

APPENDIX A: STAFF SWOT ANALYSIS

Staff SWOT Analysis Report for the Bennington Free Library

Prepared on Monday, Dec. 30 2024 by Harrington Brands for the
2025 Bennington Free Library Winter Strategic Retreat

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Objective:

Develop a three to five-year strategic plan for the library.

Approach:

- Conduct a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis involving all staff.
- Facilitate a two-hour interactive session to gather insights from ground-level staff.

Expected Outcome:

- Comprehensive understanding of internal and external factors affecting the library.
 - Engaged staff contributing to the strategic vision.
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METHODOLOGY

- We met in the upstairs of the Bennington Free Library on Wednesday, December 18 2024 from 3pm to 5pm.
- 6 staff members were included in this process without the director present (one board member was present - strategic liaison)
- On the walls were flip chart papers. Each paper had one of the 4 categories listed: Strength (internal), Weakness (internal), Opportunities (external), Threats (external)
- We started with strengths. Each staff person was given 5 minutes to write out as many strengths of the library on Post-It notes as possible - one idea per post it note. They then applied the Post-It notes to the Strength flip chart paper. We paused to read out loud each Post-It note and ask for any additional comments.
- We then moved on to W, O, T and continued the process.
- While the staff worked on the subsequent letters, the board member organized and categorized the Post-It notes on the prior sheet into buckets or themes

- When the staff completed the post it note exercise for each letter, we then went back and reviewed the categorized themes and asked for input and insight.
 - The final exercise we performed was providing each staff person with 4 sticky dots per sheet and asked them to vote on the theme(s) that they thought mattered the most to the future of the library. They could use their dots however they wanted (e.g. put all their dots on one theme if they thought it was that important or spread out their dots how they saw fit).
 - We then came back to each chart, having categorized and now prioritized based on vote/dots and shared with the group what they thought was most important.
 - We wrapped up the session by discussing the strategic plan as a whole and how it would be cascaded down to the staff.
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SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS - Main takeaways and emerging themes:

- **Institutional Knowledge:** Deep knowledge and institutional memory among staff.
- **Welcoming Environment:** A space with no barriers for patrons, fostering inclusivity.
- **Children's Programming:** Strong programs and services for children and youth.
- **Location:** Central downtown location enhancing accessibility and visibility.
- **Partnerships:** Robust collaborations with nonprofits, schools, and other institutions.
- **Staff Dedication:** Compassionate and family-oriented team.
- **Service Range:** Comprehensive offerings such as technology help, outdoor spaces, and innovative initiatives (e.g., library of things).
- **Consistency:** Reliable operating hours, open six days a week, 52 weeks a year.

WEAKNESSES - Main takeaways and emerging themes:

- **Staffing:** Insufficient staffing leading to burnout and high turnover. This included the idea that there was not enough staffing, as well as a divide between new staff and legacy staff (some indications around competency, but also rigid older thinking).
- **Building Maintenance:** Challenges with older infrastructure, including bathrooms and parking.
- **Operating Hours:** Limited and inconsistent hours impacting accessibility.
- **Training Deficiencies:** Lack of comprehensive training for technology and emergency response.
- **Communication:** Gaps in internal communication and handling patron incidents.
- **Outdated Facilities:** Infrastructure impacting the patron experience.
- **Fundraising:** Limited capabilities and absence of a dedicated fundraising arm.

OPPORTUNITIES - Main takeaways and emerging themes:

- **Partnership Expansion:** Strengthen collaborations with schools, colleges, and community groups.

- **Grants:** Leverage grant opportunities to enhance services and upgrade infrastructure.
- **Extended Hours:** Increase accessibility for middle and high schoolers and young adults.
- **Community Presence:** Boost participation at local events, fairs, and festivals.
- **Training Programs:** Develop community and staff training initiatives (e.g., AI workshops).
- **Marketing:** Improve signage and campaigns to attract new patrons.
- **Innovative Services:** Explore new service models like librarian presence in laundromats or coworking spaces.

THREATS - Main takeaways and emerging themes:

- **Technological Advancements:** Rapid changes challenge the library's relevance.
 - **Declining Patron Use:** Digital alternatives and shifting demographics impacting foot traffic.
 - **Funding Uncertainties:** Volatility in government funding and local financial support.
 - **Safety Concerns:** Increasing safety issues, including drug use on premises.
 - **Competition:** High number of nonprofits competing for limited funding.
 - **Rising Costs:** Operational and living costs impacting staff retention and budget.
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3. Categorized and Prioritization

Categorized Themes Identified:

- **Strengths:**
 - Support and Services (8)
 - Staff (6)
 - Children's Programming (4)
 - Partnerships (3)
 - Safe and Open Space (3)
 - Outdoor Space
 - Tradition
- **Weaknesses**
 - Training (7)
 - Grounds/Building (4)
 - Staff (3)
 - Safety (3)
 - Teenagers/Young Adults (3)
 - Hours (2)
 - Communication (2)
 - Funding
- **Opportunities**
 - Connections (7)

- Community (6)
- Training + Services (5)
- Outreach (4)
- Alternative screen time (1)
- Ask to be “at the table” when appropriate (1)
- Grants
- Threats
 - Relevance (6)
 - Technology (6)
 - Safety (6)
 - Funding (4)
 - Staff (2)
 - Government support
 - Communication
 - Collaboration
 - Facilities

Recommendations

1. **Support Services:** Enhance the quality and range of services offered to patrons.
 2. **Staff Development:** Improve training, increase staff numbers and benefits, and boost morale.
 3. **Children’s Programming:** Expand and promote programs to attract families and young patrons.
 4. **Safe and Open Space:** Ensure the library remains a welcoming and secure environment.
 5. **Community Connections:** Strengthen partnerships with local schools, businesses, and organizations.
 6. **Training and Services:** Offer training programs for the community and expand service offerings.
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STRENGTH (INTERNAL) APPENDIX:

Support + Services (8 priority)

- Book recommendations
- Reliable source of help online media
- Library of things
- Books - material
- Tech help
- Showing up for patrons
- Tech help
- Courier service
- Month in a minute
- Show off “the stars”
- Collections
- Help filling out job applications
- Free access to info + guidance
- Clear and easy to navigate website
- Tech help for community
- Open 6 days a week - 52 weeks a year - evening and Saturday hours
- 24/7 online catalog - library card app
- Free help - especially technology but any question is welcome
- Help finding books in library - upstairs/downstairs
- Volunteers deliver to shut-ins, banner index, history room
- Outreach - adults
- Getting people the info/help they need

Staff (6 priority)

- Staff
- Friendliness
- Skilled creative staff
- Very competency staff + friendly
- Staff always willing to step up and support each other
- Collaborative staff: team “family” mentality/support
- Staff get along well
- Staff like each other and work well together

Children's Programming (4 priority)

- Kindergarten initiative
- Outreach children's program

- Focus on young adults and tweens
- Youth services known for programs/outreach
- Multi-intelligence appeal (children's area particularly)
- Strong children's programming
- Programs for children + families
- Children's room-learning centers, play centers

Safe + Open Space (3 priority)

- Patron centered library
- A safe space to be and no need to buy anything
- Free and open to the public without regard to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age physical and mental
- The staff treats everyone with compassion and respect
- Safe refuge
- Meet people where they are
- Open to all people in Bennington and beyond
- No barriers

Partnerships (3)

- Outreach
- Connection to schools and other related places - head start, etc.
- Participation (leadership) in the Catamount Network - connecting 20+ library collections
- Connection to community (ECDC, etc)
- Established partnership with other nonprofits - Museum, CAT-TV, GHRSVP, Sunrise, BCSWA

Downtown

- Central downtown location
- Anchor presence on Main St in the center of town
- Connection to downtown businesses + activity

Tradition

- Local history resource
- Deep knowledge of the library
- Long standing traditions
- Institutional memory and experience

Outdoor Space

- Outdoor space (beautifully refurbished)
- Courtyard redone

WEAKNESS (INTERNAL) APPENDIX:

Training (7 priority)

- Increased training for public interactions: customer service, mental health, addiction, housing & food insecurity
- A bit of cross training may be helpful
- Cross training of staff could be better
- Lack of technical inhouse training (ie phone systems, projector, sound system)
- No orientation training for staff (incoming, phone system)
- Diversity - compassion training
- Wifi printing?
- Staff technology/comfort with answering questions
- No update training for fire/emergency and drug issues
- Lack of empowerment/advocacy, librarian as a profession

Grounds/Building (4 priority)

- Cleanliness
- Use of available spaces in library
- Some areas need to be de-cluttered and cleaned
- door/window replacements
- Older building with maintenance needs
- No parking
- parking/building(s) maintenance
- Old bathrooms
- Sparse parking
- Improve exterior of building
- Physical condition of spaces (need maintenance)
- Need second exit from children's room
- Online meeting space needed
- Accessibility
- Some areas need a reno: bathrooms!

