

Expanding the Capacity of the Public Library : Partnerships with Community Based Environmental Groups

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In neighborhoods around the country, individuals and organizations are trying to access environmental information as a critical tool in protecting the future and health of their lives and communities. Many of them have turned to the public library as a resource. What other place is ubiquitous (15,000 nationwide), free, accessible and spanning both local and global information. For many people and organizations, the library is the only point of access to the Internet. As more libraries attain the hardware, wiring and training to take this step this is becoming an increasingly important role for libraries.

Yet many public libraries face tight budgets, limited staff and hard choices about what kind of information to prioritize. The span of environmental information, ranging from geology to economics, is a daunting order for many public librarians. Faced with this reality, many community organizations have made the library-patron relationship a two-way street. Organizational support and interest has enabled libraries to increase environmental information resources while organizational involvement has brought to the library the information resources of the surrounding community. In these partnerships, the library becomes a community information center, realizing its capacity to integrate community members, information, activities as well as contribute some of its own resources.

There are numerous examples of these partnerships across the country, three of which are described in this article in order to convey the range of possibilities these collaborations can engender.

Solon, Iowa

Solon, Iowa is a small, farming community. Common local farming practices include high use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and machinery. These methods are largely supported by the local cooperative extension agents as well as by the nearby land grant university, Iowa State University. Frustrated with the limited information on sustainable organic farming methods, three residents, Jane

Woodhouse, Judy Jedlicka and Susan Cacharakis–Jutz, started a group called Prairie Talk. Initially the group wanted to develop a collection of materials they could share that would be housed in one of their homes. Yet the group decided to think public. As Jane Woodhouse describes, she "saw a lot of resources that I needed and didn't see the point in owning everything. I wanted my community to share resources and the library was the best place to do that." With the enthusiastic support of Solon's librarian, Kris Brown, Prairie Talk's sustainable farming resource center at the Solon Public Library was born.

With a financial support from the Kellogg Foundation received through Practical Farmers of Iowa, Iowa State University Extension, and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Prairie Talk has collected books, periodicals, videos, research papers and audiocassettes covering everything from organic farming philosophy to potato bugs. An organic farming supporter from a nearby town contributed his extensive private collection on long-term loan to the group.

The collection has been an invaluable resource for not only the immediate town, but also for the larger midwest farming community. Prairie Talk has distributed information about the collection through the cooperative extension office, taken displays on the road to conferences and has now made it available through interlibrary loan. For the local town, Prairie Talk and the library held an open house at a nearby church (the library was too small to host it) that alerted many local folks to the new resource in town. Because of the dearth of this kind of information, they have received lending requests from as far away as Wisconsin and from the nearby State University staff who are unable to find some of these materials in the university's library. As farmers, gardeners, and consumers, Prairie Talk members have personally benefited from this information which is also publicly available.

Seattle, Washington

On the other side of the size spectrum is the city of Seattle. Out of a citywide Environmental Summit Meeting convened by the mayor's office came an initiative to establish an Environmental Information Center at the Seattle Public Library. The center includes a computer workstation, magazine display racks, reference books, a vertical file, a bulletin board and references to topical books located throughout the library's other collections including the government depository collection. Four other branch libraries carry core environmental collections.

The center is collaboratively run by the Science and Social Science

Department and the Business and Technology Department of Seattle Public Library. This dual management has helped keep the center responsive to the different user needs. Businesses use the library extensively, reports Howard Fox, one of the managing librarians. It is also an important resource for Seattle's Environmental Educators Committee, of which he is a member. To insure that the Center really can serve the community, the librarians are making sure that the community knows it is there. Rather than waiting for people to discover the Center, Fox and Helen Guitierrez, the other managing librarian, have gone out and conducted workshops for teachers and organizers throughout Seattle.

To determine what kinds of services the library should have, the library surveyed local government and environmental groups. Business suggestions resulted in directories on recycling and Washington State Environmental Services. A grant from a foundation established by an engineering firm resulted in an extensive technical engineering collection. Organizations like the Washington Toxics Coalition have contributed their publications. The library continues to draw from these groups to advise them on the Center development. A library school student volunteer is currently meeting with environmental groups to discuss what kind of computer services the Center could offer and whether the Center should take on a vanguard role in maintaining environmental information technology for the city.

Before the Center even existed, a local environmental group initiated a partnership with the library in order to create accessible environmental information resources on-line. People for Puget Sound have been educating local people about the Puget Sound ecosystem using a variety of public outreach projects and mobilizing them to become committed stewards of the Sound. In 1994 they approached the Seattle Public Library, one of the first public libraries to have Internet access, and asked the library to partner with them in maintaining a "Green Gopher," available through the libraries main catalogue.

