Libraries of the Future:

Likely Roles and Implications for Facility Design

A White Paper Prepared for the Wichita City Council and
Board of Directors of the Wichita Public Library

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WICHITA PUBLIC LIBRARY
The Discovery Center
www.wichita.lib.ks.us

Libraries of the Future: Likely Roles and Implications for Facility Design

The institution of the Library can be traced back in history to at least the Roman Empire. The public library of today, however, is substantially different not only from those earliest libraries but also from those of only a decade ago. As information needs and interests of citizens change, so have public libraries: leading the evolution as often as reacting to it.

When use of the Internet became pervasive, some predicted the demise of the library. Instead, what happened was a transformation of service. Libraries adopted new roles as technology centers for their communities and incorporated the Internet as a tool for information access and service delivery. The result was dramatic: rather than becoming obsolete, libraries experienced a renewal of use and attention. Today, libraries offer virtual branches with digital collections and online services that deliver information in expanded, 24/7 ways. These branches are highly popular but have not been proven to significantly offset traditional in-building use. Indeed, according to data gathered by the Institute of Museums and Library Services, remote online visits to public libraries appear to stimulate in-person visits to physical libraries. (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2008)

 Today, information is available in more places and ways than ever before. Even so, Americans continue to rely on their libraries. Americans across all age groups report that the value of the library has increased during the recent recession. Since the economic downtown, 37% of Americans have increased use of the library. (OCLC, 2010)

Wichitans mirror these national use and support trends. Throughout the past decade, increases in Wichita Public Library use have been steady. Today, more than 40% of Wichita residents are library account holders. A 2010 citizen survey affirmed support for the Wichita Public Library: libraries were two of the five projects receiving community support for service enhancements. 89% of the citizens taking part in the survey expressed support for improving branch libraries and 87% supported building a larger downtown public library. (National Research Center, Inc., 2011) The survey suggests that library improvements are as important to citizens as adding additional fire stations, night bus service and more street maintenance.

Active Wichita Public Library Accounts
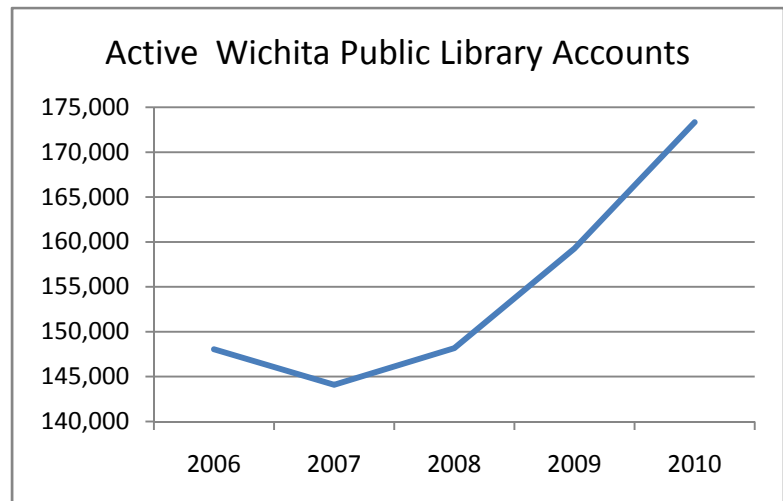
Now, another new "threat" to the public library is the source of considerable discussion: the emergence of the eBook. For people who think only of the public library as a book lending institution, the proliferation of eBooks might raise this concern. For those who are more familiar with the breadth and

scope of public library services offerings these days, however, the eBook is much more likely to be seen only as just another format offering in ever-changing library collections.

History provides an assurance that the institution of the public library will continue to play an important role in our information-based society. The ways in which information is delivered may change: the fact that much of it will continue to come from libraries will not.

The purpose of this white paper is to outline roles that public libraries are likely to play during the next ten to twenty years and to consider how Wichita can ensure that its library facilities are a benefit rather than a barrier to fulfillment of these changing roles and services.

<u>A mission of opportunity and self-discovery</u>

For many, public libraries are synonymous with the printed book. Indeed, books may still be the library's brand, but they are not the library's business. More than thirty years ago, the Wichita Public Library made that realization and began to describe itself as "The Discovery Center." That definition is as relevant today as it was then and it is just as likely to still be relevant thirty years from now. The core business of public libraries is and will remain creating opportunity: the opportunity to discover skills, interests and passions that will enrich the lives of citizens. At one time, books were the library's only tool. Today, the library's toolkit has expanded to include music, film, e-books and digital collections, computers and Internet access, meeting rooms and gallery spaces, programming and cafes.

