at a historical milestone. After more than 25 years of planning and preparation, the renovation of the Main Library in downtown Charleston was completed in May 2022. The building project provided a marvelous new physical facility for Main Library patrons and a central hub for county branches while heralding technological and service advances that may now be introduced throughout the library system. Among the services pioneered at new Main are self-checkout stations, laptop lending kiosks, and RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) technologies for greater ease at the checkout desk. Each new service is meant to enhance the patron's experience while maintaining a high level of personal connection with library staff.

Even as we consolidate the landmark achievement in renovating the Main Library, our library system continues to face challenges. The aftereffects of Covid shutdowns and quarantine and reduced staffing over the last two years have impeded progress. As we move toward post-pandemic stability, the difficulty in hiring qualified personnel continues to hinder the restarting of some popular library services, including the bookmobile program. Our ability to serve the eastern part of the county is compromised by the deterioration of library facilities in that area.

In addition, today's unsettled politics threaten to spill over into public and school libraries. The Kanawha County Public Library's strong relationship with county educators is now being tested by challenges to library materials at the school level. Some schools are required to provide full catalog lists for parental review, and teachers and school administrators now sometimes shy away from previously routine programming, bookmobile visits, and traditional "Owl Bag" services (providing sets of teacher and student copies of class materials). Though such setbacks are discouraging, the Kanawha County Public Library has a history of rising to challenges. We will practice consistent messaging in support of the freedom to read, careful and thoughtful marketing, and continued staff training and professional development.

While acknowledging current challenges, we look optimistically to the future. The success of the Main Library building project has inspired the Library Foundation to turn its eye toward improving facilities in the eastern part of the county while providing preventive maintenance dollars throughout the system. Library administration and the board of directors are committed to making Kanawha County Public Library the best in the state and region. With a solid base of public support, the library system and its working members and volunteers are energized and passionate about providing quality service throughout the county.

Communities We Serve

Kanawha County Public Library serves the most populous county in West Virginia and the capital city of Charleston. Kanawha County has 176,000 people according to 2022 Census estimates. That number is slowly falling, as is true of the state as a whole. Population losses are occurring throughout most parts of the county, including the traditional population centers in Charleston and its western suburbs, with modest population growth in the south and in the Elk River section north of Charleston.

Kanawha County residents are 85 percent white. The median annual household income is \$51,000, about average for the state and less than three-fourths the national figure. Nearly 16 percent of Kanawha Countians live in poverty, 90 percent are high school graduates, and 27 percent have at least a four-year college degree. The population is ageing, with more than a fifth of county residents above 65 years old. The great majority of Kanawha County households have at least one computer and access to the Internet.

Kanawha is one of the biggest counties in its multi-state region, fourth biggest in West Virginia and bigger than any county in Kentucky or Ohio. It is more than twice the average geographic size of West Virginia counties, with residents scattered over more than 900 square miles of often rugged terrain. Kanawha County occupies a strategic location within Southern Appalachia, and together with the city of Charleston it constitutes an important economic, transportation, and medical-care hub for a large surrounding area.

Card Holder Data

The Kanawha County Public Library has card holders in many counties. The large majority (88.2%) are Kanawha Countians, with residents of Putnam County comprising the next largest group (3.5%). Other neighboring counties (Roane, Jackson, Clay, Fayette, and Boone) together account for a total of 8.3% of card holders, with a few card holders in other parts of West Virginia. Our outlying branches, particularly Clendenin, Riverside, and Sissonville, regularly serve patrons from neighboring counties.

In Kanawha County, most card holders live in Charleston, St. Albans, and South Charleston. While South Charleston has an independent public library, many of its users also have cards from Kanawha County Public Library. Patrons of St. Albans branch library, Dunbar branch library, Elkview branch library, and Nitro Public Library are the next largest groups of card holders.

