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Public Libraries and Community Economic Development: Partnering for Success

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In the past decade, economic development experts have moved away from traditional approaches to economic development that have relied upon recruiting or attracting large businesses with offers of tax breaks, financial incentives, and other subsidies. Increasingly, communities

are focusing their economic development resources on supporting the growth of existing businesses and creating a nurturing and information-rich environment where new entrepreneurs can flourish.

Entrepreneurship as an Economic Development Strategy

Recent research studies indicate that promoting entrepreneurship and small business development makes sense as an economic development strategy (Edmiston 2007; Neumark, Zhang, and Kolko 2006). The U.S. Small Business Administration (2006) has long recognized the important role small businesses play in the United States economy. It reports that firms with fewer than 20 employees represent 97.5 percent of the total number of firms, account for half of U.S. nonfarm real gross domestic product, and have generated 60 to 80 percent of the net new jobs in the United States over the past decade. The 2006 report to the President devotes an entire chapter to the benefits of “economic gardening”—an entrepreneurial approach to economic development first pioneered in Littleton, Colorado—over “chasing smokestacks.”

Prior *Rural Research Reports* have made the case that entrepreneurship is key in rural economic development strategies (Levere et al. 2005; Macke and Markley 2006). Microenterprises—businesses with fewer than five employees—have a significant impact on rural economies. For example, they employ upwards of 25 percent of the total workforce in almost one-third of Illinois counties (Walzer, Hamm, and Merrett 2007). These microenterprises require special attention and services in order to prosper, but many small communities that depend on them are unable to provide such assistance. What options do such communities have?

This report examines the role that public libraries can play in supporting local economic development efforts and, specifically, in helping to create vibrant communities and meet the information and workforce needs of local entrepreneurs.

The Case for Public Library Involvement

Public libraries are natural partners in local economic development efforts. They are usually centrally located in a community and provide a variety of resources designed to foster human growth and development, promote early literacy and school readiness, and develop workforce

capacity. Larger public libraries usually offer business-related databases and business reference materials, career development tools, and access to trained reference librarians. Many journal articles and studies make the case that public libraries can positively impact local economic

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development efforts and produce mutually beneficial results for both libraries and the business community (e.g., Glass et al. 2000; Sciacca 1998; Walzer and Gruidl 1996).

Maxine Bleiweis (1997), in *Helping Business: The Library's Role in Community Economic Development*, makes the point that libraries depend on a tax base supported in large part by business “and should therefore have a vested interest in the support of that tax base” (xiv). Politically, the arguments for library involvement with economic development efforts are even more compelling. The community leaders who make budget decisions often are business people. If they understand the library's role in the success of local business and economic growth, they will more often fund library operations.

A recent report from the Urban Libraries Council (2007), *Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development*, reports that “investment

in public libraries not only benefits individuals, but it also strengthens community capacity to address urgent issues related to economic development” (1). After identifying the role of public libraries in providing small business support, the report further states that “when libraries work with local and state agencies to provide business development data, workshops, and research, market entry costs to prospective small businesses are reduced, existing businesses are strengthened, and new enterprises are created” (3).

In response to pressure in recent years to justify the resources spent on public libraries, more than a dozen research studies have been conducted to show the return on investment of public dollars spent on library services. These studies overwhelmingly and consistently show that public libraries not only pay fully for their existence but also produce positive returns on taxpayer investments made in them (e.g., Barron et al. 2005; Griffiths et al. 2004, 2006; Imholz and Arns 2007).

Opportunities and Challenges

Public libraries can bring many assets when partnering with business and economic development, including knowledgeable staff; proven return on investment; online and print resources to support business, workforce, and literacy development; and the library building and its technological resources. By thoughtfully leveraging these assets in their communities, librarians can become central players in local development efforts. So, why aren't more public libraries fulfilling this potential?

There are many challenges involved in moving public libraries into the realm of economic development. Libraries may face resource limitations, and librarians often lack expertise in business research. Probably the greatest challenge involves shifting librarians' (or their boards') mindset toward outreach to the business community and creating a business-friendly organization. Often, this challenge results from lack of experience with development approaches or a past history of providing traditional library services such as summer reading programs.

The Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (Walzer and Stott 1998) conducted training with public librarians in rural communities to help them find new roles in supporting local economic development efforts. They report that library involvement usually “depends both on the personality and interests of the librarians as well as on opportunities for involvement in the community” (17). Further, they found that librarians often needed additional training in local development practices as well as in data analysis,

presentation, and marketing techniques. Finally, they reported that some librarians experienced resistance from their library boards to spending time outside the library in the business community.

