

## **PALM SPRINGS PUBLIC LIBRARY ASSESSMENT**

In 2018, the Palm Springs Public Library Board of Trustees contracted with Library Strategies to develop a three-year strategic plan for the Library. As part of that process, the Board also asked for an assessment of the current library building, programs and services.

The Library assessment consisted of our professional observations of the physical structure; an examination of five-years of library usage data, as well as other data about the Library; and a comparison of PSPL to other public libraries serving similar communities. Our observations and findings follow.

### **General Observations**

The Library is well situated on the intersection of two major streets, giving it good visibility to passers-by. It has a digital marquee sign on the corner to advertise Library events as well as a sign adjacent to the entrance. The Library would benefit from a lighted sign at the entrance, as it is difficult to identify the building as a public library as one drives past. The grounds around the Library are attractive and well maintained, as is the Library building.

There are 127 free, ground-level parking spaces, which is insufficient for a library of this size (i.e. 34,000 square feet). A good metric is seven (7) spaces per 1,000 square feet of library space, which equals 238 spaces for this library.

The building has a welcoming and open entrance where staff assistance, circulation functions and the children's area are clearly visible. The combination circulation/reference desk, however, is larger than a library this size needs, in part due to the limited, back-of-house staff work space; i.e. tasks that are generally performed out of the public eye, such as materials check-in, are performed at the public service desk. The four self-check machines near the entrance handle approximately 90% of the circulation, which is an excellent use of the technology. One easy change that would make the desk a bit more welcoming would be to move the materials on hold to a shelf rather than having them on a cart in front of the desk.

The Library is collection centric – book stacks dominate the public space. There are no public-user computers near the Library's entrance. Despite the large number of stacks, however, the building offers some nice open spaces and quiet, behind-the-stacks seating. The public computer area is appropriately adjacent to another quiet space, magazines and newspapers. However, they are relatively hidden at the back of the library in a semi-separate room. There is a service desk in the computer/magazine area which is sometimes staffed by a volunteer, but Library staff cannot see this area from the main service desk.

Surprisingly, there are no small meeting or study spaces in the Library. Public library users across the country are demanding these types of spaces; in fact, the Consultant has never worked with a community that has not voiced this need. The Library does, however, have

sufficient space to install modular, glass-walled meeting rooms in the computer/magazine area or in the main library space if the collection were downsized.

The area for local documents and Chilton's car repair manuals adjacent to the magazines and newspapers is one of the few unsightly areas in the building which could be easily remedied.

There are two lovely patio spaces, one for Library staff and one for public use. The Library could welcome users to enjoy food/drink on the patio; many public libraries today allow snack items and covered drinks in all library spaces.

### **Children's and Teen Spaces**

The children's area is charming with most shelving at child-appropriate heights. The DVD shelving is the exception, with shelving that is too high for many young users. Face-out shelving for picture books would also be a welcome change.

The children's collection appears to be too large, an observation that was borne out by circulation statistics (see section on Library Collection, below). A different approach may be multiple copies of the best in children's literature; for example, a permanent display of the 100 best books for babies that is always kept stocked.

The space is large and could easily accommodate a corner that is zoned for tweens and includes computers and magazines that appeal to this age group. What I did not find welcoming in the space were the signs; there was one about food not being allowed in the Library on every table.

The teen space is, on the positive side, private. However, it is very small and is dominated by a large collection. The space would benefit from more soft seating, a gaming area and a vibe that is attractive to the user group. I suggest the Library work *with* teens when designing a space for them in any new or renovated facility.

### **Collection**

The first collections library visitors see are Hot Off the Press and new books. They are both well-displayed and, based on our observation, popular with the public. Hot Off the Press has been an excellent investment by the Friends of the Library since 2013.

Total Library circulation increased 16.6% over the past five years, an increase that was impacted by two changes at PSPL. First, the Library began using automatic renewal in 2017. With auto renewal, materials are automatically renewed for the customer when they are due unless those items have been requested by another user; renewals are counted just like new circulations. Second, the Library doubled the maximum number of DVD checkouts per user *and* allowed DVDs to be renewed.

A good indication of how well the total collection is used is turnover rate; i.e. the average number of times items circulate in a year. An excellent average turnover rate for the collection as a whole is 4 with a higher average for non-print and children's items and a lower average for non-fiction. Looking at data for the last five fiscal years, PSPL's turnover rate is under 3 with media being the only items averaging over 4. The children's print fiction collection averaged 2.8 and the children's non-fiction collection had an average turnover rate of 1. Using data provided by Library staff, we looked further into collection usage. The children's print collection totals 22,694 items. Forty percent of those items have not circulated in the last year; and 20% have not circulated in the last three years. Similarly, 25% of the teen print collection has not been checked out in the past year.

Clearly the collection needs to be weeded on a more regular basis. We recommend the Library set circulation thresholds for each collection area; e.g. children's fiction, adult non-fiction. For example, the threshold for adult non-fiction might be three years; i.e. any items that have not circulated in the past three years would be eliminated from the collection. Libraries that weed their collections on a regular basis typically see increased circulation and turnover rates.

### **Programming**

The Library is proud of its programming efforts and rightfully so. There are healthy attendance numbers for programs for all age groups, indicating that Library staff understands the types of programs community members want. In general, attendance figures have held firm for the past five years, with no significant decreases or increases.