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The Library of the future will have no fewer tools than are in use today. In all likelihood, there will be many more. Service mixes will continue to evolve as citizens' new interests and needs displace products and programs that outlive their usefulness. Flexibility will be the key, for spaces as well as for services.
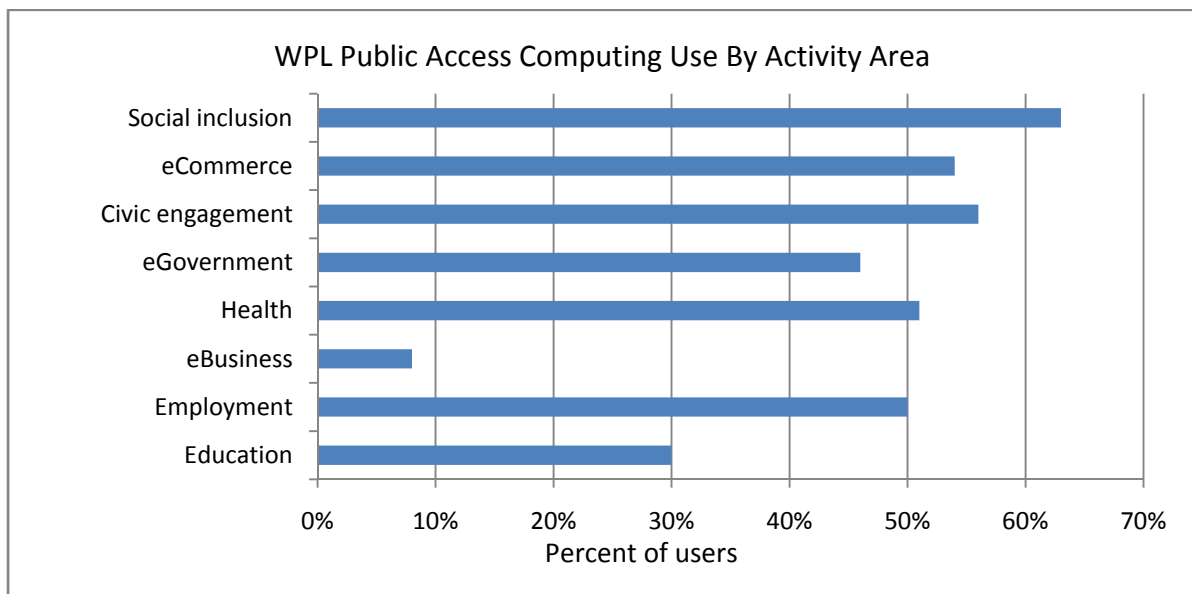
<u>Libraries as community technology centers</u>

One of the most core values of the public library is equitable access to information. For citizens without regular access to a computer or the Internet, public libraries are the agencies through which this access is most often obtained. Internet access is a core service offering and one of the most popular activities for library visitors.
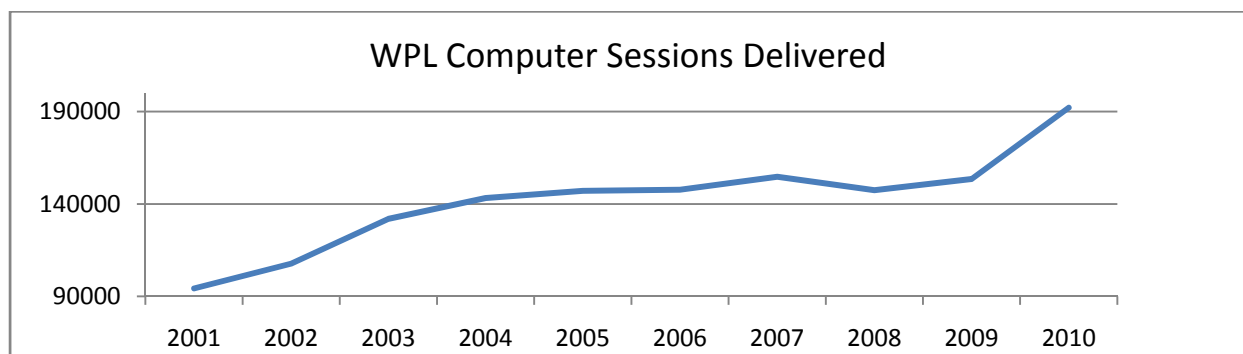
WPL Computer Sessions Delivered

Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits from Internet Access at U.S. Libraries reports that during 2009, 45 percent of the 169 million visitors to public libraries connected to the Internet using a library computer or wireless network during their visits, even though more than three quarters of these people had Internet access at home, work, or elsewhere. (Becker, Crandall, Fisher, Kinney, Landry, & Rocha, 2010)

The Wichita Public Library was part of that 2009 study as well as a 2011 follow-up research project conducted during October 2011. In the most recent survey, 40% of the Wichita respondents indicated that their only computer and Internet access was through the Library.

