MAKING THE RURAL LIBRARY
PART OF THE COMMUNITY

Nancy C. Ruccio, Director
Westmoreland County Library Board

INTRODUCTION

"Making the rural library part of the community" would seem to be a logical, almost simplistic, topic. All we must do is bring the library and the community together. But what do we know about the community? Do we know how many people live in it; what their occupations are; what their interests are; where the community is located; what is its level of ruralism; what social organizations exist; what is its form of local government; and what are the ages of its residents? A great deal of information is required before the entire picture of the community can be seen.

What do we know about the library aspect of the statement? What kind of library; where is it to be placed; will it be permanent or mobile; will it function individually or as part of a system; and how will it be funded? Without a definition of the type of service to be offered, it is difficult to decide how to incorporate the library and the community.

The purpose of this discussion is to provide a practical methodology to analyze various types of situations and to invoke decision-making procedures that will result in a positive correlation between the rural library and the rural community.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Any decision-making process must have a strong rational basis. Adequate information must be gathered before any decision can be made. The following areas of concentration, when fully investigated, will provide substantial material upon which to base a decision concerning the nature of the community and thereby laying the foundation for a

strong structure between the rural library and its community:

1. A total geographic picture of the community.
2. The governmental structure of the community.
3. Population and age distribution of the community.
4. Socio-economic conditions of the community.
5. Future developmental potentials of the community.
6. Social associations and organizations of the community.

Regardless of the level from which the decision is to be made, local, county or region, an awareness of the overall geographic picture is essential. You must know where the area is located, what areas border it, where it is in relation to urban areas, what portion of the state it occupies, and whether its land mass is mountainous or flat. If it is an agricultural area, what are its major products? Is it a mining community? If so, is the industry flourishing or declining? What are its major waterways and all other natural factors that affect the quality of life of its residents? The main objective is to create an overview of the community in light of its natural location and to assess the possible assets and/or liabilities of that location.

The local government structure is of prime importance. Governmental structures control the collection and distribution of public funds. They not only have control over local tax expenditure, but also over the spending of federal monies. Many federal programs may include spending for library service; however, without knowledge of the priorities set by the local agency, inclusion of libraries may become an impossibility. Know the workings of your local municipality. In dealing with rural areas in Pennsylvania, four forms of local government are most prevalent: (1) Borough, (2) Township, (3) County, and (4) School District.

Depending on the area, you will have at least two overlaps of authority. More than likely, you will have three forms of local government levying taxes on the residents of the area you intend to serve. Cooperation will most readily come from the level of local government which initiates or responds to interest in library service. A group from a local township will probably have a greater impact on their township officials than on county government and will gain their greatest support at the township level.

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The strongest form of government should also be noted. With the multiple authority situation, it is important to know what governmental taxing body has the greatest impact on the life style of the community. Discern which governmental agency has the greatest potential to support and promote the elements of good library service and approach that municipality for support.

Currently in Pennsylvania's rural areas, the school district is very strong. Areas with a township government may be paying as little as 5.5 mills of tax to the township and as much as 106 mills to the school district. Although substantial amounts are spent on public education yearly, in comparison, relatively small amounts are spent on public library service. Many school boards are reluctant to finance public libraries because they feel it is not a proper function of their municipality. Local governments want the school district or county to support the service. Similarly, the county often feels it is the function of local government. Consequently, the taxpayer's desires are volleyed from governmental form to governmental form. No one municipality wants to be the one to levy the tax.

After taking an honest, but optimistic, look at local government involvement in rural library service, the next logical step would be to locate the population to be served. The potential service population may be grouped in one area, in several related or unrelated areas, or widely scattered areas. If the residents are clustered, what seems to be the main reason for the relationship? Is it strictly housing? If there are businesses, are they the center of the community, as in the Main Street connotation of a small village? Are the stores an after thought, such as, a small shopping center added to a housing development? If the area is a series of related housing groups, what binds them together -- similar age groups, occupations, or perhaps nationality? In the same respect, if they are unrelated, what causes their alienation from one another? If the population is widely scattered, what is the distance between each unit and what type of terrain is prevalent in the area? Often a positive correlation exists between population distribution and the natural geography of the area.