Staff (3 priority)

- Lack of staffing x 2
- Staff morale (at times)
- More staff?
- Staffing pressures with sickness or vacations
- Salary levels too low for potential future staff
- Salaries + benefits

- Salaries are low in comparison to other libraries

Safety (3 priority)

- Drug problem in town is a challenge here
- Safety of staff + visitors
- Drug use on property after closing
- More patience w/ certain types of patrons

Teenagers/young adults (3 priority)

- Young adults not coming to library unless they are parents with children

Hours (2 priority)

- Longer hours?
- Hours not convenient for young adults
- Open hours hard to remember (varies every day)

Communication (2 priority)

- More communication about problems (patrons, building)
- Communication between depts. Regular meetings between dept. Heads
- Staff members need to handle all social media needs
- Maintain this strategic planning process with staff and public input
- More of a library presence at community events

Funding

- Funding for more programs
- No friends group to fundraise + assume responsibility for book sales
- Financial pressure of raising funds
- More materials needed

OPPORTUNITY (EXTERNAL) APPENDIX

Connections (7 priority)

- Extended hours to serve middle/high schoolers + young adults
- Work more with social services, family advocacy, elder care, etc.
- Trends to connect w/ diff. Generations i.e. grandparents as caregivers

Community (6 priority)

- More collaboration w/ the colleges CCV/Bennington + Williams (students & faculty)
- Working more w/ schools ECDC, Businesses, COA
- Community partnerships - middle school, high school, social services
- Deeper relations w/ Bennington College (internas, librarian career options)
- Partner with schools/local industries
- Joint programs with other libraries + museums

- Greater presence at local events (fairs, festivals, etc.)
- More collaboration with organizations
- More connection to Town of Bennington, larger planning initiatives
- Connections with other nonprofits
- Find new ways to invite the community in
- Ask community for help when it makes sense
- Do a community survey. What do they want?

Training + Services (5 priority)

- Promote online + in person library use to community
- The public library could be a training location for entry-level jobs, students, tech help, people in recovery, staff a used book store
- Develop a deep bench (trained volunteers, program help, etc.)
- Librarian in the laundromat - physically meeting people where they are
- Could offer more databases + training to the public (eg. foundation center, careers that need specialized access)
- Offerings/receive info + training from/for other libraries
- BFL gets social worker students-in-training?

Outreach (4 priority)

- Offer programs that address current issues/happenings
- More outreach programs for new residents-refugees
- Outreach to middle schoolers
- Outreach + collaboration w/ stakeholders in the community
- Tween + teen program to combat loneliness + isolation
- Opp. to share our expertise w/ other org. I.e staff dev of early educators

Alternative to screen time (1 priority)

Ask to be “at the table” when appropriate (1 priority)

Grants

- Grants (e.g. replace heating + cooling systems, programs)
- Look for bridge grants w/ other institutions
- Additional grant funds for updating building technology infrastructure + offer cheap fax options!

Better signage on Main Street

People come to BFL instead of Staples for printing

Support by buying local

THREAT (EXTERNAL) APPENDIX

Safety (6 priority)

- Health emergency or safety emergency - lack of prop equipment/training
- Some people are afraid to come to the library/literacy issues
- Questions about a perceived threat from a patron
- Patrons afraid to come into the library because of the drug presence outside
- Lack of planning for an emergency: active shooter, power outage, fire/flooding
- Drug use + drug dealing inside + outside the building
- Increased drug use on property/becomes a place seen as unsafe
- Drug usage in neighborhood - families and older people afraid to come to library

Relevance (6 priority)

- Assumption the library will always be there/apathy
- Do people even use libraries anymore?
- Way of life in the US - less reading; other forms of entertainment more important
- Ignorance of what a library does for the community
- Perception that libraries are irrelevant

Technology (6 priority)

- Not keeping up with technology - staff, online security, training the public
- Changes in technology - DVDs, blu-ray, wireless - try to keep up
- Can we keep up with technology changes?

Funding (4 priority)

- Possible defunding of public institutions
- Competition for funding
- Decrease or loss of funding from the town
- Uninformed electorate undermining our funding
- Rising cost of everything; competition for community funds

Staff (2 priority)

- Safety for staff + patrons
- Cost of living + higher compensation elsewhere limits future staff selection
- Library staff burnout "the job" + fundraising + outreach
- Losing staff due to social service needs of community (mental health, housing, food insecurity)

Government Support

- Lack of support from Select Board
- Civil liberties for patrons
- Lack of support from the federal level

Communication

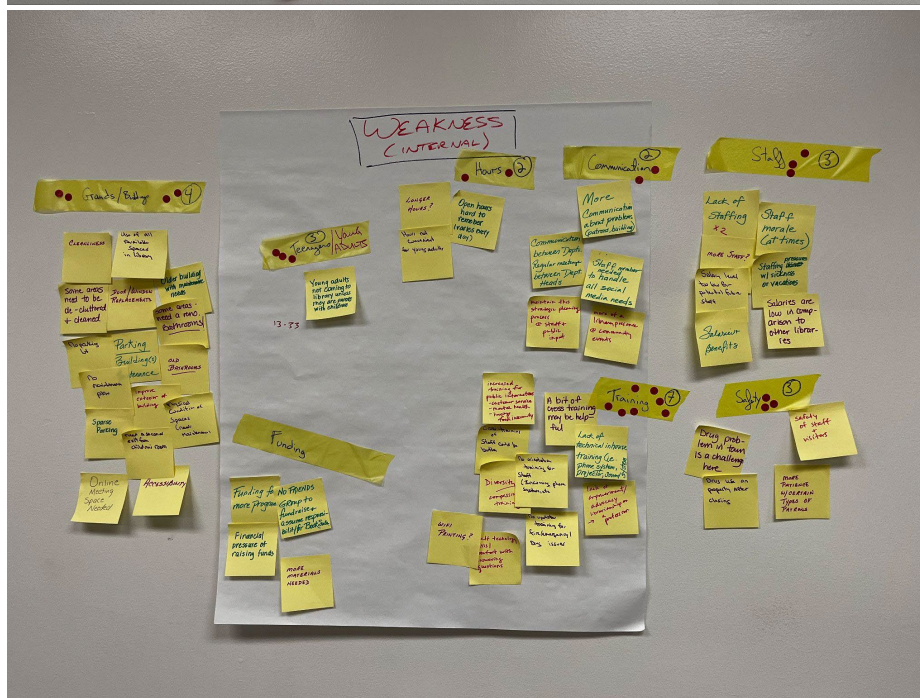
- Lack of communication w/ library staff about incidents involving patrons (drugs, etc.)

Collaboration

- Loss of connections + collaboration with groups, schools, headstart, etc.

Facilities

- No 2nd exit in the children's room
- Downtown flooding, rain/snow



APPENDIX B: RETREAT NOTES

Bennington Free Library

Retreat Notes

Saturday, January 11, 2025

Strategic Planning Goals

- Develop a shared vision for the library.
- Establish short, medium, and long-term goals aligned with actionable items.
- Balance immediate needs with long-term strategic vision.
- Enhance the library's financial stability beyond town funding.
- Improve promotions and communication strategies to increase library visibility.

STRATEGIC PLANNING THINKING AND PROCESS

- **Levels of Planning**
 - **Tactical (1,000 ft view):** Immediate to-do lists and short-term tasks; often where staff/director function.
 - **Operational (10,000 ft view):** Measurable goals and deliverables for the coming year; often where boards function.
 - **Strategic (100,000 ft view):** Long-term vision and goals spanning three to five years, with an eye towards 2035.
- **Consensus Building**
 - Emphasis on achieving consensus rather than majority voting.
 - Encouragement of open communication and inclusion of all board members' perspectives.
 - Introduction of consensus rules to ensure all voices are heard and respected.
 - Maybe someone sees an "F" we don't see.
 - "It may not be my first choice, but for the good of the whole organization, I can live with it."
- **Help/Hinder List**
 - **Helpful Behaviors:**
 - Listening, taking turns, speaking truthfully, respecting one another, asking for clarification, enjoying participation, challenging respectfully, speaking from personal experience, using sign language, assuming positive intention, staying on topic.
 - **Hindering Behaviors:**

- Anger, distractions (e.g., cell phones, computers), hogging time, grandstanding, groupthink, lack of preparation, interruptions, cutting people off.