WPL Public Access Computing Use By Activity Area

Activity Area	Percent of users
Social inclusion	63%
eCommerce	54%
Civic engagement	56%
eGovernment	46%
Health	51%
eBusiness	8%
Employment	50%
Education	30%

Leading uses of the computer access were for social inclusion (63%), civic engagement (56%), eCommerce (54%), health or wellness purposes (51%), employment (50%), eGovernment (46%) and education (30%). In addition to the access itself, citizens benefit from help and training they receive from library staff. During the 12 months prior to the study, 40% of survey respondents reported having one-on-one technology help from library staff or volunteers while 9% attended computer-related training classes at the library. 70% of the respondents reported that public computing resources of the Library were important for themselves, personally but even more (88%) felt that the resources are important to have available for others in the community. (Impact Survey: Wichita Public Library Survey Results, October 2011)

Of note in the *Opportunity for All* report as well as the local survey is the variance of age, income levels and technology experience of the survey respondents. This is an indication of the unique position and role that public libraries can and will continue to play in the evolving digital landscape. Public libraries are and will remain the primary agencies bridging the digital divide between those with their own technology access and those without. Public libraries are and will remain places where citizens can stay up to date with current events when newspapers and broadcast media refer viewers and readers to web channels and online editions for full versions of news stories. Public libraries are and will remain places where job seekers come to prepare resumes, to search job ads and to complete online applications for

employment. Public libraries are and will remain places that help organize and make accessible government information, particularly the growing number of resources that are now or soon will be produced and available only in online digital versions. Public libraries are and will remain places that are gateways for citizens to interact with local, state and federal government agencies for things like filing for unemployment or social security, obtaining permits, responding to e-procurement solicitations, etc. And public libraries are and will remain leaders in offering training on emerging technologies and information resources.

Facility Implications: Few libraries built more than a decade ago anticipated the infrastructure needed to adequately fulfill this role. Even those built more recently may need significant facility modifications. Moving forward, electric and wiring needs of libraries will continue to increase. The infrastructure must be capable of accommodating changing technology. Circuits and outlets must be plentiful. Wire management systems must enable quick, low-cost reconfiguration as service patterns change. Additional dedicated circuits for computer and surge protection will be needed. Open spaces that facilitate delivery of wireless communications technologies will be beneficial. Buildings will need lighting that does not create glare on monitors and portable device screens. Areas for one-on-one and group training will be needed. Computer stations will need to grow in quantity and will become more diverse in purpose. In addition to catalog and public computing stations, more space will be needed for stations that provide for downloading of media and perhaps even for print on demand service for out of print books or born-digital materials.

<center>Libraries as literacy builders and champions for youth</center>

Numerous studies suggest that quality early learning experiences for children ages five and younger relate directly to school and employment success, stronger families and reduced crime. The National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families research is more specific: every $1 invested in early childhood education yields $7 in long-term social and economic benefits. (Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, National League of Cities).

One of the most traditional services of public libraries is its role in early childhood education and literacy development. At the Wichita Public Library, literature based programs begin with "Baby's First Storytime" programs for infants less than a year old. These programs, along with nursery rhyme times, toddle times and preschool story times for children between the ages of 1 and 6, are designed to help children obtain the skills that will help them be ready to learn and ready to read when they start school. Beginning in 2012, the Library has become part of a statewide library 6 by 6 initiative to create greater focus on this skill development.

Once children begin to read, the Library plays an important role helping students to sustain and improve that skill. The Library is particularly involved during school breaks. Research shows that children who do not read over a summer break lose six to eight weeks of what was learned during their previous school year. The result is cumulative: by fifth grade, students not reading during

Wichita Public Library
2011 Summer Reading Programs
Children Registered: 9,827
Books Read: 152,629

Teens Registered: 1,627
Hours Spent Reading: 28,926

summers were an average of two years behind their peers. (Urban Libraries Council, 2010) A Wichita Public Library study affirms this research. 90.5% of parents with children participating in the Library's summer reading program have indicated that their children were better prepared to enter or return to school as a result of their involvement in the summer reading program. (Center for Community Support and Research, 2006)

Library support for youth does not end at elementary school. Middle and high school students must also receive regular encouragement to read if they are to avoid becoming lapsed or reluctant readers. The Library's Teens Read and teen volunteer programs and its efforts to increase interaction with and involvement of the Mayor's Youth Council are only a few ways that the Library works to engage youth.

