CONNECTING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

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Connecting with Local Government Officials

Introduction

This guide is for library directors, staff, and board members who are interested in developing better relationships with local government officials. It will provide ideas for language to use when talking about the value of libraries. Ultimately, the goal is for you to have a better relationship with local government officials – one where you can work through disagreements, find commonalities, see value in each other's work, and work together in service to your community.

We'll cover the following items in this guide

- Why it is as much about changing your mindset and view of the world as it is about changing your language.
- What is worrying Montana local government officials.
- How to identify which worries the library is helping to address and how to talk about ways the library helps address challenges.
- What to do if you can't think of anything the library does that your local government officials care about.
- Tips for making this work stick by creating a practice of thinking community well-being first and leading with that in planning, delivering, and talking about library services.

Why should you invest the time in doing this work?

- It has the potential to reduce conflict with local government officials.
- It can position the library to receive more funding and moral support from local government, the community, or private donors. The language you learn and the ability to identify what the community needs and how the library helps is valuable for obtaining funding for the library. This includes local government, state government, and private funds.
- Community members need us to work together and need to see us working together. It gives them hope.
- The library will be serving the community and will be a partner in helping build a better community. While there are some things we can do alone, most of society's challenges require us to work with others. This work gives you the skills and connections to partner with others on issues of importance to your community.
- If successful, the relationships and camaraderie that develops between you and local government officials can be rewarding and make work and life more fun and enjoyable.
- Your own leadership skills will grow. You will also gain confidence when communicating with others.

While there are many benefits to this work, we want to acknowledge to following concerns you may have

- This is uncomfortable and at times uncertain work.
- We are likely to fail or at least not look very polished the first few times we speak in new ways. It's a lot easier to talk about what we do than it is to talk about what people receive from our services in terms that are more understandable to a politician or an economist.

Changing your approach to working with local government officials

If your library only interacts with local government officials minimally and only at budget time your relationship is an example of what typically happens in libraries. This is a great time to develop stronger relationships. It is much easier to begin this process when things are neutral or positive.

If things aren't so great or if the library is suffering from a lack of financial or administrative support from local government officials, you might want to do something different. Hopefully, you want to have a better relationship than what you have right now.

When interacting with local government officials it is human and normal to want to start with our concerns and worries. All of us are busy. It's natural to want quick talking points that convince our local government officials to fund the library or to support a big project at the library. This guide isn't about that.

It's about changing your mindset and approach in such a way that you see the humanity in your local government officials, and you work with them to provide better service to the community. It's about long-term relationships that might not seem to have any immediate benefit until suddenly in a crisis or hard time the connections help both the library and the local government weather the storm.

What do we tend to do wrong when working with local government officials and talking about the library?

- We focus only on our concerns and worries with little to no acknowledgement of the larger issues facing our community and local government.
- We tend to assume that local government officials only care about roads, water, and sewer and see no value in quality of life or libraries.
- We don't understand the roles and duties of our local government officials. We don't recognize their challenges and stresses and sometimes forget they are human, too.
- We talk about what the library does and the nuts and bolts of that. We don't talk about what our community receives from our services. We use language that is library centric not community centric.

What are we changing here?

- We are giving up on talking first. We are listening first.
- It may seem as if we are agreeing to temporarily set aside the library's needs. We are committing to understanding what the community needs, what our local government officials are concerned about, and identifying how the library can help.
- This involves changing our thinking. We tend to think of the library first. We must challenge ourselves to truly understand community issues and the worries of local government.
- We are embarking on the very real possibility that we will need to change library services – more than we thought we would – to help move the community forward.
- We are taking the chance there are services or things we will stop doing or supporting because it is not our role. We are service oriented people that may have to say no to certain services or roles that are outside of the scope of the library.
- We are risking being asked by our local government officials to serve as community leaders. Many of us want to be seen as leaders. Many of us are terrified of being seen as leaders.
- We are sacrificing some control to work in partnership with others to solve community problems together – with other community leaders and our local government leaders.
- We're likely to start seeing our local government officials as humans. Our lives become more complex when we recognize the humanity of our local government leaders. It can be easier to see someone as non-supportive and anti-library. When the reality might be they are busy, overworked, and stressed individuals trying to do the best they can.

