Edith Wheeler
MEMORIAL LIBRARY

EDITH WHEELER MEMORIAL LIBRARY

Strategic Plan
2018-2023

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INTRODUCTION

In order to meet the changing needs of the Monroe community, the Edith Wheeler Memorial Library Board of Trustees embarked on a process to re-envision the library and the services it provides.

To that end, the Library Board formed a strategic planning committee and enlisted consultants from Maxine Bleiweis & Associates, a Connecticut-based consulting firm focused on innovative strategic thinking, to provide strategic planning services. What follows is a comprehensive, actionable, and forward-looking strategic plan for 2018-2023.

PLANNING PROCESS

Planning for public library services is most successful when it begins by looking outward at the needs of the community. The community has been placed at the center of the strategic planning process, and the library has listened to and integrated its findings into its priorities and service plans.

To that end, the development of the Edith Wheeler Memorial Library Strategic Plan involved over 700 members of the Monroe community who participated by providing information at focus groups, interviews, and responding to a community survey. Below is a brief description of the data collection process which took place from October – November 2016.

- A series of five focus groups were held in October and November 2016. Groups included business owners, clergy, middle schoolers, non-library users, and parents of preschool children. A total of 35 individuals participated. Seven interviews with "key stakeholders" in the community were also conducted.

- A survey, online and in paper form, was available from October 21 to November 11, 2016. 686 individuals completed the survey.

- An Advisory Council, consisting of 16 members of the Monroe community, was created. This group met three times to learn about 21st century libraries and strategic planning, hear the results of the community assessment, craft a community vision, and select the library's service priorities.

- A Work Group, composed of three Board of Directors members, the library director, and three staff members, met four times to review the community needs assessment and library data, conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, develop a new mission statement, and to write goals, objectives, and measurements based on selected service priorities.

- Input from Library staff was solicited through a staff survey, interviews with several key staff members, and all-staff meetings, including one session focused exclusively on the development of action steps.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

The community assessment process included candid conversations with individuals and groups about their experiences in Monroe, as well as demographic and open-ended survey questions. Through conversations and surveys, it was learned that respondents choose to live in Monroe for several reasons, including the quality of the schools, town amenities, including outdoor recreation options, its location, and having lower taxes than other towns in Fairfield County.

During conversations with community members, it was clear that Monroe faces particular challenges due to the overall changes in statewide demographics as well as decisions made by the town in the past that have implications for today.

First, the demographic shifts mean that there is a sense of division between those who have children in the school system and those who don't. This is compounded by the town's budget structure, which requires budgets to pass by referendum each year. There was a concern about the lack of governmental participation by citizens which results in representation of the community by the few who are engaged.

Second, Monroe made a decision in years past to forego the creation of a town sewer system which would have allowed increased commercial development. As competition increases for businesses to locate within towns and infrastructure continues to age, pressure is also created on the town's budget to make the necessary upgrades to keep a "small town" feel.

These issues are compounded by the lack of a physical and emotional town center. As a community where most people work elsewhere, the relationship with the community centers around schools, places of worship, and recreation. Commerce and opportunities to come together as a community are more fragmented. Residents also raised concerns about how the lack of racial diversity in Monroe may impact their children's preparation for engaging in the wider world as they grow older.

THE ASPIRATION

The Monroe residents who responded to the community survey were invited to list three words that they wish described Monroe. The word cloud below shows a graphic representation of the frequency of responses from those whose descriptors were different than how they currently view Monroe.

COMMUNITY VISION

Based on the information from the community needs assessment, the Advisory Council developed a Community Vision statement to guide the library's service priorities for the next three years.

"We want a community where people trust and value each other, celebrate diversity, foster creativity, and value new ideas; but we have a lack of 1) participation from many citizens and 2) a commonly recognized town center. If we want to reach our aspirations, we need to create an engaged community focused on thoughtful, proactive planning where everyone feels that they belong."

How do we get there? Open-ended survey responses:

Monroe community leaders and residents shared their thoughts and ideas for how to bring the community to its vision, emphasizing a need for increased collaboration, the formation of proactive planning processes, and increased awareness of and support for the diversity that is present in town, as well as understanding the changing world.