Facility Implications: To best serve children and families, library spaces for children will need to be colorful, welcoming spaces configured in ways that provide safe and secure environments. Locating children's areas away from building entrances yet in areas easily accessible will be important. Shelving and furniture will need to be sized for the different age groups, i.e. shelves, tables and chairs that become larger as they are intended for use by older children. In addition to zoning the spaces by age, zoning for noise will also be important. Programming spaces contained within children's areas will make it easier to supervise children and will prevent the activity from disrupting other library uses. Varying kinds of programming spaces will also be needed: spaces designed for performances for children are different than those required for interactive learning centers and activities. Technology will have an increasing role in children's spaces so areas for early learning computers and age appropriate learning resources will be required. Family restrooms are needed in places closest to the areas intended for youngest children.

Minneapolis (MN) Central Library Children's Center

Library spaces for teens are places that were rarely in existence even a few years ago. Designating areas for these youth and ensuring design and amenities that are engaging, user-centered and comfortable will be important to encouraging ongoing use from this population. Traditional study areas will need to be supplemented by areas for group study and more comfortable lounging areas. Teen spaces will need to contain nearly as much technology capacity as the library's primary computing areas and will need to include equipment specific to creative uses as well as research needs. Teens are likely to be one of the first groups of library users to focus as much on creating content as making use of it. Just as in the areas for younger children, space for programming will need to be incorporated into teen areas. These spaces, too, will be heavily reliant upon technology as they will likely be used for gaming, film and music programs as well as presentations and discussion sessions.

Libraries as interactive research and leisure centers

Another traditional role of the public library is support of lifelong learning. Libraries serve as formal education support centers, providing resources that supplement learning for students in organized

instruction. For many years, the Library has filled the role of "school library" for Wichita's growing homeschooling community. Library collections – and library staff – are being more heavily relied upon by all families as school library budgets have been cut and the number of school librarians has been reduced.

As education has become more individualized and self-paced, libraries have taken on critical roles supporting citizens in distance learning programs. This includes students in higher education programs being offered locally by national institutions as well as those with a main campus outside the Wichita metropolitan area. Futurists note that within the next few years, the number of learners age 50 and older will be greater than the number in K-12 education. Some of these students will be seeking degrees: many more will not be participating in formal training programs but will be satisfying their own desire for intellectual stimulation.

Support for lifelong learning has a broader purpose than provision of information resources for students. Labor statistics suggest that most people will have a minimum of three careers during their lifetimes. Some will have more as the "new normal" of today's economy continues to have an impact upon employment in both the private and public sectors. For these individuals, the library provides not only the access to technology but also the resources that can help them prepare for, seek and find jobs in their current fields or in brand new ones. Economic changes have also been a factor in an explosion of self-employment. Library collections and resources can offer invaluable guidance for people interested in starting or growing their own small businesses.

WPL Program Attendance
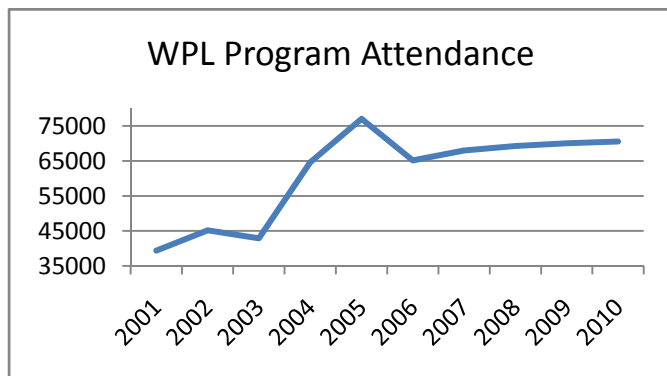
As people live longer, they will have more free time in retirement and will look to agencies like libraries for recreation and social interaction as well as learning. These individuals will look to the library for leisure time reading, listening and viewing. They will also look to libraries as places where they can share and learn more about special interests and hobbies, health and wellness, and current events.

A unique area of lifelong learning relates to local interest materials. Libraries will continue to be diligent in ensuring that local works and records are collected, organized and preserved so that the community's historical records are not lost. In addition to collecting and maintaining local records, libraries are likely to also evolve into publishers, helping to digitize unique local resources in order to improve their accessibility and preservation.

