

Bennington Free Library

Strategic Plan 2026

A dynamic community resource where curiosity thrives and lives are enriched.

Board approved May 20, 2025

Prepared by Wendy Sharkey, Deirdre Ryan, Karson Kiesinger & Sarah Blizzard

01 Executive Summary

This Strategic Plan sets the direction for the Bennington Free Library (BFL) for 2026 and beyond. It was developed through a comprehensive process that began with a consultant-facilitated staff SWOT analysis, executive memos from trustees, and a full-day board retreat in January 2025. Following that process, Wendy Sharkey and a working group comprising Deirdre Ryan, Karson Kiesinger, and Sarah Blizzard reviewed all retreat outputs and developed a refined set of four strategic pillars and eleven goals. The Board voted and approved this plan on May 20, 2025.

This document reflects that board-approved plan. It supersedes the consultant's draft in structure and scope, consolidating the original five pillars into four and grounding each goal in the operational realities of the library.

VISION

Bennington Free Library - a dynamic community resource where curiosity thrives and lives are enriched.

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.

CORE VALUES

- Community-driven
- Literacy and lifelong learning
- Pursuit of knowledge
- Intellectual freedom

FOUR STRATEGIC PILLARS

- **1** Community Engagement - engaging the public, nonprofits, the town, and beyond
- **2** Financial Futuring - financial sustainability and diversified revenue
- **3** People - staff, volunteers, and those who support the library
- **4** Space and Physical Resources - the building and grounds entrusted to our care

02 About the Library

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

The Bennington Free Library was founded in 1865 at the corner of Main and Silver Streets in the heart of downtown Bennington, Vermont — making it one of the oldest public libraries in the state. The original building still stands and remains part of the library today, though the facility has been significantly expanded over the decades. The main entrance is now on Silver Street, and the building has grown to encompass 11,511 square feet of space.

The library began operation by the Young Men's Association of Bennington. In its earliest years, membership cost one dollar per year; those who were not members could still borrow books but were required to leave a deposit equal to the value of the book. This changed in 1897, when the Town of Bennington started making annual appropriations to the library, fundamentally broadening public access and shifting the institution toward its modern identity as a free public resource.

Since its founding, the Bennington Free Library has been led by 23 directors. The current Director is Wendy Sharkey, who oversees the day-to-day operations of the library and reports to the Board of Directors. The library is owned by a Trust and governed by a Board of Directors of 12 active members, with five members also serving as Trustees who hold exclusive authority over the endowment established by the library's founders.

The library is uniquely situated in the southwest corner of Vermont, just five miles from both the Massachusetts and New York state borders. This tri-state position shapes the library's identity: it draws patrons from across the region, its Vermont History collection extends to cover the Berkshires and parts of upstate New York, and its staff must consider neighboring states when benchmarking salaries and services.

The library is an independent public library and a proud member of the Catamount Library Network, a consortium of 26 libraries across the state with a shared catalog. Through the consortium, BFL patrons have access to more than 660,000 items. A statewide courier service delivers materials to and from the library twice weekly, and interlibrary loan extends access further still — requests go unfilled only in rare circumstances.

Free membership is available to all residents of Bennington, North Bennington, Shaftsbury, and Woodford. The towns of Bennington, Shaftsbury, Pownal, and Woodford each vote annually on appropriations that form the financial backbone of the library's operations. The library serves not only as a source of books and information, but also as a gathering place, a digital access point, a programming hub, and an anchor of civic life in downtown Bennington.

1865

Founded

54,743

Collection Items

11,511
square
feet

Building

+26%

New Members (prior
year)

LIBRARY DETAILS

Director	Wendy Sharkey
Board Chair	Michael S. Munson
Location	101 Silver Street, Downtown Bennington, VT
Governance	Independent public library; Board of Directors (twelve active) including five Trustees
Consortium	Catamount Library Network - 26 libraries, shared catalog
Service Towns	Bennington, North Bennington, Shaftsbury, Woodford
Funding Towns	Bennington, Shaftsbury, Pownal, Woodford (annual appropriations)
Board approved	May 20, 2025
Goals based on	Calendar year

HOW THIS PLAN WAS DEVELOPED

Following the January 2025 strategic retreat facilitated by Harrington Brands, Wendy Sharkey and a working group (Deirdre Ryan, Karson Kiesinger, Sarah Blizzard) reviewed all retreat outputs and refined the strategic framework into four pillars and eleven goals. The Board approved the plan by vote on May 20, 2025.