"I have children and want them to grow up in a community feeling that they belong, and where everyone is treated equally and fairly."
 (age 36-45)

"In this age of growing isolation and intolerance of others who are different, it is important for everyone to have a place they can go to and live in where they feel safe and welcomed."
(age 66-75)

 "In order to create change, we need to provide welcoming environments for town members to feel comfortable, but also that their opinions are not only welcomed, but encouraged and valued as well."
(age 13-19)

"Inclusivity because I believe everyone should be treated equally, support because I know how important it can be to have people to turn to when you're in need, creativity because it's something that I highly value and believe can lead to improvement"
(age 19-25)

EDITH WHEELER MEMORIAL LIBRARY

Following an examination of the community as a whole, the survey questions and conversations turned to the role of the Edith Wheeler Memorial Library in the eyes of Monroe residents. An overwhelming majority of survey respondents consider the library to be very important to the Monroe community (89%); when combined with those who responded "somewhat important," the total reaches 99%.

The community's affection for its library was also evident in an open-ended question from the survey and focus groups where people listed words that describe the Edith Wheeler Memorial Library.

The survey gathered information from residents about how they use the Edith Wheeler Memorial Library and offered a glimpse into specific demographics – namely people with children under the age of six and stay-at-home parents. This is a key group for the library to focus on as the birth of a child is often the "re-entry" point for people into the public library. Libraries have found that engaging both parents and children into library programming and services is key to the library's relevance in the community.

For example:
- When asked "which services provided by the library are most important to serving the needs of the Monroe community as a whole?", people with children under the age of six were most likely to select "offering a community gathering place"

- There is a gap in awareness by stay-at-home parents in terms of the services the library offers to people seeking additional training or employment. In response to the question cited above, this group was significantly less likely to rate providing training/education as a key priority. Additionally, in response to the question "How much do you think Edith Wheeler Memorial Library contributes to the following things in your community", people with children under the age of six were significantly less likely to respond "a lot" than any other group to the option "helping people find jobs/job training." This represents untapped potential, as these individuals may seek to return to the workforce when their children age.
- Respondents who identify as stay-at-home parents are significantly more likely to say that library programs are "very important" to them when compared to other employment categories.

In addition to understanding how people currently use the library, residents who took the survey and participated in focus groups also shared their aspirations for the Edith Wheeler Memorial Library. The following desires for the library emerged from residents:
- Offer a space where residents can access reliable information and understand controversial topics
- Convene community groups for conversations and deeper understanding
- Provide a welcoming space for multi-generational and experiential learning
- Reach out to groups, organizations, and individuals to bring the community together.

These themes were echoed by library staff who were also surveyed and interviewed as part of the strategic planning process. Staff look forward to the library becoming a center of activities for the community through more effective use of communication, space, and staff. In addition, the Work Group identified four main opportunities for the library: 1) marketing/social media strategy, 2) space needs assessment, 3) staff development, and 4) community engagement and partnerships.

MISSION STATEMENT

The aspirations and opportunities uncovered through the community assessment laid the foundation for the library's new proposed mission statement, to be approved by the Board of Trustees.

> The mission of the Edith Wheeler Memorial Library is to enrich lives, foster success, and build community by bringing people, information, and ideas together in a welcoming environment.
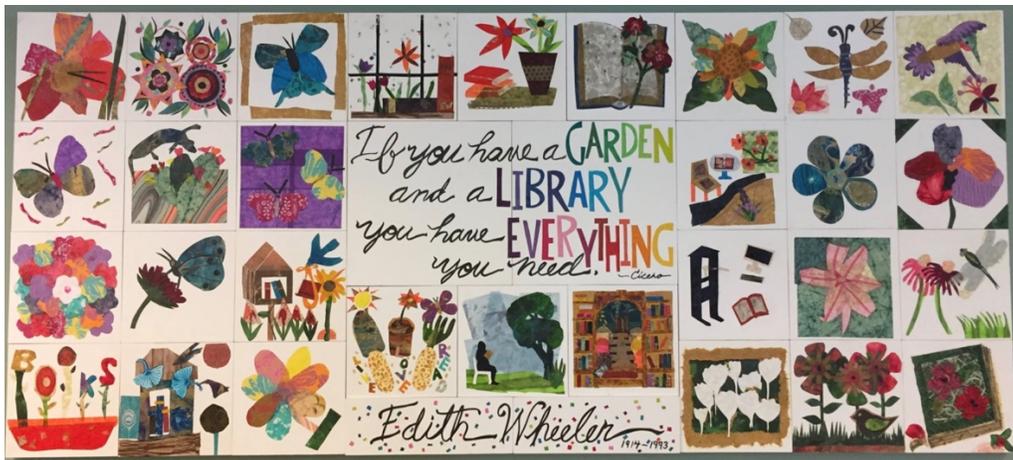
CREATING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Combining community feedback with professional knowledge of best practices in 21st century libraries, goals and objectives were developed by library staff. Each objective has a measurement associated with it to ensure that the library is working effectively toward each goal during the next three years. To put these goals and objectives into action, library staff initially identified more than 100 activities to engage, inspire, and enrich the lives of Monroe residents.