### **Other Usage Data**

The Library also provided data on library visits and computer use. While the number of hours the Library is open annually has remained constant at a little over 2,500, the number of times people visit the Library has decreased by 20% over the past five years. Adding Sunday hours of service would likely reverse that trend, as Sunday hours tend to be among the busiest in public libraries.

In terms of public computer use, the number of computers available has remained at 36, but the total number of uses has decreased 27%. Many other public libraries are seeing the same type of decrease as more people purchase smart phones and computer prices decrease.

### **Peer Library Assessment**

Library Strategies analyzed two California systems (Escondido, Ontario) that are geographically close, similarly structured, and already recognized by Palm Springs Library leadership as informal but effective yardsticks of their Library's comparative performance. Consultants supplemented this review with an assessment of out-of-state library systems similar to Palm Springs in terms of population, wealth and poverty statistics, and ethnic breakdown. In many cases, confounding variables (such as significantly different governing structures) ruled out a

library as an apples-to-apples benchmark peer. Ultimately, Library Strategies narrowed a list of 50-60 possible contenders to just two fair and particularly illustrative case studies: Rosenberg Public Library (located in Galveston, TX) and Sierra Vista Public Library in Arizona.

Data comes chiefly from two sources. The first is the Public Library Survey (PLS), an annual outputs audit conducted by the federal Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). Statistics for 2017-18 are not yet available; consequently, figures examined for this report reflect 2016 outcomes. The second resource is QuickFacts, a free service of the U.S. Census Bureau which offers 2017 demographic figures for all the communities in question.

**Demographics:** As noted above, Galveston and Sierra Vista were selected for this exercise specifically because several key base demographics mirrored Palm Springs. Nevertheless, meaningful differences rise to the fore. Palm Springs is particularly well educated, with 89% of residents holding a high school diploma and more than 36% boasting a BA or higher college education. Palm Springs is also the whitest city in this sample set, and is home to fewer Hispanics than the two other California communities under consideration.

**Findings:** Palm Springs compares favorably to these peers in most areas, including number of registered users and circulation per capita. PSPL has the second highest budget per capita – significantly more than Escondido or Ontario – and spends more per capita on its collection than any of the other libraries. The Library also offers the most hours of service annually; *however*, about 60% of those hours are at the Welwood Murray Memorial Library which is open 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

Palm Springs has the second largest staff for their population size (staff per 1,000 residents) – more than the two other California libraries. The Library also has the largest percentage of staff members with a Master’s Degree in Library Science (MLS).

Looking at programming, Palm Springs offers fewer total programs than Sierra Vista and Galveston which are closest to Palm Springs in population size. The average attendance per program in Palm Springs is tied with Sierra Vista at 28, the lowest average of the five libraries.

### **Library Staff Survey**

The Consultant also surveyed PSPL staff as part of the planning process, and 89% (16 of 18) staff responded. We learned that the staff vision for the future includes a Library that is more community oriented, addressing issues facing new immigrants in particular. Staff also feels they could do a better job of customer service. Twenty-five percent of staff believes the collection needs to be weeded and that the Library should be offering streaming services for the public. They recognize the facility issues that exist – parking and lack of restroom space among them – and 44% mentioned the need for meeting/study rooms.

## **Friends of the Library and the PSPL Foundation**

The Library is fortunate to have had the long-term support of the Friends of the PSPL. They are an active, engaged group of very dedicated and talented volunteers who provide considerable funding to the PSPL annually. Their focus is on conducting what is typically termed “small fundraising activities” and they do them very well. They are strong partners with the Library who provide needed funds for programming and other non-capital improvements.

The recently-created PSPL Foundation is going to be stepping to the forefront very soon if the Library moves into capital campaign mode to either renovate the current facility or build a new library. This creates a very real state of urgency to expand the capacity of the Foundation’s Board – as well as jump-starting its annual fundraising activities. This should be an absolute priority of the Foundation. The Foundation should focus on identifying and recruiting additional Board members who will be able to identify and solicit major donors. Additionally, the Foundation Board should create a 3-5 year Development Plan to articulate its activities and establish goals within the scope of traditional Foundation activities: annual campaigns, planned giving, corporate sponsorship, etc.

## **Summary**

Clearly Palm Springs has a good public library. The community generously supports the Library with its tax dollars and makes good use of the Library’s resources. However, with the support this library system enjoys – evidenced by attendance at the Strategic Planning retreat – it could and should be a *great* library – a library on par with the Palm Springs Art Museum, for example.

A new building would be a gift to the community and would give the Library an opportunity to enhance the services and programs it offers. While the Library Board and Library Foundation work with the City to make a new building a reality, there are other steps that also need to be taken. The Library should:

- Examine its materials selection and maintenance policies and practices, setting and adhering to thresholds in each area of the collection;
- Determine why visits to the Library have decreased so dramatically in the last five years;
- Clean up the computer/magazine area and provide some quiet study spaces;
- Determine if it is offering the best schedule of hours to meet community needs;
- Determine if the current schedule of programs meets the needs of all community members, including the Hispanic community.

Library Strategies will complete the strategic planning process by working with Library staff to prioritize the actions in the strategic plan and address the issues raised in this organizational assessment. The result will be an eighteen-month Implementation Plan that will establish critical tactics and create a timeline and assigned responsibilities for carrying out these tasks. The implementation plan should be reviewed and updated after one year and focus on the remaining tasks.