Still with us? What is worrying your local government officials?

The best way to find out is to start local. We will highlight worries local government officials reported at sessions we have led. However, they might not apply to all your local government officials. This is where you enact the first step – listen first, no talking. There is also a need to listen deeply – to the issues truly underlying what people are discussing.

Ways to find out what is worrying your local government officials

- Read the minutes of county or city council meetings. What is discussed? What worries might be behind the discussion?
- Read/skim the newspaper – either a local one if you are lucky enough to have one or a regional paper that covers your area – what articles seem to be talking about local issues? What worries or concerns are behind those articles?
- Monitor social media – this doesn't work for every community, but if your local government has a social media presence – what is being posted there?
- What are people in your community talking about – while in the library, the grocery store, or in other public places? What are the worries and concerns behind those conversations?
- Attend local government meetings. Review the agenda and listen to what local government leaders are saying. Just listen for the first few meetings. You're there to learn. This is where they may look at you funny. Stay the course. When you begin to talk about how the library can help with issues they are working on, they will begin to see value in your presence.

What is worrying local government officials in Montana?

- Lack of affordable housing
- Public safety/mental health challenges/drug addiction
- Incivility
- Unfunded mandates
- Zoning
- Sewer/water
- Worries about children, their well-being and ability to read
- Inflation that is making it difficult to offer basic government services
- Personnel turnover at the local government level leading to loss of historical knowledge and inconsistencies
- State legislation that may undermine financial stability and remove powers from local government leaders

Here's something to keep in mind as you review the worries and move into how the library might be able to help. Neither libraries, nor local government officials, can wholly, and independently solve many of these issues. So many of the contributing factors are outside of the control of the library and local government officials. It's important to recognize what may be within your control, even if you only move the needle a little bit. That's still progress. We forget that many of the greatest achievements made by people are taken one step at a time. Notice we said

"people" not one person. People. It takes collaboration and working together to solve these issues and build better communities. That is something many Montana libraries excel at doing – working with others and developing partnerships. You can model that behavior for your local government officials. It can be reassuring to local officials that you don't expect them to solve these problems completely and that the local officials are not alone in trying to solve them. It can also be helpful to show local government officials how the library works with other entities to address community issues.

How can your library help and how do you communicate that to local government officials?

Not all the concerns that local government officials have are appropriate for the library to tackle. When you reviewed the list under "what worries local government officials" which ones does your library help address and how?

If you are struggling to identify how the library helps with any of those, there are some resources that can help you identify how the library helps and explain it in a way that makes sense to others.

Tools/resources that can help you understand the economic and social wellbeing ways that libraries help

- Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life by Eric Klinenberg.
  - o There is a chapter dedicated to how libraries help. Reading the entire book can help you understand the role of social infrastructure and enable you to give higher level policy information to your local government leaders. You may not have time to read the entire book, so simply read the chapter about libraries. It will give you non-library language to explain how libraries help address incivility, improve safety and mental well-being, and how they build quality of life.
- Creating Public Value by Mark Moore
  - o This book is how an economist defines public value. It is language that resonates with local government officials because it is community/economic development centered. Again, there is a chapter specifically about libraries. If you read the entire book and attempt to apply it to your work, you will be amazed at the way it encourages you to communicate differently, often in ways that make local government leaders pay attention. You begin to naturally look at public services with a wider lens. You will also begin to see how the library fits within that wider context of community needs.
  - o The State Library has offered training about the concepts Mark Moore discusses in his book. We will continue to offer sessions about using the strategic triangle, analyzing stakeholder values, and using this information to measure and communicate how the library makes a difference.
- Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation's Libraries and Museums – a research guide paid for by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.
  - o Reading the entire report gives you quite a bit of information. It ties library services to community wellbeing measures – including mental health and safety. If you read the executive summary, you will have some idea of how to present the library differently.
- Use theories of change or logic models to identify what outcomes library services provide
  - o See appendix for an example of a logic model and a template.
  - o This is about identifying how the library makes a difference for community members.
  - o Outcomes are about a change that happened to a person. They include:

- - A change in knowledge
  - A change in behavior
  - A change in attitude
  - A change in status
  - An impact is how those outcomes benefit society. Think of it as how that change led to something better for the community.
  - Local government leaders often find outcomes and their impacts of more value when hearing about a library service.