LENSES IN DECISION MAKING

The board explored how different personality types among members influence decisions regarding the allocation of a \$5 million donation.

- **Optimist/Opportunist Lens**
 - **Focus:** Growth, innovation, and exploring new possibilities.
- **Traditionalist Lens**
 - **Focus:** Preserving historical practices and successful strategies.
- **Risk Averse Lens**
 - **Focus:** Caution, careful planning, and long-term sustainability.
- **Urgency Lens**
 - **Focus:** Immediate action on time-sensitive needs.
- **Relationship/People Lens**
 - **Focus:** Impact on relationships, collaboration, and community building.

STAFF SWOT ANALYSIS

- **Strengths:**
 - Dedicated and versatile staff.
 - Central and accessible location in Bennington.
 - Strong support from the town.
 - Successful children's programs that engage a significant portion of the community.
- **Weaknesses:**
 - Limited engagement with 90% of the community not currently using the library.
 - Physical limitations of the building, including poor signage and accessibility issues.
 - Insufficient promotion of available services, particularly technological resources.
- **Opportunities:**
 - Enhance accessibility and create a more welcoming environment.
 - Position the library as a central community hub.
 - Promote technological and cultural programs to attract a broader audience.
 - Develop partnerships with educational institutions and local businesses.
 - Introduce innovative programming (e.g., tattoo art exhibits) to draw in new patrons.

- **Threats:**
 - Budget constraints that limit flexibility and responsiveness.
 - Resistance to change from traditionalist members.
 - Competition from other institutions like Barnes & Noble.
- **Action Items/Quick Wins**
 1. **Promotion and Outreach:**
 - Enhance promotion of existing programs to attract a larger portion of the community.
 - Launch a roadshow and listening tour to engage with the 90% of residents not currently utilizing library services.
 - Develop partnerships with local banks and educational institutions to offer workshops and community events.
 2. **Facility Improvements:**
 - Improve signage to make the library more identifiable.
 - Enhance physical accessibility by opening front doors more widely and possibly adding ramps.
 - Consider adding amenities like a café or bistro to make the library more inviting.
 3. **Programming Enhancements:**
 - Expand technological workshops (e.g., phone usage, computer skills) to meet community needs.
 - Introduce diverse cultural programs to engage different demographic groups.
 - Leverage successful children's programs to attract more families and reinvest in adult programming.
 4. **Staffing and Organizational Development:**
 - Improve staff benefits and hire additional personnel to reduce workload and allow specialization.
 - Consider hiring a cultural officer to enhance cultural programming and community engagement.
 - Define and articulate core organizational values to guide decision-making and culture.
 5. **Financial Management:**
 - Allocate funds in a balanced manner to address immediate needs while ensuring long-term sustainability.
 - Explore investment opportunities for the \$5 million donation to maximize its impact.
 6. **Board Development:**
 - Conduct a candidate search to recruit board members who align with identified organizational values.
 - Ensure a balance of personality lenses on the board to enhance decision-making and governance.

ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

- **Importance:**
 - Values serve as the heartbeat of the organization, guiding decision-making and shaping the organizational culture.
 - They influence behaviors, relationships, and the overall direction of the library.
- **Examples Discussed:**
 - Johnson & Johnson's response to the Tylenol crisis highlighted how core values (e.g., customer safety) can guide effective and reputation-enhancing decisions.
- **Questions Addressed:**
 - Major decisions with positive consequences and the values they reflect.
 - Allocation of significant time and resources.
 - Expected behaviors and values from donors, patrons, stakeholders, staff, and board members.
 - Values prioritized in hiring and reasons for termination based on misalignment.
- ***Library Staffing Values***
 - Core values for hiring include personality, vitality, customer service, community engagement, appreciation for literacy, and learning.
 - Reasons for potential dismissal include insubordination, unreliability, and placing personal values above those of the library.
- ***Expected Behaviors and Values***
 - Respect, compassion, open-mindedness, adaptability, creativity, and teamwork expected from staff, donors, patrons, and stakeholders.
 - Library's mission includes fostering gratitude, knowledge sharing, and supporting community diversity and inclusion.
- ***Core Library Values and Defending Principles***
 - Strong advocacy against censorship and for free access to information, reflecting deeply held beliefs.
 - Emphasized values include inclusion, safety, truth, knowledge, and teamwork to ensure everyone feels welcome.
- ***Voting and Decision-Making Process***
 - Participants engaged in a polling activity to prioritize values they want to see continue or be implemented.
 - Key prioritized values included no censorship, inclusion, truth and knowledge, safety, respect, and lifelong learning.

- The group discussed ways to consolidate these values into three to five key principles for future implementation.
- **Outcomes:**
 - Values Task Force: Sarah B, Deirdre R. and Susan M.
 - Participants engaged in a polling activity to prioritize values they want to see continue or be implemented.
 - Key prioritized values included no censorship, inclusion, truth and knowledge, safety, respect, lifelong learning, trust, teamwork, customer service, and transparency as key organizational values.
 - Discussed the importance of aligning board member recruitment with these values to ensure cultural fit and effective governance.
 - Three selected participants will conduct further refinement on these values ahead of the upcoming board meeting on the 21st.
 - Plan to draft a concise set of core values to be presented at the next one or two board meetings for approval.

MISSION STATEMENT REVIEW

- **Current Mission:**

"The Bennington Free Library is a central part of the community that provides engaging and accessible materials, programs and services that meet the educational, informational, cultural and recreational needs of the community. We strive to provide a dynamic, welcoming environment that enriches lives, promotes lifelong learning and literacy, and supports the interests of our patrons."
- **Discussion:**
 - Consider incorporating the concept of the library as a community hub into the vision statement.
 - Reflect on whether the mission adequately captures the library's role and aspirations.

VISION

- **Perception and Engagement with the Library:**
 - There is a concern that a large portion of the community does not engage with the library and there may be resistance to change within the library itself.
 - Some people believe that libraries are fully funded by the town and therefore do not need additional financial support, highlighting a need for better communication and promotion.
- **Diversity and Inclusivity Challenges:**

- The conversation touched on the lack of diversity and inclusivity in programming and staffing, noting the predominantly white demographic in the discussion.
- There was emphasis on the desire to incorporate more diverse cultural programs, such as African dance or drum circles, but facing budget constraints can lead to conflict about resource allocation.
- **Resistance to Change:**
 - There may be resistance from the community regarding funding allocation to nonprofits, including libraries. The idea of reallocating money to prioritize making a few institutions world-class was proposed.
 - The discussion highlighted the need for performance metrics for funds used rather than relying only on presentations to authority figures.
- **Visioning Exercise for the Future:**
 - Participants were asked to imagine the library in 2035, considering its role, structure, and community impact. They were encouraged to visualize changes and developments over the next decade.
 - The exercise involved crafting a personal vision for what the library could become, considering factors such as community involvement, facilities, and funding scenarios.:
 - Participants wrote down their visions for the future of the library and shared them within groups.
 - The groups selected standout ideas and collaboratively worked on crafting a concise vision statement to represent their collective goals and aspirations for the library's future.

1. Strategic Planning and Vision

- **Focus and Adaptation:** Emphasis on concentrating efforts due to anticipated drastic changes in the nonprofit sector's financial landscape in New England and nationwide.
- **Vision Statement Development:**
 - Initial Vision: "The library is a warm and welcoming beacon or heart of culture, learning, community, and creativity."
 - Expanded Vision: Establishing the library as a community hub akin to third spaces, fostering interaction, learning, and creativity among diverse groups.
- **Future Orientation:** Transitioning nonprofits to more business-oriented models while retaining their inherent heart and mission.

2. Community Engagement and Patron Growth

- **Membership Goals:** Aim to have at least 50% of Bennington residents become library members.

- **Target Demographics:** Focus on engaging individuals aged 13 to 35, including teenagers and young adults.
- **Program Development:**
 - Creation of diverse programs such as cooking classes, quilting, gardening, dance, and presentations to cater to various interests.
 - Consideration of virtual workshops and book clubs to extend reach beyond physical premises.
- **Visibility and Awareness:**
 - Enhance library's presence through marketing plans, social media engagement, and virtual platforms.
 - Establish the library as a known and accessible location within the community.