03 Community Profile

KEY TRENDS SHAPING LIBRARY SERVICE

- **Population:** Bennington's population is declining and aging, creating both urgency and opportunity for the library to expand its relevance.
- **Engagement:** Fewer than 10% of Bennington residents hold active library memberships despite free access. Engaging the other 90% is the central challenge of this plan.
- **Momentum:** New members grew 26% to 815 in the most recent year - proof that targeted outreach works.
- **Age Gap:** Teens and young adults remain significantly underrepresented. Programming must address the 13-35 age gap.
- **New Residents:** New immigrant and refugee families are among the fastest-growing patron segments, drawn especially by chromebook lending and digital services.
- **Economy:** Rising free and reduced-price meal eligibility in local schools signals growing economic pressure on community households.

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Insights informing this plan were gathered through:

1. Staff SWOT analysis - 6 staff members, December 18, 2024
2. Executive memos from board trustees - December 30-31, 2024
3. Full board strategic retreat - January 11, 2025
4. Working group review sessions – Wendy Sharkey, Deirdre Ryan, Karson Kiesinger, Sarah Blizzard
5. Board meeting discussions, including August 19, 2025

The community told us: the library is trusted and beloved by those who use it - but most of Bennington has never walked through the door. The listening tour planned will tell us why, and what it will take to change that.

04 Situational Analysis

SWOT ANALYSIS

Developed with library staff (December 2024) and refined with the full board at the January 2025 retreat, incorporating updates through August 2025.

STRENGTHS - Deep institutional knowledge and staff experience - Welcoming, barrier-free environment for all patrons - Strong children's and youth programming including STEAM center - Central downtown Bennington location - Established partnerships with nonprofits, schools, and ECDC - Catamount Network consortium access — 660,000+ items - Dedicated, compassionate staff with collaborative team culture - New members grew 26% to 815 in the most recent year	WEAKNESSES - Staff compensation below state median across most roles - Aging building: bathrooms, parking, accessibility, signage - Fewer than 10% of community are active library members - No active Friends of the Library volunteer group - Limited fundraising infrastructure and no signature event - Programming gap for teens, young adults, and new adults - No succession plan or Assistant Director position - Job descriptions not yet fully modernized
OPPORTUNITIES - Re-form Friends Group — Williamstown (Milne) Friends eager to assist - Community Foundation grant applied for teen space - Community Conversation on fundraising scheduled September 30 - Expand corporate sponsorship alongside individual donor growth - Community listening tour to understand and re-engage non-users - Organization chart and updated job descriptions underway for 2025 - Facility assessment nearing completion for November board meeting	THREATS - Heavy dependence on appropriations from four funding towns - Perceived irrelevance vs. digital and screen-based alternatives - Drug use and safety concerns near building entrances - Rising costs limiting staff retention and service expansion - Possible reduction of state or federal library support - Volunteer attrition and difficulty sustaining engagement - Community unaware the library needs support beyond taxes

KEY CHALLENGES

- Financial over-reliance on municipal appropriations leaves the library vulnerable to political and budget shifts in any one of four funding towns.
- Staff are at or beyond capacity. New initiatives require additional staffing, a revived Friends Group, or retiring less-effective programs.

- Below-median compensation is hampering recruitment and retention both part time and full time staff - it took six months to hire a Circulation and Communications Manager. Need to recruit early career staff and interns.
- Safety concerns near building entrances (drug activity) are deterring some patrons, particularly families and older residents.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES

- New member growth of 26% proves outreach works - scaling this is the fastest path to the 10% membership goal.
- The Williamstown (Milne) Friends Group is actively eager to help BFL re-form its own - a ready model and partner.
- A Community Foundation grant has already been applied for to fund a teen space - a potential quick win for the underserved 13-35 cohort.
- The completed ARPA HVAC project in December 2026 will free director and board bandwidth to focus on programming, people, and community engagement.

05 Strategic Priorities & Goals

The following four pillars and eleven goals were approved by the Board of Directors on May 20, 2025. All goals are based on calendar year unless otherwise noted.

1

Community Engagement

Engaging the public, nonprofit partners, the town, and the broader community.