Myburgh (2003) refers to the “librarian mindset,” characterized as “a focus on the library as the location of the profession, which has a physical presence, rather than on the skills and knowledge that librarians bring to it.” Some librarians are reluctant to leave the confines of the building to become involved in business and community organizations. Library staff in smaller communities, especially, may feel they have insufficient time for outreach to the community because they spend so much time just “keeping the doors open.”

Some Common Public Library Objections to Serving the Business Community

- “We can't show favoritism to one group (business owners). Our mandate is to meet the needs of all community members.”

Fact: Libraries always make choices about who they serve and how they distribute resources. Strategically allocating resources towards supporting business needs can contribute to the economic growth of the community, thus improving the quality of life for all.

- “Businesses can afford to pay for services from the private sector—that’s not our job.”

Fact: Most small business owners have fewer than five employees and don’t have the resources to pay for outside research or marketing services. Getting the right information can make a critical difference to their survival and success. The public library can provide the information small businesses need.

- “Our job is to teach business owners how to find information for themselves.”

Fact: Most business owners do not have the training or time to do research. They need someone else to do it for them.

- “We shouldn’t be subsidizing the business community.”

Fact: The business community is actually subsidizing the library. Successful businesses create jobs and a strong tax base, both of which are needed to support the library.

- “We shouldn’t go outside the library walls into the community; our job is to bring people into the library.”

Fact: While the library building can be a great asset, it’s the people that make a difference in the

community. The more the library staff “shows up” at community events and business meetings—and volunteers for leadership roles—the more the library can develop mutually beneficial partnerships with business and community organizations.

- “We don’t understand the needs of business owners and don’t know how to help them.”

Fact: It’s not rocket science. What most small business owners need falls into a few basic categories such as marketing, industry statistics, and demographics. A librarian who knows how to use basic reference sources can quickly master these kinds of requests.

Even in the context of these many challenges, librarians in both small and large communities have re-envisioned the role of the library in community economic development. They have been rewarded with exciting new partnerships and success stories. These visionary librarians have set up small business information centers that offer reference services and online business databases, chaired local chamber of commerce committees (or even the chamber itself), offered classes to local business owners, partnered with local SCORE and Small Business Development Center counselors to provide business research to their clients, and collaborated with local workforce centers to train the public in searching and applying for job opportunities online.

Library System of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania



Rhonda Kleiman (left) and Donna Brice, Lancaster Library System, at Lancaster Chamber of Commerce and Industry Business Expo
Photo courtesy of Rhonda Kleiman

The Library System of Lancaster County serves a total population approaching 500,000, with a total of 14 member libraries. Several years ago, they partnered with the Lancaster County Planning Commission to create Biz Info to Grow (BIG), a set of five business information centers located in the central library in Lancaster and in four smaller community libraries. Librarian Rhonda Kleiman, Business Information Coordinator for the library system, has a background in special libraries and a passion for helping business owners.

The BIG information centers offer a wide variety of online business databases free-of-charge both on-site and via remote access. Kleiman and business reference librarian Diane Pawling assist business owners in using the databases as well as answer specific questions and provide customized research. Here are some examples of recent projects:

- A local investor wanted to purchase a former industrial building and turn it into a visual arts center. BIG staff provided demographics of local people who would support such a center off-season, demographics of people from the surrounding environs, and information about other models of successful visual arts centers such as the Torpedo Factory.
- A major engineering company wanted information on industrial parks located off interstate highways. Kleiman provided information about the typical build time of such parks from conception to completion and specific information about an industrial park being developed in a neighboring county.
- A national company that manufactures auto parts has a branch office in Lancaster County. The marketing manager wanted to identify distribution companies in Japan for their marketing campaign. Kleiman provided a targeted list of Japanese companies, and the client was thrilled. The library director said it was the best PR the library could have provided since his company is a major contributor to the library.
- A small local toy manufacturer needed to find safety regulations for toy trains. BIG staff found the information for them on the Consumer Product Safety Commission and Toy Industry Association websites.
- A local jeweler was trying to find the total dollar amount spent on jewelry in Lancaster County. She had been spinning her wheels and not finding the information she needed. Kleiman found the information for her in about two minutes on the U.S. Census Bureau Economic Census website.