3. Financial Planning and Fundraising

- **Robust Financial Plan:** Necessity for a comprehensive financial strategy to secure funding beyond town support.
- **Grant Utilization:** Allocation of the \$1.5 million ARPA grant for HVAC improvements and other infrastructure needs.
- **Fundraising Strategies:**
 - Hiring a dedicated development and fundraising officer.
 - Exploring tiered membership models (e.g., basic free membership vs. premium paid memberships with additional benefits).
 - Leveraging events like galas and capital campaigns to raise funds.

4. Infrastructure and Facilities

- **Building Modernization:**
 - Upgrading the library's physical infrastructure to make it more inclusive, safe, warm, and welcoming.
 - Enhancing the entrance and overall architectural appeal to attract more patrons.
- **Future-Proofing:** Planning infrastructure updates in alignment with strategic goals to avoid redundant expenditures.
- **Expansion Ideas:** Introduction of mobile library units to serve areas like laundromats, enhancing accessibility.

5. Governance and Board Functioning

- **Committee Restructuring:**
 - Transitioning from traditional committees to more action-oriented task forces.

- Ensuring committees meet regularly with clear agendas to provide meaningful recommendations.
- **Leadership and Succession Planning:** Addressing governance issues to ensure sustainable leadership within the organization.
- **Meeting Cadence:** Proposal to increase board meeting frequency from every other month to monthly, especially during active planning phases.

STRATEGIC PILLARS

- **Initial Pillars:**
 5. **Patrons, Donors, Community:** Focusing on increasing membership and community engagement.
 6. **Finance, Fundraising, Future Planning:** Developing financial sustainability and fundraising initiatives.
 7. **Public Awareness and Communication:** Enhancing visibility and communication strategies.
 8. **Innovation, Leadership, Education:** Promoting innovative programs and leadership development.
- **Addition of Fifth Pillar:**
 5. **Infrastructure, Assets, Buildings, Grounds:** Addressing physical and technological infrastructure needs.

S.M.A.R.T. GOAL SETTING

- **SMART Goals Framework:** Utilizing Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound criteria for goal development.
- **Example Goals:**
 - **Membership Growth:** Increase library membership by 15% and donor base by 12% within 18 months through comprehensive community engagement.
 - **Financial Planning:** Develop and implement a robust financial plan by mid-2025 to ensure fiscal sustainability.
 - **Public Awareness:** Launch a marketing plan to boost website visits and social media engagement by 20% by 2026.

Action Items

1. **Vision Task Force Formation:**
 - **Members:** Kelly, Mike, Beth, Sarah

- **Objective:** Develop a comprehensive vision statement and refine strategic pillars.
- Consider incorporating the concept of the library as a community hub into the vision statement.
- 2. Goal Development:**
 - **Responsibility:** Each board member to draft goals under their assigned strategic pillars.
 - **Deadline:** Present initial goals at the next board meeting on January 21st.
- 3. Financial Plan Creation:**
 - **Assigned To:** PJ, Brian, Susan
 - **Objective:** Develop a detailed financial and fundraising strategy.
- 4. Marketing and Community Engagement Plan:**
 - **Assigned To:** Susan and designated marketing team
 - **Objective:** Create and implement a plan to enhance library visibility and patron engagement.
- 5. Committee Restructuring:**
 - **Assigned To:** All board members
 - **Objective:** Transition existing committees into task forces with clear agendas and regular meeting schedules.
- 6. Membership Model Development:**
 - **Assigned To:** Mike and development team
 - **Objective:** Explore and propose tiered membership options.

FOLLOW UP

- **Next Board Meeting:** January 21st
 - **Agenda Item:** Strategic planning section to review and finalize goals.
- **More Frequent Board Meetings**
 - **Board meetings now every month to implement strategic vision**
- **Value Task Force Update:**
 - **Deadline:** Within one month to present refined vision statements.
- **Vision Task Force Review:**
 - **Deadline:** Within one month to present refined vision statements.
- **Committee Meeting Improvements:**
 - **Timeline:** Implement changes in committee structures by the March board meeting.
- **Infrastructure Planning:**
 - **Deadline:** Align infrastructure projects with strategic goals to ensure cohesive planning and funding allocation.

Additional Notes

- **Execution Emphasis:** Success hinges on effective execution of the strategic plan, requiring united effort from trustees, board members, and staff.
- **Patience and Consensus:** Acknowledgment that strategic planning is a gradual process necessitating consensus and collaborative decision-making.
- **Ego Management:** Encouragement to prioritize organizational goals over individual preferences to foster collective progress.
- **Innovative Ideas:** Open-mindedness towards future expansions and technological integrations to keep the library relevant and accessible.
- **Community Engagement and Communication:**
 - Develop strategies to increase community engagement and alter public perceptions of the library's funding needs and program offerings.
 - Focus on communication efforts to clarify the library's funding structure and emphasize the importance of public financial support.
- **Diversity and Inclusivity Initiatives:**
 - Explore avenues for integrating more diverse programming and involvement of underrepresented communities in library activities.
 - Assess current policies and staff makeup to identify opportunities for increasing diversity and inclusion in all aspects of library functions.
- **Future Planning Activities:**
 - Continue the visioning process to refine long-term goals with transparency about budget constraints and funding opportunities.
 - Establish clear performance metrics for future funding requests and showcase how past funding has benefitted the community.

FLIP CHART NOTES:

TODAY
 Volunteer Base
 SHARED VISION OF WHO WE
 ARE

IMPORTANT OBJ. / VALUES

ROBUST FINANCIAL PLAN
 SHORT / MED / LONG GOALS

Quick Wins

PROMOTION / STORY / COMM.

COMPARISON / OTHER LIBRARY

GROUP DYNAMICS

Setting

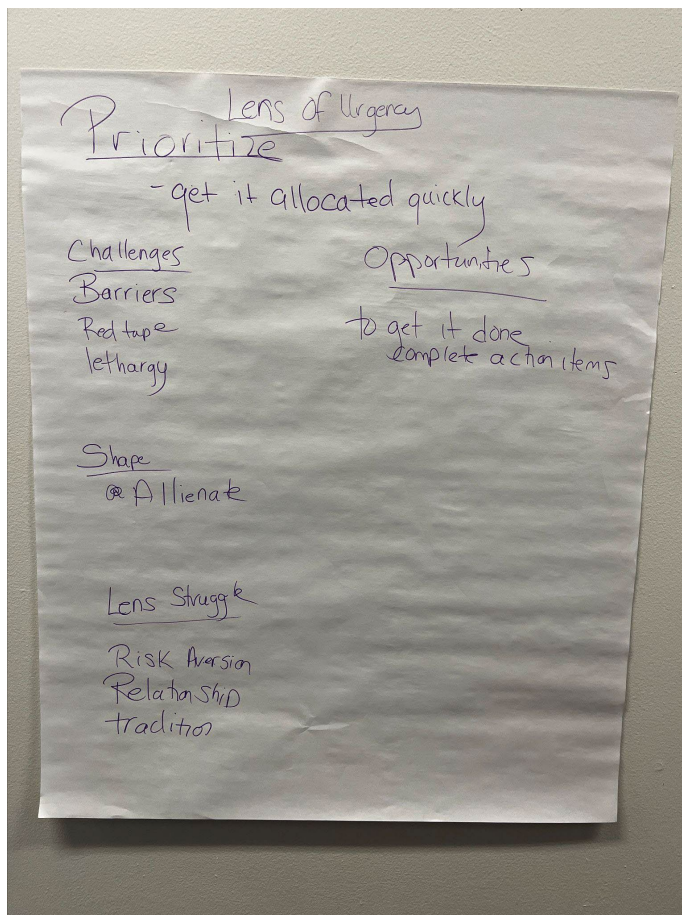
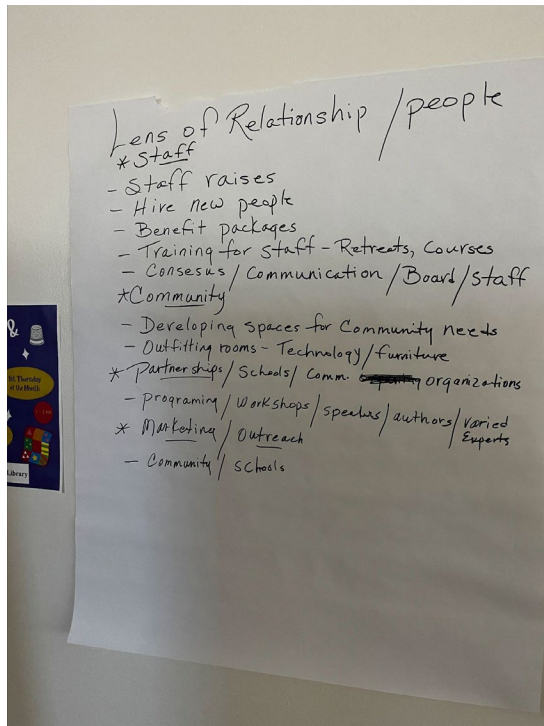
COMMUNITY / SERVING