- Goal 1 - Launch community listening tour by Q4 2025; gather feedback from 500+ community members
- Goal 2 - Establish website and media engagement metrics by Q4 2025; explore new social media channels
- Goal 3 - Increase library membership by 10% within 18 months through targeted outreach

2

Financial Futuring

Building financial sustainability and diversifying revenue beyond municipal appropriations.

- Goal 4 - Develop and implement a diversified financial plan by December 2025
- Goal 5 - Increase individual donors and corporate sponsors by 10% by Q1 2026
- Goal 6 - Reestablish a Friends Group with mission, vision, values, and roadmap by Q4 2025

3

People

Investing in the staff, volunteers, and board members who make the library run.

- Goal 7 - Reimagine and align job descriptions with community needs by Q4 2025
- Goal 8 - Bring staff compensation to statewide median rate by 2027; link future increases to core competencies
- Goal 9 - Provide professional development to 100% of staff, trustees, and board by Q1 2026

4

Space & Physical Resources

Caring for, improving, and optimizing the building and grounds for generations to come.

- Goal 10 - Complete comprehensive facility assessment by Q3 2025 (ADA, energy efficiency, safety, pressing needs)
- Goal 11 - Implement three key facility upgrades by end of calendar year 2026

06 Key Initiatives

The following actions were developed by library staff and leadership in February 2026, translating each strategic goal into concrete, operational steps.

PILLAR 1 - COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Goal 1: Launch a community listening tour by Q4 2025 to gather feedback from at least 500 community members to better understand barriers to library engagement.

Update Wendy to share the QR code with board members to share with the community.

Action 1 Promote all library services in facilities outside the library. Focus on supermarkets, banks, schools, and laundromats.

Action 2 Poll the community to determine the most convenient hours of operation and align open hours with community needs.

Action 3 Perform a policy audit to ensure there are no barriers to any part of the library, either physical or digital.

Goal 2: Establish metrics for website and media engagement by Q1 2026. Explore other social media channels.

Action 1 Set up Google Analytics.

Action 2 Employ summer help to explore other social media outlets and set up a content calendar.

Goal 3: Increase library membership by 10% by end of June 2026 through targeted outreach programs.

Action 1 Create programming for teens based on gaming and life skills to entice teens back into the library. Promote new teen programs within schools and on social media.

Action 2 Increase the variety and frequency of programs for adults to create something for everyone.

Action 3 Enhance current childhood literacy by promoting '1000 Books Before Kindergarten' and expanding story time year-round. Promote with the hospital to reach new families.

Action 4 Offer group technology skills classes for adults including basic 'How to' workshops. Promote outside the library for maximum effect.

Action 5 Perform a diversity/purchasing audit to ensure everyone in the community can see themselves in the collection.

Action 6 Hold a community fair where multiple agencies set up stations at the library to generate collaboration between agencies and increase foot traffic.

Action 7 Explore new technologies to enhance the library experience for patrons. Turn technology into programs.

Action 8 Create a marketing strategy that unifies efforts throughout the library and makes the library instantly recognizable.

Action 9 Send welcome letters to all new homeowners in the area introducing the library and encouraging them to get a library card.

Action 10 Use the image of the Skylight as the foundation of our marketing plans.

PILLAR 2 - FINANCIAL FUTURING

Goal 4: Develop and implement a diversified financial plan by December 2025 to maintain level town funding and increase fundraising initiatives.

Action 1 Establish a Marketing & Advocacy Committee for the Board.

Action 2 Identify new funding opportunities.

Action 3 Hold one flagship fundraising event every other year, with smaller events in intervening years. Flagship: Mini-golf, online auction. Smaller: spelling bee, scrabble tournament, puzzle tournament, read-a-thon.

Action 4 Set up a yearly calendar of fundraising events ahead of schedule.

Action 5 Sell more valuable book donations online.

Action 6 Update and distribute information on legacies and bequests.

Action 7 As overdue fines are no longer collected, consider placing a donation box at the library.

Goal 5: Increase individual donors and corporate sponsors by 10% through targeted campaigns and donor appreciation events by March 2026.

Action 1 Hold a donor appreciation event at the library.

Action 2 Use the Grand List to identify possible donors for special campaigns.

Goal 6: Reestablish a Friends Group with mission, vision, and values roadmap by December 2025.

Action 1 Reform the Friends Group. Start with 3 or 4 willing volunteers and create mission, vision, and values.