Facility Implications: To support this role, libraries will need to add a wide variety of spaces. Quiet study areas and small conference rooms will be needed in order to provide space for individual and collaborative learning. Furnishings in traditional study areas will need to include tables wired for laptop use and Wi-Fi or wired Internet access. Flexibly configured meeting rooms of varying sizes will be needed to provide space for library programming and to support the needs of interest groups such as

investment clubs, book discussion groups, civic organizations, etc. These areas will need to be high-tech spaces capable of offering services such as videoconferencing, streaming media downloading, cable television viewing, etc. They will also need to be located within facilities in ways which allow them to be used beyond the service hours of the library itself.

Specially designed exhibit areas will be needed to help the library attract touring exhibits and cross-promote assets of the community's other cultural organizations. These spaces would also help the library to highlight works of area artists, library collections and other local resources.

Space for print reference collections will still be required but over time may be gradually replaced with additional computer workstations as materials transition to online and digital formats. The exception to this will be spaces for local history and genealogical collections. Local resources will remain unique holdings that will be considered permanent collections. Additional space will be needed if the library is expected to retain a role as a lead custodian of these primary historical records.

Relaxed reading areas will be needed throughout the library. Amenities such as chairs with tablet arms near electrical outlets will be needed to aid users who bring their own devices for recreation or study. These same kinds of areas will be particularly required in areas near fiction and media collections. Areas housing new and popular materials will need library shelving that allows for highly merchandised collections, i.e. shelving no more than 60" in height with the ability to feature items cover out on display units, end panels, etc. Fortress styled service desks will be eliminated and replaced with portable service points from which roving reference service to building visitors can be offered. The implementation of self-service technologies in other areas of the library, such as at the circulation desk allowing users to check out their own materials at the end of their library visits, will create opportunities to downsize the clerical spaces and staffing that will be replaced by employees and spaces providing more interactive customer experiences.

Libraries as anchors for community life

In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg talks about places other than home and the workplace as "third places" important for civic engagement. Often described as the "community's meeting room," public libraries are classic examples of successful third places, i.e. accessible places other than home or a work site where people go for informal gatherings and social interaction. And because they fill this role, public libraries are destination locations which can vitalize – or revitalize – the neighborhoods in which they are located. Libraries are desirable neighbors. Americans ages 14-24 already find libraries as places to be almost equally important to libraries as book collections. (OCLC, 2010)

Public libraries, especially new and revitalized central libraries, are proven engines for the development of business and local economy and cultural endeavors. (Urban Libraries Council, 2007) Wichita has recognized this opportunity. "Project Downtown: The Master Plan for Wichita" lists the proposed new Central Library as a project that holds "tremendous potential to catalyze further improvements" in the core area. (Goody Clancy, 2010) In

Goody Clancy concept drawing of new Central Library

its report "Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age," the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy identifies vibrant public libraries as one of eight elements essential in a healthy information community. (Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, 2009)

People of all ages enjoy visiting the library. They come for social interaction as well as for information and recreation. This makes the library a good place to deliver programs or services intended to reach broad segments of a community's population.

As use of technology becomes more pervasive, the traditional work place will change. Fewer people will spend their work days in offices. More people will be contractors or employees with flexibility to work from alternate worksites. For these people, libraries will prove to be appealing alternatives to home offices because they can provide the required technology access and numerous other information resources as well as the amenities and opportunities for social interaction that are already making today's well-designed libraries community destinations.

Facility Implications: In order to fulfill the role of a community anchor, libraries will require spaces where people can gather, interact, collaborate and debate. Libraries will continue to evolve their roles as community centers. This means they will need creative spaces suitable for a number of activities, only one of which is seeking information. Flexible meeting spaces of numerous sizes and configurations will be needed in places easily accessible to building visitors. Amenities such as food and beverage service, outdoor gathering places, convenient access and parking will be other requirements for libraries filling this community service role.

Conclusion

Libraries of the future may be less about managing in-library book collections and more about managing community spaces and services. Public libraries of the future are likely to be actively involved in education: creating new readers, offering technology access and training, and partnering in the delivery of programs and services that support lifelong learning. Successful public libraries will be gathering places for their communities. People will come for the social interaction as much as for resources they may use. Materials collections will still be important assets but will be housed and offered in ways that encourage interaction rather than in the storehouse configurations of the past. Library buildings will be flexible spaces, easily reconfigured to serve a variety of uses and to support changing community needs. Buildings will be zoned for differing noise levels in order to support both active and passive citizen uses. Buildings will also need easily recognizable, consistent yet changeable way-finding signage so that visitors know where to find what they need from the time they enter the library. Spaces that support amenities such as cafes or coffee shops and self-service activities will be important.

But as the roles and services change, one constant will remain. The success of the library of the future will remain measured, as always, by the institution's ability to assure equality of opportunity and to contribute to the quality of life for all citizens.

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