HELP

LISTENING
 TAKING TURNS
 TALKING w/ TRUTH
 Respect One another
 ASKING CLARIFICATION
 Enjoy what we're doing
 CHALLENGE
 "I" LANGUAGE
 POSITIVE INTENT
 COMMUNICATE
 STAY ON TOPIC
 RADICAL CANDOR

HINDER

DISTRACTIONS
 HAVING THE TIME
 MISUNDERSTANDING
 Going along to get along
 Groupthink
 SIDE BAR
 Meeting After Meeting
 Lack of Prep.
 Interpretation



RISK - AVERSION

- Prioritization — invest ^{safety} gift = security protection
- opportunity — ensures long-term sustainability for BFL; ^{thoughtfully} used in perpetuity
- challenge — no opportunity for growth/change
 - rigidity for ~~any~~ consensus building
 - making the gift an opportunity
- decision-making process → no change/no growth limiting disenfranchised ⊖
 - ⊕ → creates thoughtfulness not necessarily destructive slows us down
- who would struggle — urgency optimists/opportunities

OP / OP

- x Missing demographics
 - ↳ study "why not" 90%
- x → STAFFING — \$8 + TRAILING
- x Programs —
- x Spread good news
- x Infrastructure
- x Friends - role?
- x Community Liason / fund raising

TRADITION

PRIORITIZE: What's worked in past (invest wisely,
determine the spend ① infrastructure,
② goods/services, ③ staffing)
endowment / performance debt

Challenges: Playing it safe, lack of forward thinking,
innovation, inclusivity

Opportunity: Past successes inform future decision making
Shaping process: Partnering w/ other lenses; slowing down others

Other lenses: urgency + most complicated
possible overlaps: risk aversion, relational

legacy / knowledge / CONTEXT

SWOT Analysis

Strengths: Staff / Do what they do best.

- Town of Ben. - Supports the library
- Location - Make it more accessible

Opp.: - Meeting the needs of our patrons
+ welcoming
How do we become a hub?
Hub = future, vision, not there yet

Challenges/Strategies: - Higher Ed. outreach

- Read show/listening
- Access to technology (phones, computers)
- Better promotion for programs
- Providing cultural programs/connections

#1 Values
 decision — ① investing in Children's Room + Programming
 (new carpeting, bathroom, STEAM programming)
 ② adding non-English titles/programs

Values:

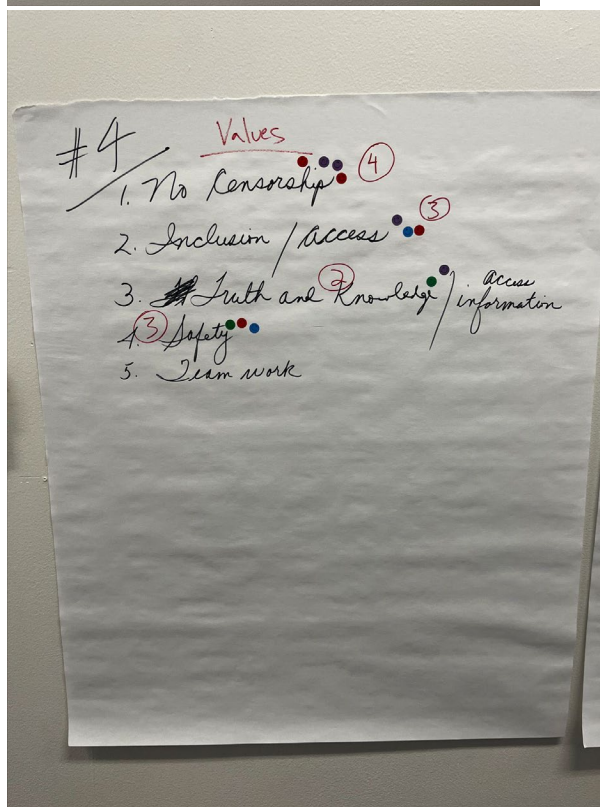
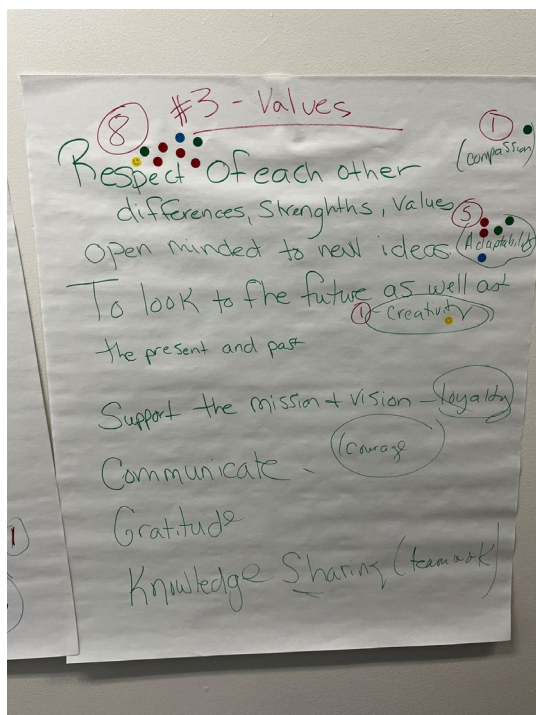
- * promoting life-long learning ●●● (4)
- * Access to learning, reading, resources ●●● (4)
- * creating community ●●● (3)
- * safety ●●● (1)
- * positivity ●●● (1)
- * Aspirational inclusion ●●● (1)

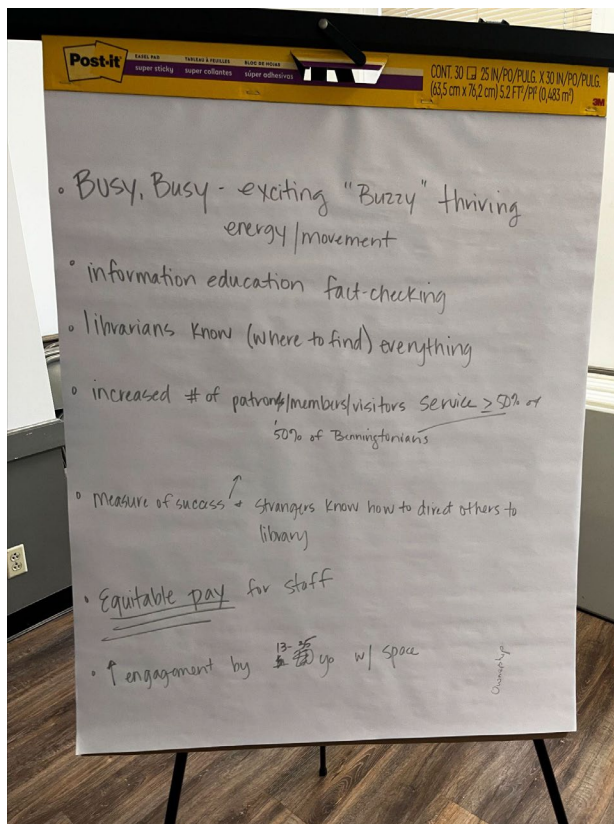
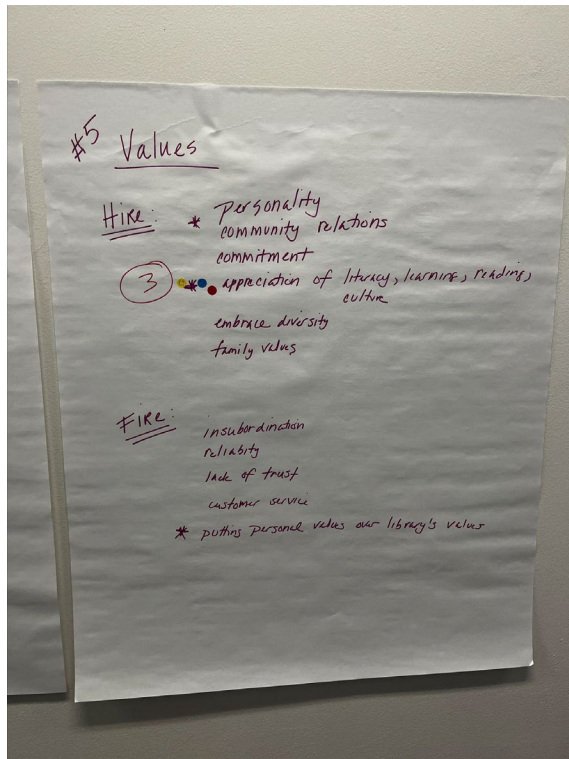
#2 Values
 Spend time + resources on
 - most money