Patrons 19-29 years old are the largest age cohort among library card holders, followed closely by those aged 30-39 and 40-49. Overall, we see a gradual shift toward older card holders in recent years, with those aged 30 and above now comprising more than 60 percent of the total; card holders aged 29 and under were previously most numerous. There was a sharp rise in digital downloading and streaming spurred by Covid. During that period, digital checkouts fluctuated between 50 percent and 60 percent of overall monthly circulation and have remained consistent post-pandemic.

The Kanawha County Public Library hosts approximately 43 Kanawha County schools as part of its data system, reciprocally sharing information as to holdings and library patronage. We offer special teacher cards for use by those working in schools, day care centers, and similar facilities, and to homeschool parents. The school system has 11,833 active users and maintains over 300,000 items for circulation within the shared database.

Online Survey Our Patrons Speak

In preparing this plan we retained ReThinking Libraries, a national consulting firm, to survey library patrons at all branches.

While a wide variety of comments and suggestions were offered, the 853 patrons responding to the online survey expressed broad satisfaction with the Kanawha County Public Library and the services provided. Pleasure with the recent renovation of Main Library was widespread, with many respondents stating that it is now time to turn similar attention to the branch libraries and by implication to the overall library system. While the greatest number of respondents reported using the Library for the traditional purpose of finding books and other physical materials, the survey's compilers also noted a high level of digital engagement.

Full survey results are available upon request.

Organizational Conversations Staff, Management, Library Board and Library Foundation Board Members Speak

Over the course of several listening sessions, the long-range planning committee heard from top Library administrators, senior staff, branch managers, board leadership, and Library Foundation leadership.

Among the main topics to surface in these conversations were widespread approval of recent pay increases and support for continued progress in that important area; concern that internal communications need to be improved; concern that more attention should be given to the branches and to the distribution of library services across the county; recruitment needs within the custodial and maintenance staff; and board development, including some support for term limits and the general idea that the board "should step back a little," as one board officer put it, from its traditional very hands-on approach. Again, there was general consensus that with the completion of the Main Library remodel, it is time to turn attention to the branches and to the functioning of the library system as a whole.

A detailed summary of these in-depth conversations with more than two dozen individuals is available upon request.

PRIORITIES IN DEPTH

Maximizing Main

The renovation of the Main Library has allowed us to venture into new service areas, including among others the coffee shop, tool library, and maker space, while providing many more public meeting rooms. Each new service will be analyzed as to cost effectiveness, to decide whether adjustments are advisable. Such adjustments may include expansion or reduction of the service in question, or its discontinuation in favor of more productive use of library resources. Greater attention will be given to programing, particularly adult programing, in support of the broader goal of making the Main Library more truly a community hub. All decisions will be calibrated toward making the most of the valuable new asset of renovated Main Library – figuratively "maximizing Main," as one board member put it.

The Main Library will also be maximized in a more literal sense, as a working model for the library system countywide, with services and new technologies pioneered at Main to be dispersed systemwide to the extent possible.

Geographic Distribution of Library Services

In addition to Main Library in downtown Charleston the Kanawha County Public Library operates eight branches, located at Clendenin, Cross Lanes, Dunbar, Elk Valley, Glasgow, Marmet, Riverside and St. Albans. These branch libraries vary widely in the adequacy of services provided. There is also a self-service library kiosk at Clendenin. Library services are dispensed through this variegated system; while most visitation occurs at Main Library, the branches collectively account for 60 percent of total circulation.

Library services are not evenly distributed throughout Kanawha County, with three major branches clustered within a few miles of each other in suburban communities west of Charleston. The western region is also served by a large independent library in South Charleston and by the Nitro Public Library, an independent library supported by Kanawha County Public Library, for a total of five libraries between Charleston and the Putnam County line. Additionally, the Sissonville branch occupies the northwestern corner of Kanawha County.

