

LARCHMONT PUBLIC LIBRARY
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR
MAY, 2011

I suppose that everyone about to retire examines their institution and their role in it with a combination of interest, detachment, rue and pride. I am no exception. Therefore kindly indulge me in the opportunity to ruminate, advocate, and prognosticate in this, my last monthly report to you.

When I arrived at LPL in 1995, the staff was still using typewriters and reference librarians routinely had to refer people to “larger” libraries for the information they needed. The staff, excellent individuals all, were mired in procedures that had not often been reexamined: there was a lot of “that’s the way it’s always been done” thinking in place, and, as far as I could tell, staff were not encouraged to make suggestions, far less changes.

What we did have was a Board of Trustees that was enthusiastic about change and foresaw the major changes sweeping across libraries, many of them directly tied to computers. When I arrived here the reference staff asked me to implement a LAN for databases on CD; instead we got online, realtime electronic databases that transformed all libraries into repositories of vast amounts of data, albeit invisible ones. I once said that were our online resources physical, we would need to add eight stories to this library to house them; that amount of space would likely be too small today. There is no longer any such thing as a “small” library, but the key to unlocking those resources is the staff. Therefore, constant training and re-training of staff, particularly the librarians, is essential for public service. Our challenges yesterday were the internet and databases; our challenge today is streaming media; our challenge tomorrow is unknown, but rest assured, it will arrive!

Library Services

When I was a grad student, people told me that the book was dead because microforms would kill it. When I was a library consultant, people told me that the book (and libraries) were dead because the Internet would kill them.

Now people are saying the book is dead because e-books will reign.

Even as the doomsayers were making their predictions, libraries became more and more important. This library saw major increases in usage and circulation over the past fifteen years, and this use and support by our public shows no sign of diminishing. This library is a community hub. It provides identity to the community, and, more importantly, is a central clearinghouse for many, many services. People will continue to borrow books and physical items for many years to come. More importantly, they come here to learn what is happening: you can buy a book from Amazon if you know what book you want, but if you want to browse and see what books are out there---to learn what you don’t know—you need a mass of materials. A bricks and mortar place is also necessary if you need a retreat, a quiet place to study, to read, to share discussion about books, watch a film with others, listen to a lecture.

People also need someone to teach them about the new technologies. Library staff, who always taught the public, is critical in this new world of technologically based resources. That role has been increasing and will continue to grow. E-content promises better delivery and brings new issues. The challenge, for libraries, is to be certain that their staffs have the necessary training and development to keep abreast of the new technologies, to choose the technologies that will survive, and to secure the financing to permit this.

library staff. We have a strong and dedicated staff in place. All of our folks are committed to the concept and delivery of excellent public service; indeed, virtually all the library’s personnel resources

are spent on public service delivery. There is no separate “technical services” staff, nor are there many resources allocated to “back room” allocations of any sort. This director has never had a secretary, and even the Assistant to the Director, Linda Ronaghan, has worked the public service desks when needed.

As of this writing, there are several vacancies to be addressed by the next Director. Public relations has been outsourced for now; the need for a full-time person in that slot must be reassessed. The Assistant to the Director is retiring next month, and that position, which includes all bookkeeping, personnel work and the catchall “related duties” should probably be filled by the next Director. (Linda has agreed to return part-time in the interim to do the financial work, which will ensure both continuity and uniformity.)

All of our librarians are all wonderful and understand the changing role of the library and the need for them to be teachers, guides, pathfinders and explorers. They, in turn, need to be supported with continuing education and professional involvement in library associations.

The Children’s Room has become “the place to be” and another children’s librarian would be useful. Rebecca has done an outstanding job in building a devoted clientele; she could use more assistance.

Our excellent support staff should expect their jobs to grow and change as libraries shift their focus from physical materials to e-content. The support staff of the future needs to be really, really comfortable with technologies and prepare to serve as guides to the land. Finally, it is likely that another circulation system migration will occur within the next three years, probably to an open-source system like Evergreen or Koha, and meaningful staff manipulation of code and data will be within reach.