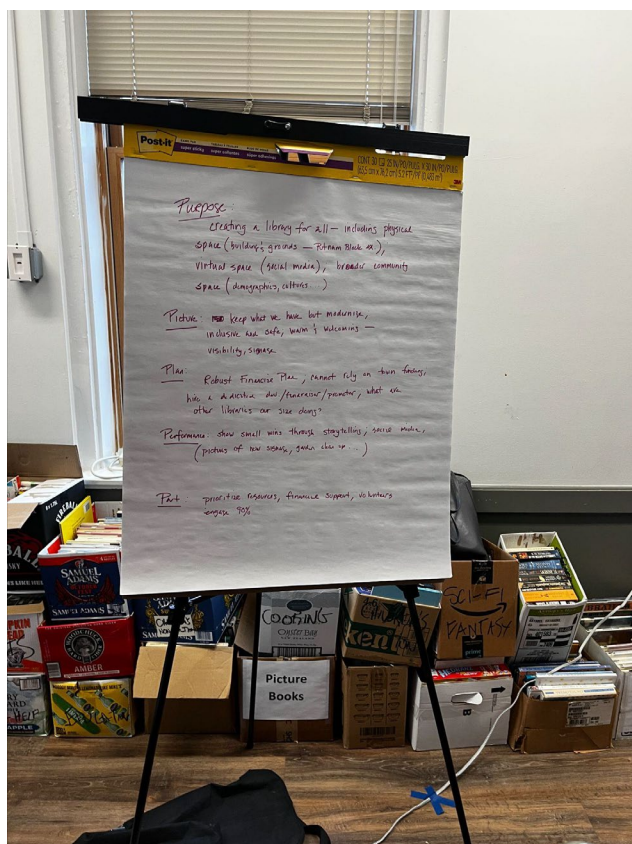
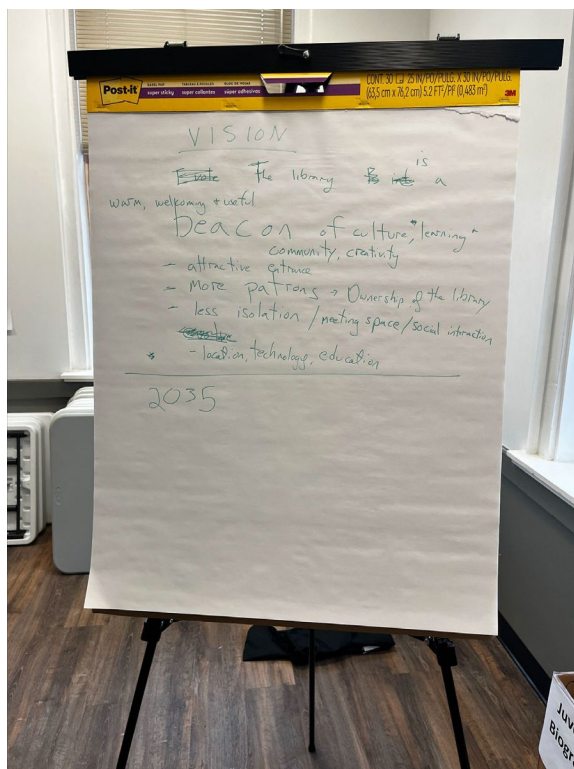
Staff - ●●● acceptance commitment ●●● (4)
 ●●● Warmth community

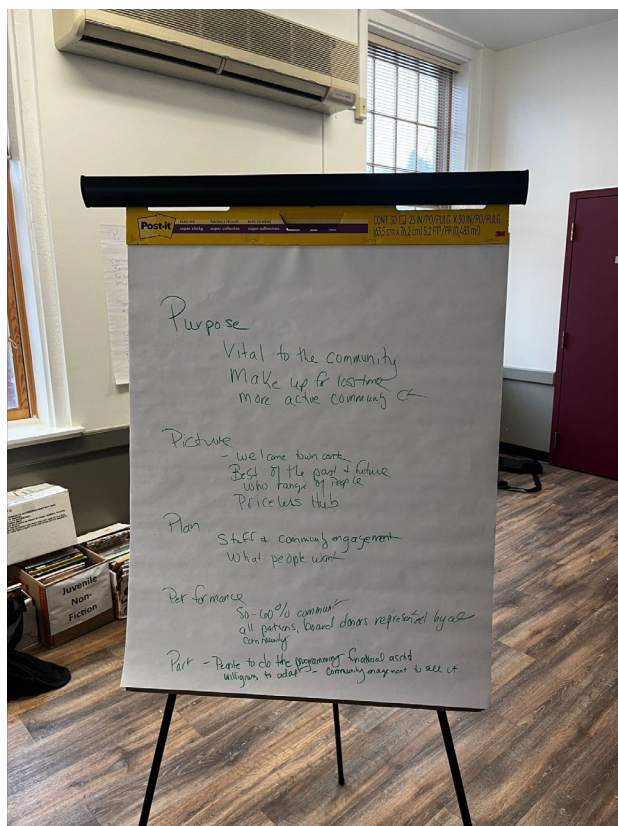
Building / Infrastructure edifice

Books / computers / programming ●●● (1)
 Diversity ●●● (1)
 Community Engagement ●●● (1)
 Commitment to community ●●● (1)









APPENDIX C: EXECUTIVE MEMOS

Executive Memo

Executive Leadership

Author: Michael S. Munson

Submitted: December 30, 2024

Overview

This Memorandum will cover Executive Leadership at the Bennington Free Library (BFL) for purposes of Strategic and Long-Range Planning and will be used by the Board of Directors and Trustees of BFL in the context of developing a new Strategic Plan with the assistance of consultant Matt Harrington of Harrington Brands.

The Bennington Free Library is owned by a Trust and funded in part by an endowment established by its founders. There are five Trustees of the Bennington Free Library as required by the Trust Agreement. Each of the five Trustees is also a Board member. All Trustees serve on a standing committee on investments, which has exclusive authority over the investment and use of the endowment.

The Library has a Board of Directors, currently with twelve (12) active members. Activities of the Board of Directors are governed by Bylaws which were last updated in 2010. The Board of Directors meets bimonthly with the exception of July and August (meetings in September, November, January, March, May and an annual meeting in June). All meetings are presided over by the Chair of the Board, currently Michael S.

Munson. Meetings take place in person, when possible, at the Library, on the third Tuesday of each month. The meetings are video recorded and made available on the BFL website.

Wendy Sharkey is the current Director of BFL and manages the day-to-day operations of the Library. Wendy reports to the Board of Directors. To assist and inform the Board, the Director prepares Board packets including income and expense reports, capital campaign status and fundraising reports, and schedules and information about programs and events, and circulates the same to Board members prior to each meeting. At meetings the Board engages with the Director about all such matters, votes on resolutions, and advises the Director.

The Library has six Committees who meet as necessary to plan, discuss and approve resolutions, and offer insight and recommendations to the full Board.

Those Committees are:

- Buildings and Grounds
- Finance
- Fundraising
- Strategic/Long Range Planning
- Nominating
- Personnel and Policies.

Each Committee has a Chair and members who are also members of the Board of Directors. These Committees have been under-utilized historically.