Conversely, the eastern end of Kanawha County is substantially underserved, having only small and inadequate branches at Marmet and Glasgow and a larger and better-equipped branch at Riverside High School. Riverside represents a special-case collaboration with Kanawha County Public Schools and largely serves the school community. The region served by these eastern branches has a population of nearly 30,000 people, a sizable fraction of the total county population.

While unfortunate, the current uneven distribution of library services offers an opportunity to model in eastern Kanawha County an ideal solution to the problem of providing equitable library services across our large county. We effectively have a blank slate in the east, and the modern library facility built there may serve as an example and template for improvements throughout the system. We will take this opportunity to envision the ideal public library system for Kanawha County, how many branches it should have, and where they should be located. The guiding goal is to maximize efficiency, make better use of staff and other resources, and realize the resulting savings, while providing better and more uniformly distributed library service countywide. Consideration of the imperfect geographic distribution of library services brings us to the first two priorities of this plan:

Priority 1 – Promptly plan and pursue the construction of an Eastern Kanawha County Regional Library to provide library access to the currently underserved eastern region of the county while serving as a model for other branches within the system.

Priority 2 – Undertake a professional study of the library needs of Kanawha County communities to determine the optimal footprint of our library system, as regards the number and location of branch libraries and other library assets, as a first step toward providing better library service and improved library facilities throughout the county.

To augment the more even distribution of library services, the new bookmobile should be deployed to serve outlying areas and consideration should be given to whether an additional new bookmobile may be needed. The success of the Clendenin library kiosk should be evaluated, with attention to whether additional self-service kiosks should be added to the system.

Organizational Development

The Kanawha County Public Library is governed by its board of directors. There are 18 board members, counting occasional vacancies. The board is ordinarily self-perpetuating, recruiting and electing new members as the need arises (with new members subject to approval by the Kanawha County Board of Education). Board members serve six-year terms, with no limits on the number of terms served.

Although no action is recommended at this time, library leaders should continue the conversation as to whether board term limits may be advisable. While the board will remain involved at every appropriate level, board committees will continue working toward a reduction in the number and frequency of meetings.

To improve familiarity with the overall library system, the board should meet regularly at branch libraries having the facilities to host board meetings, alternating as feasible between the Main Library and the branches.

Staff Development and Compensation

The Kanawha County Public Library has recently made good progress toward improving staff compensation, with a \$2 across-the-board hourly pay increase in FY22-23 and an additional \$2 increase in FY23-24. Consideration of the importance of adequately compensating Library employees brings us to the third priority of this plan:

Priority 3 – Continue to improve staff compensation on a priority basis as resources permit, making Library pay competitive with other local public sector jobs and with the best library systems within the state and region.

It is expected that improvements to compensation will be complemented by improvements in customer service and staff performance and the continued professionalization of staff. Library staff are encouraged to participate in professional organizations at the state and national level, attend meetings and travel to conferences, and subscribe to professional media. The library will support such participation financially, as resources permit.

Administrators and senior staff should actively circulate within library facilities during business hours, visibly present among patrons and staff. Frontline staff should regularly be trained in customer service to assure a welcoming, proactive reception of library visitors. Library administration should continue to work to improve communications within the staff and among the branches

Library as a Leader

The Kanawha County Public Library is the largest public library system in West Virginia and traditionally has exercised leadership within the statewide library community. The need for such leadership remains critical. Our library will take an active role in strengthening the West Virginia Library Association and in working independently and through the Association to represent the library community to political decision makers and to the public.

FIVE YEARS FORWARD

Five years forward, at the conclusion of this plan, Kanawha County Public Library will have capitalized on the downtown renovation by maximizing Main Library as a distributor of library services and as a vibrant community center for West Virginia's capital city. Substantial progress will have been made toward building an Eastern Regional library, and important steps will have been taken toward the equalization of library services throughout Kanawha County. Toward accomplishing the latter goal, a study will have been undertaken to determine the optimal footprint of Kanawha County Public Library as regards the optimal number and placement of branch or regional libraries to serve residents throughout the county.