The original "Green Gopher" has evolved into a well-linked web site for the Environmental Information Center. Under the "Local" section, six links represent a range of Seattle resources. People for Puget Sound has created a website that includes a calendar of events, a directory of local institutions that can help you learn more about the Sound, articles and updates on current and past Puget Sound environmental issues, and a list of volunteer opportunities. Teaching Resources for Environmental Education (T.R.E.E.) was established by the Department of Housing and Human Services, Department of Education in order to connect people of

all ages to the range of environmental education opportunities available throughout the Seattle area. It includes an extensive list and descriptions of educational resources with contact names, phone numbers, costs and addresses. Additionally, there are links to the City of Seattle's Public Access Network, the Puget Sound Green Pages, and the Thornton Creek Alliance websites.

While the Internet can help orient library patrons to local environmental happenings and resources, the Environmental Information Center page also lists government and more "global" non-governmental links. After visiting the PPS' website and learning about what fish live in the Sound, you can go to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website which includes endangered species descriptions. Alternatively, after reading an article about dioxin and its effect on the Sound ecosystem, a link to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry or to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 10, can provide you with information on local sources of dioxin, government policies affecting dioxin dispersal, the health risks of dioxin and what industries produce it. Links also connect the job seeker to the Environmental Careers Organization and persons concerned with "sound" investment to the Greenmoney Journal. Econet and the Envirolink Network, other networks and search engines, open up even more search possibilities.

To visit the Seattle Public Library's Environmental Information Center, go to <<http://www.spl.lib.wa.us>> and click on the section on "Special Services". People for Puget Sound's web page is <<http://www.pugetsound.org>>.

New York, New York

While folks in Solon and Seattle have strengthened the library as a local information resource, a community gardening group in New York is strengthening the role of the library as a community "place" that meets people's need for beauty, tranquillity and living plants in their local environment. The Hamilton-Fish Branch of the New York Public Library is located in the Lower East Side, a community that struggles against poverty and drugs. Part of this battle has been waged by community gardeners who have sown over 50 gardens throughout the neighborhood. One of these gardens was planted by the late Fred Rosenstiel, a member of the Green Guerrillas, in front of the local branch library.

After Rosenstiel's death, the Green Guerrillas, a citywide urban gardening technical assistance organization, organized volunteers to

revive the neglected garden. With the support of the branch librarian, Jayne Pierce, and through Green Guerrilla staff member Joe Eisman's organizing, volunteers have been digging into the compressed soil planting annuals and perennials. Some volunteers, recruited through the Green Guerrilla's network, didn't know that there was a library there.

Other volunteers who stumbled upon the garden during their usual trip to the library, dug into a garden for the first time. Passersby have commented how nice the garden looks and even how much safer the block feels with less trash and less weeds.

The Green Guerrillas envision integrating the garden with the other information services the library provides. Using native plants to create a wildlife habitat, they hope to generate understanding about the local ecosystem. A worm bin compost facility will provide education on composting and recycling. Literary themes will be woven into the garden while volunteers and library staff create indoor gardening information displays. Finally, to support the spread of community gardening, the Green Guerrillas hope to create a Gardening Resource Center in the library that will offer practical information and contacts in order to start and maintain other gardens throughout the city.

Public libraries are the key to insuring community access to information that may help them in maintaining a safe and healthy environment. In part, this is based in their role as information stewards. However, public libraries go beyond this – they are community integrators and community centers. Faced with shrinking budgets, swiftly changing information technology, and pressing public issues, public libraries and community organizations cannot do their work in isolation. Public libraries provide communities with an institution for pooling resources, exchanging information, connecting with each other. Through partnerships, public libraries will realize their full potential to serve their communities' information needs. In these collaborations, community organizations can increase their outreach, expand their information resources and enhance a sense of community and place. These partnerships require that both the library and the community organizations reexamine their sense of themselves as well as of each other. Community organizations have often overlooked the value of the public library. And for the public library, engaging in partnerships has challenged business as usual, introducing new ideas on what kind of information to provide and how to provide it.

For more information on public library partnerships and environmental information, contact Libraries for the Future and ask about the

Environmental Information Access Project and "The Environmentalist's Guide to the Public Library," Libraries for the Future, 121 W. 27th St., Suite 1102, New York, NY 10001 USA, TEL: 212-352-2330, <lff@inch.com>, <<http://www.lff.org>>.

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