What to do if you can't think of how the library contributes or helps address local government concerns

This is the section that you might have wished was first – the talking points to create an elevator speech. It wasn't listed first because experience has taught us that local government officials have heard plenty of elevator speeches and talking points. This guide is about changing your approach completely – starting first with hearing their concerns, understanding their issues, and then communicating how the library helps or can help with those issues.

Given how different this approach is we recognize that you might need some training wheels. Here are some ways you can talk about current library services and how they might address concerns listed earlier.

How libraries help with literacy

This is low hanging fruit. Local government officials see the connection between libraries and literacy. They have also seen the news about how a higher percentage of kids aren't reading at grade level or above.

- Story time programs that incorporate early literacy skills help children 0-5 learn to read. It also helps their parents/caregivers understand how important it is to read together.
- Studies have shown that access to books, toys, colorful spaces, and having adults who read, play, sing, and talk to the child can help them be more successful in school and later in life.
- Outreach programs help reach children, parents, and caregivers who may not come to the library. Hosting story times and training outside of the library is an important way to reach more people.
- Partnerships with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, local hospitals, or other early literacy organizations help get books into the hands of kids. There is value in giving children access to books.
- Summer reading programs connect kids and books and can help students retain their reading skills.
- Resources that help explain the value of literacy
  - Ready2Read
  - Hopa Mountain Storymakers
  - How access to reading materials helps children in low income families

How libraries help with overall wellbeing

- The human connection that librarians provide can help older adults and those who are lonely. The presence of staff that smile, talk to you, and ask about your day can alleviate loneliness and improve overall mental health. Montana has one of the highest rankings for suicide rates. While access to mental health care is critically important it's also good to remember the small ways society can keep people from reaching a crisis stage.
- Access to reading materials, entertainment, and informal learning can reduce stress and provide people with an escape from the turmoil of the world. It can also provide human connection and allow people to interact with others in a reassuring way.

- Access to programs and materials that support informal learning gives people a chance to explore topics of interest to them. The internet can provide many pathways for people to learn. There is still interest in informal learning through books, magazines, and programs on topics of interest to community members. Informal learning also inspires and improves people's overall wellbeing.

How libraries help with incivility

- This is where Palaces for the People can be so helpful. Libraries help by existing as a place where people from different walks of life can be exposed to each other. The Internet and our current way of life make it very easy for us to stick with our own kind. That behavior can lead us to suspect anyone different of bad intent. That can lead to incivility. We need to meet people from different walks of life to be reminded of their humanity. That reminder leads us to behave more respectfully and kindly towards others.
- Libraries also help in this arena by offering programs that bring people together to discuss topics of interest to them. Some libraries may even offer specific programs designed to encourage civic and civil engagement.

When you talk about these concepts it's helpful to discuss specific services or programs that address the concerns and to talk about usage of these programs. It also helps to have stories or quotes from library patrons. They often speak more eloquently about how the library helped them.

You must find the style that works for you. We've found it helps to start by asking for people's concerns and then talking about how libraries address those concerns. You might need to start with the concrete. You might need to start with the value for the community and then touch on how your library directly helps meet that need.

Watch body language and listen deeply to what your local government officials say to become better at speaking in a way they can hear. It may take a few tries, and that's okay. This is a long-term effort to build support and improve relationships.