BFL's strategic plan must explore the ways in which our leadership can improve communication, collaboration and utilization of best practices to meet our goals. Key findings, Challenges and Recommendations are as follows:

Key Findings

● Leadership capacity:

1. The Bennington Free Library needs more volunteers to facilitate fundraising, events and programs at the Library. In the past the Library has utilized a "Friends of the Library" volunteer organization for such purposes, but it was disbanded around 20 years ago and never re-formed. In order to meet our strategic goals, the Board needs more help. Many hands make light work, and with greater human capital we will be able to host more successful events, programs and fundraisers for the Library.

2. The Board of Directors may need to meet more frequently in order to take a greater role in overseeing the operations of the Library and implementing the strategic plan.

3. BFL needs more Board members, preferably with experience and expertise not currently represented on the

Board. The Bennington Free Library has twelve (12) volunteer Board members who serve on three-year terms. Under the Bylaws, the Library may have up to sixteen Board members at any time. The Board should recruit new members with expertise in areas such as grant applications, energy efficiency and construction, engineering, technology, web design, accounting, and diversity / DEI.

4. The bylaws may be amended as necessary by vote of the Board. Bylaws may be amended regarding the number of Board members and the term of service. Term limits may be extended (perhaps to four or five years) to allow Board members to gain the experience necessary to meaningfully participate in planning and implementation of important goals. Longer tenure will allow for greater development of talent and leadership.

5. Committees have not functioned as envisioned in the Bylaws. The various Committees should meet regularly, accompanied by Library employees who sit on the Committee or have expertise in the matters being discussed. Development and circulation of an agenda should proceed each meeting, and resolutions and recommendations of the Committee should be reduced to writing and brought before the

full Board at the next scheduled meeting.

- **Succession Planning:**

1. BFL does not have a leadership training program for Board members, to prepare them for leadership within the Board or for stepping into the role of Trustee. In order to ensure the continuity of functions and leadership, the Library should develop such a program and create incentives for Board members to take on greater leadership roles including becoming Trustees (when such a vacancy occurs).

2. The Friends of the Library should be re-formed with invitations extended broadly to patrons and community members. Membership criteria should be developed in such a manner that the Friends group will be robust, inclusive and reliable. Protocols should be developed to recruit new members and reward members for their service. Utilization of a listserve or phone tree should be made to coordinate volunteer schedules. The Friends group should be self-sustaining, trained, and report to a Coordinator either internal or external to Library leadership.

3. There is no Assistant Director position at the Library, and therefore no employee is formally trained to do the job of Director or to step in as interim director as needed. Should anything happen

to Wendy, a gap in leadership and experience may negatively impact the Library and its patrons.

- **Alignment of Roles with Strategic Vision**

1. The Strategic Plan should consider the composition, function and utilization of the various Committees and their role in the implementation of our strategic vision. Committees should take a more active role in educating and advising the Board of Directors.

2. Delineation of responsibility for implementation of strategic goals between the Director, Board and Committees.

3. Friends of Library may have a leadership structure and report to an employee or Board member who will oversee the program and ensure its functionality and recruitment.

Challenges

- Capacity of existing board members to meet the volunteer needs of the Library (need for additional volunteers).
- Lack of successful fundraising, lack of signature fundraising event.
- Lack of volunteers to facilitate programs, services, and fundraising.

- Current number of Board members and term limits.
- Efficacy of committees must be improved.
- Additional areas of expertise are required among the Board, and/or consultants must be utilized.
- Funding sources: the Library currently receives the vast majority of its funding from the Towns of Bennington, Shaftsbury, Pownal and Woodford. This puts the essential community functions of the Library at the mercy of the Select Boards and their willingness and ability to meet the Library's budget needs. Should funding be cut or denied by any participating Town, the Library may have to cut services, reduce hours or let staff go. The Library requires additional sources of funding and fundraising to ensure its continued operation.
- Board of Directors to meet with greater regularity.
- Committees to have regular formal meetings (Bimonthly + As Necessary).
- Utilize consultants, volunteer professionals to advise boards and committees.
- Add/recruit new board members with expertise lacking in the existing board.
- Extend term limits for board members.
- Director and board members to attend regional trainings and conferences.
- Adopt best practices from other libraries and Vermont Department of Libraries.
- Develop additional sources of funding for the Library.
- Develop and implement leadership training programs within the Board and among the Library employees; consider an Assistant Director position.
- Partner with local schools and non-profit organizations to increase Library usage and improve visibility.

Recommendations

Provide actionable recommendations or options for consideration:

- Re-Form the Friends of the Library, recruit and train members.

Executive Memo

Finance & Fundraising

Authors: Kelley Legacy and Patricia Venti

Submitted: December 31, 2024

Critical Priorities

The library is dependent on its hometown, Bennington, for financial support. Due to its limited financial resources, the library has not been able to pay staff or provide benefits that would make it competitive with similar professional jobs and some other libraries nearby. The location of Bennington is bordered by 2 other states, Massachusetts, New York.

The library must take into consideration other states when considering its employee wage competition, not just Vermont. The limited financial resources of the library limits the library in what services it can offer and what training the staff can participate in.

The library does not have substantial fundraising events. For many years the library had author events and a large book sale. While the pandemic changed the momentum of fundraising events, these events were losing steam pre-pandemic.

Fundraising events not only provide supplemental financial support, they also bring together friends, supporters and patrons of the library and remind others in the community of the role the library provides to the community. Ideally successful events can result in bringing in more supporters and patrons in addition to revenue.

The challenges to bring back these events or others is the lack of an established volunteer group to execute the events as well as limited sponsorship resources in town.

In addition, the library can also be more deliberate in organizing and executing its annual fund program - i.e. different messages for different types of donors; a more robust on-line giving program; recurring gifts; planned gifts, etc.

Accomplishment and Achievements

The library has historically managed its budget well, ending their fiscal year ends in the black. Likewise, the library has been able to budget for repairs over the years, including a new roof and flooring.

Recently the library received over a \$1,000,000 grant to help with the building's heating and cooling systems and other related building repairs. After the successful completion of the work and processing of the grant this should allow the Director and the Board to focus on other aspects of the library going forward, such as programming, fundraising and so forth.

Suggested Action Items

- Grow investments to provide additional support for increasing salaries, training and reducing

reliance on towns.

- Look beyond library focused grants and see if there are other community needed grants that the library could be assisted with.
- Create budgets that align with the libraries strategic plan: programming, repairs and staff development and growth including their goals, salary and continuing education. With the lack of a vision/plan often the repairs, improvements and so forth have been more reactionary

than planned. The future focus will help assist staff, volunteers and donors in their support of the library as well.

Fundraising

Establish a broader group of volunteers to work on more financially rewarding fundraising events. Beyond building/establishing the volunteer base, we should be more strategic in our partnerships with the PM library/other nearby libraries and Bennington Museum to combine and share resources.

Executive Memo

Services and Activities

Author: Wendy Sharkey

Submitted: December 30, 2024

Critical Priorities

The library is a place for the dissemination of information. The form of information comes in different packages, most importantly in physical books, the provision of internet, and the running of programs. The library has great staff all of whom are working at full capacity.

Books remain a staple of the library; our older patrons enjoy the physical items although there is an increase in the desire for e-materials. The selection of materials and the form in which they are used should be studied. Does the library need to move to more e-materials?

The provision of access to the internet is an important service. There are still many without access to computers and/or the internet. The library has increased the number of chrome books that can be checked out to patrons which have been very popular with the new immigrant families in town.

Although the library runs many programs for children there is a gap for programs for teens, young adults, and new adults.

The summer of 2024 the library ran a summer camp for tween and teens which proved to be very successful. This program still not address the need to entice older teens and new adults into the library.

Programming for adults is less prolific. Why? Adult programming is currently done by the reference librarian who also maintains the library website and produces all the images and layout for the "Month in a Minute" e-mail blast.

Currently the library does not have a vision statement so it is hard to judge where the board would like the library to go. As far as aligning with the mission statement the library should be for everyone, all ages and now we cater for the young and the more mature. It should be noted that many of the immigrant families are single people so increasing the children's programming will not address this.

Evolution of Services and Activities in Response to Recent Challenges

During COVID the library added more online services and activities to an already impressive list. These have proven most useful to our patrons. We are engaging more with the community than ever before and have been working with the ECDC, Cat TV, and the Bennington Museum on more projects than ever before. The programming budget for adults was increased two years ago and we have been fortunate to get grants from various entities to help run the "Fit-it-Fun" and the summer camp. The truth of the matter is that everything is more expensive since COVID and there are not enough hours in the day to do everything that we would like. Our most recent hire has a job

description that includes communication hopefully to alleviate the work done by the reference librarian.