Kleiman and Pawling also make many presentations to business owners on the resources available to them—for example, how to find competitors and financial information online. Kleiman believes these presentations are far more effective than advertising in reaching their target audience.

Impact statistics show that during 2006 there were nearly 1,500 requests for information from local business owners, and more than 600 would-be and established entrepreneurs attended the presentations.

The library staff is very visible in the community. Kleiman serves on the boards of several community workforce and business groups, including the venture capital task force of the Economic Development Company of Lancaster. According to Kleiman (2007), “[A]ll of these organizations view the Library System and our Biz Info to Grow program as a vital part of the county’s economic development.”

Success Story: Greeley Economic Gardening Project

Kelly Peters (2007), Economic Development Manager for the City of Greeley (population 87,000), Colorado approached the Weld Library District to gain support for the City’s Economic Gardening program, which provides research services to local entrepreneurs. Two reference librarians stepped up to the plate and volunteered to do research projects for the businesses. Peters found that the public librarians, even though they had limited knowledge of business research at the outset of the project, were eager to learn. Along with two business librarians from the local community college and university, they created a small learning group that began meeting regularly to discuss business research tools and techniques. They also met with the businesses they were assisting to hear first hand what the business owners needed.

Peters reports that the librarians completed three large research projects in the first six months, including one supporting the county airport in its efforts to recruit aviation-related businesses to its industrial office space. For this project, they researched innovation and trends in the aviation industry, identified 20 companies that were likely targets for the airport’s recruiting efforts, and created detailed profiles on each of the companies.

Cecil County Public Library Small Business Information Center

Located at the central library in Elkhorn (population 14,753), the Cecil County (Maryland) Public Library Small Business Information Center serves a county population of nearly 100,000. The center started with a \$47,000 state grant, which was matched with local in-kind contributions of more than \$13,000. The county commissioners have funded the center since grant funding expired.

Lera Chitwood, a librarian with both MLS and MBA degrees, staffs the center full time. She worked for many years in a corporate setting as a competitive intelligence professional and has also owned and operated a small business. In addition to assembling a collection of resources and providing business reference services, she has gone into the community to find partners, speaking at business and community group meetings. She now serves on several committees and works



Kabir Abubakar, Kebbi Web Hosting, LLC (www.kebbistate.com) (right) with Lera Chitwood, Small Business Librarian

Photo courtesy of Lera Chitwood

closely with Cecil Business Resource Partners, an informal network that includes the workforce center, Small Business Development Center, SCORE, community college, economic development office, and chamber of commerce.

Chitwood (2007) believes in forming and sustaining ongoing relationships with business clients. Her hands-on approach involves meeting with prospective and actual business owners to find out what they need: “They don’t have money and they don’t have time. I do much of the research and hand it to them.” She typically sees more than ten clients a month and has assisted in the launch of 30 new businesses. Some of the businesses she has worked with include the following:

- A green technology company that developed a product that converts waste into water and energy and needed help getting it patented and to market. Chitwood provided the owner with in-depth statistics on the industries in which her product could be used, identified potential competitors, helped the owner convert her technical content into business terminology and projections needed in a business plan, and connected her to local experts who could help her apply for a patent and obtain funding. All of this assistance helped her win her first grant, an Aberdeen Technology Transfer Initiative grant for \$57,000. Chitwood even went so far as to make her own garage available for the owner to develop her prototype and demonstrate her proof of concept.
- A man with dual citizenship in the U.S. and Nigeria wanted to create an Internet business that would serve the Nigerian market. Chitwood consulted with him about the details of starting an international web hosting business, including information about

the ethics of the Internet, Internet development and cultural differences, the importance of domain extensions, how he could make an income with web hosting, and what content to include on the site. As a result of mutual connections with other Cecil Business Resource Partners, the chamber sponsored him to go on a government tour of Baltimore, and he received a scholarship to attend the Cecil Leadership Institute.

Many of the success stories are profiled on the Small Business Information Center website: www.cecil.ebranch.info/SuccessStories.htm.

Success Story: Libraries Mean Business

Ron Newlin, Consultant/Project Manager. The Indiana Cooperative Library Services Authority (INCOLSA), a statewide nonprofit membership cooperative of 770 public, school, and academic libraries, developed the Libraries Mean Business Program, a series of initiatives for the business and economic development community. The dual goals of this program are (1) to give business and economic development leaders a better awareness of the assets already available through all libraries in the state and (2) to identify additional business and community development needs that INCOLSA and its member libraries can help to meet. A team of reference library specialists in business research developed staff training and public programs that were delivered in 16 local communities between April 2006 and March 2007.