Tips for making this work stick

- Find a learning partner. It's helpful if it is someone in the library or someone who knows libraries. It can also be helpful to partner with other department heads.
- Collect patron stories and quotes. Build a practice of writing it down if someone compliments the library or tells you about how the library helped them. Put it in a spreadsheet. Make a column that has major categories. Is the story about human connection? Is it about economic development? Is it about literacy?
- Work with others to identify the outcomes of your most common library services. Try using a theory of change. The library offers books for checkout so that.... See what comes up and talk about whether it makes sense to you.
- Practice using these outcomes and tying it to library services when applying for grants or giving presentations about the library. Evaluate how you did. People are engaged if you observe the following:
  - Lots of eye contact during the presentation
  - Questions from the audience
  - The audience talking more than you is a great sign
  - Follow-up from audience members after the presentation. Do they talk to you? Do they ask you questions? Do you see them in the library? Do they say "hi" when they see you in other places in the community? Is their tone of voice warm and welcoming?
- Read/skim about issues facing the world and solutions that are being tried by other organizations. Take 10 minutes a week to do this. Ask yourself how the library might fit in with that effort, and then let your subconscious work on the question while you do your day-to-day tasks.
- Volunteer to serve on one non-library community board or task force. If you don't have time to serve on a board is there something else you can try? Observe what people are talking about, what they struggle with, and their fears. How can the library help?
- Attend at least one or two local government meetings each year – not just the budget ones. Listen to the discussion. Think about what the worries and fears are and how the library can help.
- Pick one larger community issue that makes sense for the library to help solve. Identify who else in the community cares about the issue. Work with them on solutions that can help community members. Talk about this work with your local government officials.
- Ask for advice from your local government officials. Let them know about a problem you are trying to solve and ask them if they have faced something similar and what they did. Don't be afraid to say "I'm worried about the growing hostility and incivility I'm seeing. Are you worried? Why or why not?" Listen to their response. Reflect on it and share your own thoughts.
- Recognize that library people have a right to be at the community leadership table. Once you realize that it becomes easier to talk to local government officials about the issues you are facing. Suddenly, they are peers, and peers can help each other weather the storms.
- Practice acknowledging your anxiety and uncertainty and keep putting one foot in front of the other. Take time out to recharge, but don't run away if things get hard or don't seem to be working right. It takes practice to speak and work in this way. The reward is

well worth the effort but like so many things it requires hard work and discomfort on the front end.

Good luck! Let us know how it goes and what tips, tricks, and things are working for you as you connect with local government officials to work together for the benefit of the community.

Appendix

Logic Model Definitions

- Inputs – the resources needed to do the work
- Outputs – the deliverables and usage. What will be created? How will it be used?
- Short-term outcomes – what change in knowledge, behavior, status, or attitude do you want to happen immediately?
- Long-term outcomes – what change in knowledge, behavior, status, or attitude do you want to see over the course of several months?
- Impacts – how does a community benefit from a person's change in knowledge, behavior, status, or attitude?

Logic Model Template

- The following template is a very simple logic model. The last box is an either/or option. You can limit yourself to long-term outcomes that may result from your work. Or if you want to focus on society/community wellbeing you can use impacts.
- Start with outcomes and build backwards. This is a logic model way of saying "begin with the end in mind" - a basic principle of leadership and learning. The phrase "begin with the end in mind" comes from Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.
- It's important to note that short-term outcomes are measurable and should be tied to library services, programs, or materials. Long-term outcomes or impacts can be hard to measure and/or difficult to tie directly back to the library.

Inputs	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes or Impacts

Logic model example for programming to improve reading scores in elementary school age children

Inputs	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
• Staff time to take science-based reading workshop for librarians • Staff time to develop or distribute materials • Partnerships with organizations that teach reading • Partnerships with schools • Funding for materials • Funding and time to promote reading and practice	• Materials that explain how to help your child improve reading skills • Programming that teaches parents, caregivers, and other adults how to improve reading skills • Programming that gives children time to practice reading • Materials that encourage and support children in reading for pleasure • Materials and/or programming that helps increase children's time reading	• Parents and caregivers learn how to help their children improve reading scores. • Children, parents, and caregivers develop habits that improve reading skills • Librarians use science-based reading education in their story times and summer reading • Librarians promote science-based reading skills	• Reading scores improve for third graders • 90% of third graders can read at or above grade level.