Highlighting Recent Services and Activities Successes

The distribution of free COVID tests has been a great hit, so far 10,000 kits have been given out. We are working on the fourth delivery of tests and once they have gone, we will have handed out 12,000 test kits. We have made the kits available to the McCullough Library in North Bennington as well as GBCs (Greater Bennington Community Services). COVID maybe under control but it has not gone away.

“Fix-it-Fun” was a great success with a host of items fixed resulting in less items being put in the landfill and savings to the people who got items fixed as they did not have to buy new. This was a collaboration with BCSWA (Bennington County Solid Waste Alliance) who also attended the events to encourage better recycling habits from those attending.

The new STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math) Center in the children’s room has brought a world of discovery and learning to younger children. It truly is a delight to see the area being used to not only answer questions but to have the children pose even more questions.

The raised beds that have been added to the courtyard have resulted in programming for children. It has been a delight to see two-year old watering the plants. The library had a bumper crop of cucumbers this year and it became a case of wonderful to see you at story time. So far, the raised beds have solely been used for children’s programming there is potential to add in the adults as well or let’s get wild and have some family events.

Current Services and Activities Challenges:

Would I like to see more programming at the library, especially for young adults and new adults? Yes, but programming takes time to organize, and time is money. With staff operating at capacity, it would seem to be a bit of a disconnect.

We should consider a way to evaluate programs that are currently offered to judge their effectiveness. Maybe retire programs that are no longer relevant.

There is not enough time to do everything.

Volunteering has fallen off. It has been hard to find volunteers even to man/person the Vermont History room. We need volunteers to help run programs and to help pull off fundraisers, but currently every event we must spend hours soliciting help from volunteers. There needs to be a more formal system which is more time efficient.

There is not enough time to study the patron needs so how can the library adapt to their needs.

The homeless have taken a liking to sleeping in the alcoves at the entrance to the library. It can be worrisome to individuals that want to return books out of hours through the book drop when they encounter a sleeping person. The same is true for those using the meeting rooms out of hours they may have to run the gauntlet of a pan handler on the way to a meeting.

Gaps in Services and Activities Capacity

The mission statement for the library states that it is for the community, but we have less than 10% of the community signed up to be members. Why? What barriers are there in place that exclude 90% of the community from the library?

While we would like to think that we cater to everyone there is a lack of teenagers and new adults in the library. It should be a priority to find out why this demographic does not come to the library and fix it.

I have not witnessed any succession planning at the Bennington Free Library, and I would advocate that it be something that should be done at the board level and the staff level. Does this mean that the board positions have term limits as board membership has or maybe that the Chair of the board becomes the past chair and the vice chair becomes the chair, etc. Currently it is carried out by a vote each year with a certain reluctance to step forward.

Staff should also have a succession plan or at the very least there should be more than one person who can fill a roll. Cross training.

Hiring of good people is currently very difficult because of the pay scale the library uses. Last year the state carried out a salary survey for all staff in libraries. When I compared the pay rates to the survey only the bookkeeper and the maintenance man received a median salary, everyone else was well below the median rate of pay. This was part of the reason that it took six months to hire a circulation and communications manager.

Recommendations

The library needs to find more time. It is recommended that a friend's group be set up to help with the volunteerism at the library. A friend's group would be a ready source of help when needed and could even take on some of the programming.

You get what you pay for. The rate of pay for all members of staff should at least be at the medial level for the state.

Additional programming should focus on the young adults, new adults, and families. Maybe programs that have run for "x" number of years should be appraised to evaluate their worth, and if necessary retired.

Money, money, money. It must come from somewhere, but do we have to rely upon the whims of the Bennington Select Board and a vote of the people? I have no idea where the money would come from, but I do know that a lot of time is expended on raising the money from the annual fund.

APPENDIX D: WHITE PAPER

White Paper

The Future of Rural Libraries

Cornerstones of the Communities

Rural libraries have long stood as cornerstones of their communities, offering access to information, technology, and education while fostering a sense of connection and belonging. As societal and technological shifts accelerate, rural libraries face both challenges and unprecedented opportunities. This white paper explores the future of rural libraries through the lenses of service, leadership within the organization, financial sustainability, community engagement, and innovation.

Leadership: Building Strong Boards and Executive Teams

Effective leadership will be critical for rural libraries to navigate future challenges. This includes cultivating strong boards of trustees and executive staff capable of strategic planning and adaptive decision-making.

- **Board Development:** Boards must represent the diversity of their communities, bringing varied perspectives and expertise. Ongoing training in governance, fundraising, and innovation will empower trustees to be effective stewards.
- **Executive Leadership:** Library directors must blend traditional

leadership skills with modern competencies such as data-driven decision-making, partnership building, and community engagement.

- **Succession Planning:** Ensuring continuity through leadership transitions will require intentional strategies to identify and develop future leaders within the organization.

Leadership grounded in collaboration and a commitment to lifelong learning will help rural libraries remain resilient.

Finance, Fundraising, and Future Planning

The financial health of rural libraries often depends on a mix of local government funding, grants, and community support. As economic pressures mount, innovative approaches to funding and future planning will be essential.

- **Diversifying Revenue Streams:** Libraries can explore earned income opportunities, such as renting space for events or offering paid workshops. Building endowments can also provide long-term financial stability. An

aging population in rural communities also means more legacy wealth and philanthropy at the end of life.

- **Grant Opportunities:** Pursuing state and federal grants, as well as funding from private foundations, will require professional grant-writing expertise and a clear articulation of library impact.
- **Community Campaigns:** Engaging patrons and donors through storytelling and transparent reporting will build trust, belonging and encourage giving.
- **Strategic Planning:** Libraries must align their financial strategies with long-term goals, incorporating flexibility to respond to unforeseen challenges.

A proactive and diversified approach to finance will enable rural libraries to thrive despite economic uncertainties.

Patrons, Donors, and Community

Building strong relationships with patrons, donors, and the broader community will be critical to the future of rural libraries. These stakeholders are not only users of library services but also champions of the library's mission.

- **Community Engagement:** Hosting events, focus groups, and surveys will ensure that library

services align with evolving community needs.

- **Donor Cultivation:** Recognizing and celebrating donors' contributions can deepen their commitment and inspire further support.
- **Advocacy:** Encouraging patrons to advocate for libraries at the local, state, and national levels will strengthen support for funding and policy initiatives.
- **Inclusivity:** Libraries must ensure their spaces and services are welcoming to all, addressing barriers such as language, accessibility, and cultural differences.
-

By nurturing these relationships, rural libraries can foster a sense of shared ownership and collective impact.

Service: Expanding the Role of Rural Libraries

The traditional role of rural libraries as repositories of books and information has evolved into that of dynamic community hubs. Future rural libraries will need to adapt by providing diverse services that address specific community needs. This could include:

- **Technology Access:** Offering high-speed internet, digital literacy training, and access to tools like 3D printers and coding

workshops.

- **Social Services:** Partnering with local organizations to provide resources such as job search assistance, mental health workshops, and social support for underserved populations.
- **Mobile Libraries:** Reaching remote populations through mobile units equipped with books, tablets, and internet hotspots.
- **Health and Wellness:** Hosting health screenings, fitness classes, and wellness workshops to promote holistic well-being.

By embracing these expanded roles, rural libraries can ensure they remain indispensable to their communities.

Innovation and Education

Innovation and education will be at the heart of the rural library's future, enabling them to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

- **Educational Programming:** Offering workshops on topics such as financial literacy, environmental sustainability, and STEM will position libraries as lifelong learning centers.
- **Technology Integration:** Utilizing emerging technologies,

such as virtual reality and AI, can enhance programming and attract new patrons.

- **Sustainability Initiatives:** Libraries can serve as models of environmental stewardship by incorporating green practices into their operations and educating the community on sustainability.
- **Collaborative Partnerships:** Partnering with schools, local businesses, and nonprofits can expand the library's reach and resources.

Innovation will not only enhance the services rural libraries provide but also cement their role as forward-thinking institutions.

Conclusion

The future of rural libraries lies in their ability to adapt and innovate while staying true to their core mission of serving their communities. By embracing expanded roles, fostering strong leadership, ensuring financial sustainability, engaging stakeholders, and prioritizing innovation, rural libraries can continue to be vital community anchors in the years to come.

Through deliberate action and a commitment to excellence, rural libraries can transcend their traditional roles, becoming indispensable cornerstones of education, connection, and transformation in their communities.