PILLAR 3 - PEOPLE

Goal 7: Reimagine and align job descriptions with the needs of the community by October 2025.

Action 1 Carry out a job survey to define exactly what each employee is responsible for completing.

Action 2 Establish non-voting youth representation on the Board.

Goal 8: Bring staff compensation to the statewide median rate by 2027. Link future pay increases to core competencies.

Action 1 Compare salaries and benefit levels with the survey results from the working group studying the status of libraries in Vermont.

Action 2 Apply step increases to bring staff in line with state median rates.

Action 3 All staff to wear name tags while at work (first name only) to make them easily identifiable to the public.

Goal 9: Provide professional development to 100% of staff, trustees, and board by April 2026. Link future staff pay increases to professional development.

Action 1 Hold all-staff training at least quarterly covering: leadership, technology, customer service, new methodologies, and safety.

Action 2 Professional staff to attend regional and national conferences on a regular basis.

PILLAR 4 - SPACE & PHYSICAL RESOURCES

Goal 10: Complete a comprehensive facility assessment by November 2025 to identify and prioritize infrastructure improvements, ensuring ADA compliance and energy efficiency.

Activity 1 Create a project list for necessary improvements to the outside of the building.

Activity 2 Create a project list for necessary improvements to the inside of the library.

Activity 3 Revise the current draft disaster plan to meet the standards of the Board.

Activity 4 Look at space utilization within the library, including a new gaming/teen hangout room and a new central location for the Director.

Activity 5 Explore options for increased parking. Originally three spaces plus curbside parking on the street.

Activity 6 Advocate for a bus stop at the library to improve accessibility for those with transportation challenges.

Activity 7 Phone system optimization.

Activity 8 Address landscaping maintenance. Enlist the Garden Club and/or Master Gardeners for ongoing support.

Activity 9 Explore connecting the thermostat to the internet for remote setting during inclement weather.

Activity 10 Weatherize the Vermont History Room.

Goal 11: Implement three key facility upgrades by the end of calendar year 2026.

Activity 1 Weatherization of buildings.

Activity 2 New HVAC system.

07 Implementation Plan

The table below captures all 11 goals with updated deadlines, leads, and implementation notes current as of February 2026.

#	GOAL	DEADLINE	LEAD	NOTES
Pillar 1 — Community Engagement				
1	Launch a community listening tour to gather feedback from at least 500 community members and better understand barriers to library engagement.	Q4 2025	Wendy	QR code to be shared by board members. Methods: surveys, visiting supermarkets, banks, schools, laundromats.
2	Establish metrics for website and media engagement by Q1 2026. Explore other social media channels.	Q1 2026	Deirdre Ryan	Set up Google Analytics; employ summer help for content calendar and social media exploration.
3	Increase library membership by 10% by end of June 2026 through targeted outreach programs.	June 2026	Wendy	Teen gaming/life skills programs; adult variety programming; 1000 Books Before Kindergarten; community fair; welcome letters to new homeowners; Skylight as marketing anchor.
Pillar 2 — Financial Futuring				
4	Develop and implement a diversified financial plan by December 2025 to maintain level town funding and increase fundraising.	Dec 2025	Deirdre Ryan / Kelley / Wendy	Flagship event every other year (mini-golf, auction); smaller events in between; yearly fundraising calendar; sell valuable book donations online; donation box; update legacy/bequest info.
5	Increase individual donors and corporate sponsors by 10% through targeted campaigns and donor appreciation events by March 2026.	Mar 2026	TBD	Donor appreciation event at library; use Grand List to identify prospects.
6	Reestablish a Friends Group with mission, vision, values, and roadmap by December 2025.	Dec 2025	Beth Tegart / Deirdre Ryan	Start with 3-4 willing volunteers. Create mission, vision, and values from scratch.
Pillar 3 — People				
7	Reimagine and align job descriptions with the needs of the community by October 2025.	Oct 2025	Wendy	Job survey to define responsibilities; establish non-voting youth representation on the Board.