Edith Wheeler Memorial Library's Goals
- Connect to Community through Outreach and Partnerships
- Create a Community of Readers
- Build Successful Enterprises
- Create and Share Content through Experiential Learning
- Be an Informed Citizen
- Provide Exemplary Service

GOAL ONE

Connect to Community through Outreach and
Partnerships: Monroe residents will experience the
library as a space where they belong and can connect
to the community. Everyone will feel welcomed and
supported at the library; it will be a central source for
community information.

Objectives:

Expand outreach to community organizations as
measured by 1) connecting with a minimum of 2
community groups per month, and 2) increasing
mentions of library and library services to community
groups by staff of 10% over baseline by the end of 12
months.

Develop balance of active and quiet areas that meet the needs of the community as
measured by decreasing the number of times people's space needs cannot be
accommodated based on public requests and staff planning over baseline by the end of
24 months.

Engage new and underserved communities as measured by 1) increasing use of
homebound services by 50% over baseline by the end of 12 months, and 2) increasing
use of library services by new/underserved communities as measured by survey by the
end of 24 months.

Enhance staff engagement with patrons through outreach within the library as measured
by an increase in staff interactions with patrons by 10% over baseline by the end of 12
months

GOAL TWO

Create a Community of Readers: Monroe residents will have programs and services designed to foster life-long reading habits.

Objectives:

Explore expanded special needs offerings as measured by offering four programs per year directed at special needs communities.

Improve marketing of current offerings as measured by 1) an increase email recipient list by 10% over current number by the end of 12 months, 2) an increase e-blast open rate by 10% over baseline by the end of 24 months, and 3) an increase in awareness of current offerings based on survey or staff interactions with community members

Expand partnership with community educational institutions as measured by an increased interaction with school groups by 20% over current levels by the end of 12 months.

Expand collections/online offerings for early literacy as measured by an increase usage of early literacy links on website by 5% over baseline by the end of 12 months.

*Explore avenues to bring community together over topics of common interest a*s measured by an increase in participation in each year's community read by 10%

Create communal spaces to share reading opportunities as measured by 1) holding 5 new morning book discussions per year at a coffee house and 2) an increase in contact with community book discussion groups by 10% over baseline by the end of 24 months.

Expand Reader's Advisory as measured by 1) sending out six (6) Reader's Advisory e-communications per year and track email opens and links, and 2) increase monthly page visits to Readers Advisory web page by 10% over baseline (first month web page is up) by the end of 12 months.

GOAL THREE

Build Successful Enterprises: Monroe's entrepreneurs and business owners will have a welcoming place to work on new ideas to bring to the marketplace.

Objectives:

Expand outreach to the business/entrepreneur community as measured by an increase in usage of monthly business promotion table to twelve uses per year.

Promote offerings to the business/entrepreneur community as measured by an increase in circulation of business collection/usage of business services by 10% over baseline by the end of 12 months

Identify and evaluate business needs as measured by implementing at least one new business/entrepreneur program per year based on survey feedback.

Build resources to meet identified needs as measured by an increase in satisfaction of business/entrepreneur users by 20% over baseline by the end of 24 months.

GOAL FOUR

Create and Share Content through Experiential Learning: Monroe's residents will have the opportunity to participate in experiential learning and receive the services and support they need to express themselves by creating original print, video, audio, or visual content in a real-world or virtual environment.

Objectives:

Evaluate current space usage to accommodate experiential learning by experimenting with the right balance between active learning space and quiet space as measured by a decrease in the number of times people's space needs for experiential learning cannot be accommodated based on public requests and staff planning over baseline by the end of 24 months. (need to define experiential learning—like through conversations, discussions, hands-on learning, etc.)

Develop partnerships with makers, clubs, and educators as measured by 1) establishing four partnerships with makers, clubs, and educators by the end of year one, and 2) increase in partnerships by at least one partner in years two and three.

Increase understanding of experiential learning for staff and community as measured by 1) offering at least one experiential learning class per month for community run by community members, and 2) running at least one experiential learning class per month for staff.

Identify community resources to partner with already-existing creative/technical professionals as measured by reaching out to three local creative/technical community businesses/resources for possible partnerships by the end of 12 months.