Several early success stories have emerged from the initiative (Newlin 2007). In one case, a roofing contractor attended one of the public programs in a suburb of Indianapolis. After learning about ReferenceUSA, he used it to create a list of addresses of houses affected by a recent hailstorm. The business owner returned to the library three months later to report that his marketing campaign using that list had generated \$1 million worth of business.

Another success story involves a small public library that hosted a Libraries Mean Business program. The library’s limited license to the ReferenceUSA database only allowed it to be used within the library. When the library staff demonstrated to local business leaders how to use the database to create sales leads and marketing lists, the local economic development corporation offered to pay to upgrade the library’s subscription to make it available remotely.

Practical Steps for Creating Public Library/Economic Development Partnerships

In order for public library staff and community business leaders to create a productive partnership, librarians must get out into the community. Walzer and Gruidl (1998) recommend that library staff should be prepared to spend at least ten percent of their time in activities outside the library building. These forays into the community might include meeting with community leaders, such as the mayor, city council staff, and economic development staff, to learn about projects currently under way and the information resources needed to support these community efforts. Library staff can actively participate—and take on leadership roles—in business organizations such as the chamber of commerce. They can also invite business groups to hold meetings and offer workshops in the library as well as make presentations about library resources to business, economic development, and service groups.

Maxine Bleiweis (1997) suggests that libraries gather information from their potential business clients by holding focus groups, using written surveys and questionnaires, and conducting on-site business audits with business owners to identify their most pressing needs. The library can then create service offerings to meet those expressed needs.

Numerous other opportunities exist for public libraries to partner with local economic development and business support efforts:

- Create and host networking opportunities such as early morning business meetings and brown bag lunches.
- Develop partnerships with other organizations that provide business services, including small business development centers, chambers of commerce, community colleges, workforce centers, and financial institutions. Meet with each organization's leadership to explore possibilities for collaboration. Attend their meetings, make presentations to their members and clients, and offer to host their meetings at the library.
- Create a small business information center in the library or at least a kiosk that offers basic business information and lists of local resources.
- Become active in local economic development and entrepreneurship support efforts such as downtown redevelopment authorities, Main Street programs, business retention and expansion (BRE) programs,

venture capital clubs, and local merchants' associations.

- Work with the local SCORE chapter, or set up a mentorship program using retired business people to mentor new businesses.
- Track successes. Record new business start-ups as well as the number and types of reference questions answered. Collect case studies with anecdotal information. Publish small business success stories, and highlight local entrepreneurs on the library's website and bulletin board.

To take advantage of these opportunities, library staff may need training in the basics of business research and economic development. Training in economic development may be available through university-affiliated programs such as the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs and cooperative extension programs. Local chambers of commerce, small business development centers, and other business support organizations and consultants can help librarians understand the types of information local business owners need to be successful. Key information needs fall into the categories of marketing resources, competition, and industry or market information. Librarians can translate these information needs into appropriate resources and services such as the following:

- Online databases that business owners can access from their locations—These include ReferenceUSA and general business databases produced by EBSCO and Thomson Gale. These sources are often available through regional library consortia or the state library.
- Tip sheets that connect business owners' typical information needs with the print and online resources provided by the library—for example, the sources they could use to create a list of prospective customers or competitors, find industry information and key business ratios, and research a company.
- A folder of customized information for a business owner that includes articles, websites, trade associations, industry surveys, pertinent demographics, lists of possible competitors and customers, and other resources related to their business.

- A resource guide on how to start a business in the community—Make it available on the library’s website (e.g., see Lancaster Library System’s Business Start-up Toolkit, www.lancasterlibraries.org/lslc/cwp/view.asp?a=3&q=467470). Provide links to local, state, and national business organizations and data.
- Telephone and online reference services that do not require business owners to come to the library for help
- A marketing campaign that targets newly registered businesses with a postcard describing the library’s services and resources
- A monthly e-newsletter sent to local business owners who sign up that includes research tips, information resources, and examples of how businesses have used library resources
- A local business directory or database of targeted entrepreneurs—Local data is available through companies such as Dun & Bradstreet and ReferenceUSA as well as through city or county tax records. If the community is small, the public library can enlist local high school or community college students who are interested in business or entrepreneurship to compile and update the database through phone calls or field visits.
- Presentations on topics such as finding competitors and financial information online to be offered in the library or through the local small business development center, chamber of commerce, or community college
- Community fact sheets on local resources for finding employees, obtaining business loans, and addressing small business legal and insurance needs
- Demographics and market characteristics for the regional market area—Such data is often available through the U.S. Census Bureau.
- A list of free online resources for business research (see *Free and Low-Cost Resources for Supporting Local Entrepreneurs*, downloadable from www.growinglocaleconomies.com/resources)