8	Bring staff compensation to the statewide median rate by 2027. Link future pay increases to core competencies.	2027	Wendy / Board	Compare with VT library salary survey; apply step increases; all staff to wear first-name name tags.
9	Provide professional development to 100% of staff, trustees, and board by April 2026. Link future pay increases to PD.	Apr 2026	Wendy	Quarterly training: leadership, technology, customer service, methodologies, safety. Professional staff to attend regional/national conferences.
Pillar 4 — Space & Physical Resources				
10	Complete a comprehensive facility assessment by November 2025 to identify and prioritize infrastructure improvements.	Nov 2025	Wendy / Chris	Interior and exterior project lists; disaster plan revision; space utilization (teen room, Director location); parking; bus stop advocacy; phone system; landscaping; thermostat remote access; weatherize VT History Room.
11	Implement three key facility upgrades by end of calendar year 2026.	End December 2026	Wendy	Confirmed: weatherization, new HVAC system. Third upgrade to be determined from facility assessment.

08 Evaluation & Success Metrics

The Director will maintain a running list of goal progress and report to the Board at each meeting. A formal mid-year review is recommended for Q2 2026, with a full plan revision to follow.

METRIC	CURRENT / BASELINE	TARGET
Active library members	815 (grew 26% prior year)	+10% by June 2026
Community listening tour responses	Not yet launched	500+ (Q4 2025)
Website & social engagement metrics	Not yet established	Metrics live Q1 2026
Individual donors	Enter baseline	+10% by Mar 2026
Corporate sponsors	Enter baseline	+10% by Mar 2026
Friends Group established	Disbanded ~20 years ago	Roadmap created Dec 2025
Staff with updated job descriptions	In progress	100% by Oct 2025
Staff compensation vs. state median	Below median (most roles)	At or above median by 2027
Staff and board receiving PD	Enter baseline	100% by Apr 2026
Facility assessment complete	Well underway	Full report Nov 2025 board mtg
Facility upgrades implemented	HVAC in progress	3 upgrades by end CY 2026

09 Financial Overview

CURRENT FUNDING STRUCTURE

The BFL is primarily funded through annual municipal appropriations from the Towns of Bennington, Shaftsbury, Pownal, and Woodford, supplemented by a modest endowment, the annual fund, grants, and occasional fundraisers. The library has historically ended its fiscal year in the black.

A key recent milestone: the library received a grant of \$1,500,000 through the ARPA program for HVAC improvements. With that project underway, director and board attention can now shift to programming, fundraising, and community engagement.

Financial Futuring means reducing dependency on any single source. The goal is enough financial resilience that no town vote, no grant denial, and no unexpected cost can put library services at risk.

PRIORITY INVESTMENTS IDENTIFIED

Friends Group relaunch	Start with 3-4 volunteers; create mission, vision, and values
Flagship fundraising event	Mini-golf or online auction every other year; smaller events in between
Marketing & Advocacy Committee	New Board committee to be established
Staff compensation to state median	Phased step increases targeting 2027
Teen gaming/hangout room	Space utilization study underway; tied to facility assessment
Facility upgrades (3 by end CY 2026)	Weatherization and new HVAC system confirmed; third TBD
Cupola repair	Estimated ~\$51,000; to be included in capital plan

10 Acknowledgments

This Strategic Plan reflects the work of many people. The January 2025 retreat process was facilitated by Matt Harrington of Harrington Brands. The board-approved plan was developed by Wendy Sharkey, Deirdre Ryan, Karson Kiesinger, and Sarah Blizzard through working sessions reviewing all retreat outputs, with ongoing board input through May and August 2025. Key Initiatives were revised in February 2026.

STRATEGIC PLANNING WORKING GROUP

Wendy Sharkey (Director) - Deirdre Ryan - Karson Kiesinger - Sarah Blizzard

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Michael S. Munson (Chair), Kelley Legacy, Patricia Venti, Bruce Smith, Beth Tegart, Brian Cunningham, Jon Goodrich, David Newell and all board members who contributed to the retreat and subsequent review sessions.

ORIGINAL FACILITATION

Matt Harrington, CAE - Harrington Brands (January 2025 strategic retreat and SWOT analysis)

Appendices

The following materials are attached for reference:

- Appendix A - Staff SWOT Analysis (Harrington Brands, December 30, 2024)
- Appendix B - Strategic Retreat Notes (January 11, 2025)
- Appendix C - Executive Memos: Leadership (M. Munson); Finance (K. Legacy & P. Venti); Services (W. Sharkey)
- Appendix D - White Paper: The Future of Rural Libraries (Harrington Brands)
- Appendix E - One-Page Strategic Plan Summary (for community release)
- Appendix F - Community demographic data (Census, school meal eligibility)