Physical Plant. Maintenance of the Library building has become the responsibility of the Library. This may be good or bad, but it is the truth. Before I arrived, much maintenance had been neglected despite the fact that the Village employed a full-time engineer. A public building is a public trust; keeping it in good shape, planning for required projects, and implementing them with intelligence and cost-efficiency is part of that trust. The Library Board has accepted the reality and responsibility for the planning and implementation of building maintenance. The hiring of John O’Malley by the Village in late 1996 as Superintendent of Buildings has been a godsend for the Library, providing a knowledgeable and conscientious individual who could accomplish some repairs himself and supervise larger projects. This building, comprised essentially of three separate units, is a complex one. John knows the building inside and out and takes justifiable pride in all that has been accomplished. These projects include a major renovation of the HVAC system that has made it far more fuel-efficient as well as more comfortable for the public and the staff; roofing repairs; lintel replacements and masonry repairs, and a number of other projects, from renovating existing bathrooms to recarpeting. In all, some three dozen projects have been accomplished in the last fifteen years. The most major and obvious, of course, has been renovating the Children’s Room and the infrastructure of the building that houses it, but the “smaller” projects are not to be ignored or underestimated. It has been our practice to create five-year charts of building projects for items not in the operating budget: in January, I took that chart out to the year 2019, in order to list the items I know need attention and suggest the ballpark costs (\$1,105,900) that would be needed to finance such projects. Please note that there is no guarantee that unanticipated events won’t happen! As the role of the library changes, the reference room should be re-visioned; it may better serve as an area for young adults or a work/seating area for the public. Every once in a while I think of building out in front for a new circ area, delivery space, and more public restrooms. There is a space outside Tech Services (currently a closet) that would make an ideal handicapped restroom. As with a house, there are always things to do and plenty of wish lists! However, with the care and attention that the Board, assisted by

John O'Malley, will lavish upon the building, I know it is in good hands.

Library Finances. The establishment of a capital fund for the building in 1996 has proven useful and necessary. Whether our current method of funding it proves adequate for future needs will have to be monitored and reassessed periodically.

The apparent likelihood of a tax cap and the general state of the economy are, of course, worrisome. This library is as cost-efficient an operation as one could hope for, but the single largest cost of library operations is labor, and staff is, as discussed above, the heart and soul of library services. Given the public sentiments and the economic realities of today, however, it is likely that there will be changes in public sector employment within the coming years that are not in the library's control. There will also be some changes within our control. Further, given the rise in popularity of e-content, fine revenues will decrease, processing and handling of physical items will diminish and the (perhaps smaller) staff will be deployed in other ways.

We were fortunate that we received seven major grants for the Children's Room renovation, allowing us to maintain the fund balance that we had earmarked as our reserve for that project. However, we have already used one-third of the fund balance, and the building projects in progress—the boiler replacement and the façade/columns projects—will eat into it as well. Since bonding is not in the library's purview, care must be taken to assure adequate reserves for both planned and unplanned project and events.

Library Governance. This Library has been blessed in having a pool of Library Board members who are selfless, intelligent, thoughtful and interested only in assuring the best, most cost-effective library service to the community. I have enjoyed working with each and every member of the Board, and particularly note the four outstanding Board Chairs—Joan Faulkner, Bill Dentzer, Miriam Curnin and Pamela Dubitsky—all of with whom it's been my pleasure to work. The hours of work you have all volunteered has made a true difference to our community. I did not exaggerate when I broadcast that that Larchmont has the best Board of Trustees in the State!

When I was being interviewed and the composition of the Library Board was explained, I asked what happened when the Board split on Town/Village lines. The members of the Board looked at one another and told me that had never happened. Suspiciously, I thought to myself, "That can't be true." But it is indeed true: it has never happened even once during my tenure. I attribute this to the fact that intelligent people are working solely for the common good. Like a Quaker meeting group, the Board arrives at consensus after thoughtful discussion.

The sharing of library services through an intelligent, far-sighted intermunicipal agreement has been, I suggest, a boon for both the Village and the Town. (Working with both municipalities has been a wonderful, and amazingly smooth, experience. I thank the officials and employees of both the Village and the Town who have made my job both easy and fun.) The mutual cooperation and respect must be the envy of the state, and I would hope that it will continue long past the contract's expiration date in 2033. That said, the State's goal of making municipal libraries become special library districts is still a reality and future Boards will have to address that issue.

In summary: The Larchmont Public Library is in great shape, which is one of the reasons I've chosen this time to leave. June Hesler will be outstanding as Interim Director and I know the staff and Board will provide all the help and support she needs. I will miss you all and thank you for your support, wisdom and work through the years. If I can ever do anything for the Library, please do not hesitate to call upon me.

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