Success Stories: Partnerships That Work

LaWanda Roudebush, Director of the Davenport (Iowa) Public Library. Roudebush partners with the New Ventures Center, a consortium of business development groups that serves as the economic development agent in the community. Her reference staff provides classes to center clients to explain how to search various business databases. She has worked with nearby Palmer College of Chiropractic to integrate a business information program into their curriculum so students can learn the practical business aspects of running a chiropractic office. The library provides supplementary materials for the students, and the students learn about the library’s business databases. The library also works with the community college career center and local workforce center to train the public to find and apply for jobs online.

Joan C. Smith, Library Head, Hope Borbas Okemos (Michigan) Library, a branch of the Capital Area District Library (CADL). Smith is a member of the Meridian Township’s (population 39,000) entrepreneurship development team. The team of around 30 people includes representatives from the business community, township administration, Michigan State University Cooperative Extension economic development staff, the Small Business Technology and Development Center, and greater Lansing business support organizations. They meet monthly, often at the library, with the goal of developing a Meridian Asset Resource Center (MARC) to provide existing and would-be entrepreneurs with the expertise they need to be successful. The MARC will be housed at the library, which is providing print and online resources such as ReferenceUSA and Business Decision as well as a meeting space for counselors to sit down with prospective clients. The CADL website also offers extensive resources and support for small businesses at www.cadl.org/answers/business/business-main.

Brian Miller, Director, Millington (Tennessee) Public Library. The Millington Public Library serves an economically challenged town of just over 10,000 people. Miller actively participates in local business and service organizations, such as the chamber of commerce and Rotary Club, as well as with local workforce initiatives. As a result of his efforts, business and community sponsorships of the library have increased by 30 percent, and he has achieved “better communication within the business community.” A partnership with Southwest Community College has led to construction of a satellite distance learning classroom and state-of-the-art meeting room in the library to provide small business and career development services.

Cynthia Fuerst, Director, Kankakee (Illinois) Public Library. Fuerst took over a rundown library in an economically devastated downtown area in 1995. She applied for grants and hired a consultant to develop a space needs assessment and a fundraising consultant to determine the community's potential to pay for a new facility. When the mayor and a developer proposed that the library move into a vacant seven-story building along with some office spaces, it required cramming a

multi-year building project into just one year. Her reaction was "Let's go!" Since then, the new library has opened, library statistics have skyrocketed, and the library has become the catalyst for downtown redevelopment. Her budget increased from \$200,000 to \$1.4 million. She credits her role as making the most of what she had, keeping an open mind, and being ready when the opportunity presented itself.

Conclusion

The small business sector is an important driver of economic growth in the local community. The public library is part of the local economy and possesses a variety of assets that can help local small businesses grow and thrive, thus contributing to the wealth and vitality of the community.

To accomplish this goal, libraries must create partnerships with the other players in local economic development efforts and take an active leadership role in reaching out to the business community. Such partnerships will prove beneficial to both the public library and the community it serves.

Resources

Public Libraries with Small Business Information Centers

Cecil County (Maryland) Public Library SBIC, www.cecil.ebranch.info/SmallBusinessInformationCenter.htm

Library System of Lancaster County (Pennsylvania), Business Information to Grow (BIG) centers, www.lancasterlibraries.org/lslc/cwp/view.asp?a=3&q=466847#

Memphis (Tennessee) Public Library, www.memphislibrary.org/ftsbc/center2.htm

Pima County (Arizona) Business Information Center, www.library.pima.gov/research/business

Simsbury (Connecticut) Public Library, www.simsburylibrary.info/brc.htm

Small Business Information Center, the Business Library of the Brooklyn Public Library, www.biz.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/index.cfm/bay/content.research/pcatid/64/catid/94/cpid/91.htm

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