GOAL FIVE

Be an Informed Citizen: Monroe's residents will have the information they need to support and promote democracy, to fulfill their civic responsibilities at the local, state, and national levels, and to fully participate in community decision-making.

Objectives:

Increase community engagement in civil discourse as measured by holding a series of four "Let's Talk About It" programs in conjunction with other community institutions by the end of 24 months.

Increase outreach to civic groups as measured by co-sponsoring two programs per year with civic groups that promote civic engagement

Expand/promote databases and resources with reliable information as measured by an increase in usage of databases by 20%

GOAL SIX

Provide exemplary service: EWML will ensure that its staffing is responsive to the needs of the community. EWML will focus on building a creative, knowledgeable, and patron-focused team whose emphasis is to provide excellent services, programs, and resources to the community.

Objectives:

Implement staff training and professional development program that emphasizes building a creative, knowledgeable, and patron-focused team as measured by 1) tracking the number of staff attending trainings, 2) 80% of staff will be trained in at least one new task/technology each year, and 3) 20% of staff are able to conduct train-the-trainer activities for other staff or patrons by the end of 12 months.

Identify gaps in service as measured by offering two additional library services per year that meet the needs of new audiences.

Identify space changes necessary to delivery exemplary service as measured by an increase in library patron satisfaction based on surveys or focus groups by the end of 24 months.

KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

In order to meet the community's aspirations for the Edith Wheeler Memorial Library, four foundational issues that impact each of the plan's goals and objectives need to be addressed: community engagement, space reconfiguration, staff training and alignment, and fund development planning.

Community engagement.
The strategic planning process began with an invitation to community members to engage in a comprehensive look at Monroe. In order to keep the community in the forefront of planning library services, the deployment of staff should be reexamined to allow for time and key connections to continue. Engagement might begin with a look at relationships to the community that exist within the EWML organization. A survey of staff and others close to the library could uncover relationships within the community and within the businesses of Monroe. In focus groups, 7th graders were eager to share their expertise with others. This is an easy way to add informal, low-cost technology training to offerings in spaces such as entrances, enlivening the areas. Making community conversations between staff and members a goal that is noted and rewarded is one way to bring attention to this important goal.

Space reconfiguration.
A community member's desire for learning opportunities at a public library should ideally be realized before patrons approach the library doors. The EWML has an opportunity to beckon people from the expansive outside green space into a place of discovery. Both entrances hold possibilities for invitation to explore further. Once inside, the patrons should be greeted by dynamic activity accompanied by traditional resources of books, magazines, and videos. The dynamic activity could include a café setting, demonstrations of active learning in entrances and corridors, and a visual invitation to continue entering the spaces toward a place of discovery for children and families downstairs or to designated quiet areas upstairs. Spaces should be created to change during the week, accommodating different uses and audiences. Utilizing express or self-services for patrons would free staff to work directly with patrons and allow barriers such as large service desks to be diminished.

Staff training and alignment.
At a time of tight budgets and cost controls, often the first item to be sacrificed is staff training. This practice is counterproductive to keeping up with new trends, new technology, and new ways to accomplish tasks in a more cost-effective way. Change

happens more quickly when staff are introduced to new methods. In a small staff situation, cross-training should be employed to reduce stress during staff absences.

Similarly, the organizational charts of public libraries have been static even in the face of change. A step back and an analysis of how the goals and objectives will be accomplished and by whom is likely to illustrate what the organizational alignments should be so that adjustments can be made accordingly. For instance, if community outreach is identified as key, either a staff position should reflect that as a main responsibility or a cross-functional team should be created to undertake the tasks associated with those objectives. Back room workflow should be examined with the goal of freeing up staff for community outreach and other areas identified in this plan.

Fund development planning.
The EWML is poised to rethink the approach to fiscal planning and fundraising strategy. The combination of town funds, a trust established by Edith Wheeler, and an untapped opportunity to explore new funding avenues at a time when people are considering estate planning as it relates to their community are all opportunities to put into motion. Public libraries are examining the role of Friends of the Library and the possibility of creating foundations. As with staff alignment, Friends of the Library goals and purposes should be reexamined to align with the new strategies of the organization. These strategies begin with conversations with key individuals, policy creation, procedures, and an examination of methods that suit the Monroe community.

KEY PEOPLE INVOLVED

Advisory Council members
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Janna Eastwood
Dana Firmender
Rev. Kurt Hueber
Kay Inderdohnen
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