Population distribution is also related to the socio-economic conditions of the area. Will the potential patron feel that the library is a luxury or a necessity? It is important to understand the factors that contribute to the creation of the various socio-economic areas of the community. Why is the area currently in an economic slump? Does it have potential to come back or the ability to change? Will that change be positive or negative? Analysis of all economic groups will be most helpful in deciding the format of service within the community, not only for the present but also the future. Where is the area going and is your organization able to keep pace?

In order to keep abreast of potential future development in the area, it is important to be aware of the programs proposed by the local, county and/or regional planning agencies. Is there a shopping center in the works for your now unclustered agricultural population? When will it be completed? What additional industrial plans are in the future? What about new housing development? How about another Pennsylvania Volkswagen plant? What about general population migrations? Where will we be in the year 2000? Do we care what the area will be like in twenty or thirty years? Or better yet, should we care what it will be like in decades to come? Sound long range planning certainly goes beyond a two or three year projection. Many programs take a year or two to plan and equally as much time to implement. If the library is going to be a viable, active part of the community, it must be involved in the projection and movements that are forthcoming and change with the needs of the community.

Social associations in the area will be very helpful in understanding the community. Perhaps social organizations are the only community-oriented relationships that exist in the area. Strong agricultural areas have Granges, County Fairs and 4H Clubs. Shopping areas hold a lesser importance to those who reside in a housing development. Social organizations will be their means for establishing community relationships.

Similarly, mining areas will have Miners Associations, Miners Unions, or a branch of the Moose. Other small rural communities may

have a Lions Club, a branch of the Elks, a Woman's Club, a Garden Club, or an American Legion Post. Often the type of social organizations in an area is directly related to the area's local industry or to the community's level of ruralism.

Education and religion occupy a large part of many residents' lives. Do not neglect the potential of using the local PTO or church related organizations to find out about the community. Parents may not envision library service for themselves, but they may well view it as a necessity for their children.

Knowledge of what is needed can be made available through communication with the various social groups of the community. Finding out how the community functions is vital to the successful publicizing of library programming and social groups can give you at least a good part of the story. Of equal importance is their potential for disseminating information back into the community. They can also provide an excellent network of verbal and financial support.

The information acquired from researching these topics will provide a substantial base upon which current and developing library service can be built. In addition, they will clearly define the rural situation of the area, giving you insight into the current level of ruralism in the community and future development potentials. This will enable the library to bend and mold with whatever new demands may occur.

Remember that no substitute exists for good planning. Do not cheat yourself and your organization by inadequately surveying the area you now serve or the area you intend to serve. In addition, keep a clear mind in establishing the relationship between the organization offering the service and those to be served by that organization. Even the best plans can be ineffectual if they do not fulfill the wants and needs of those to be served. Listen to what people want, and perhaps in time, they may accept what you think they should have. Communication is essential in defining the population's needs and in disseminating the information to satisfy those needs.

After exploring each of the previous points, a reasonable idea of the composition of the community to be served should now exist. All that must be done is to satisfy the needs of the community by providing a unit of library service. That may not seem too difficult. Or does it? Before the library and the community can be united, there are a few questions that must be asked, and answered, concerning the method used to provide library service for the community:

1. What type of library service will be offered?
2. How will the service be financed?
3. Does the service have the flexibility to sustain change?

Once these questions are answered, steps can be taken to incorporate the library into the community. Both sides must understand the reasons for the relationship, as well as the intended results. They must be working toward the same end with cooperation and complete comprehension.

Now that the needs of the community have been ascertained, what type of library service shall be employed? Shall we try a small local library, a mobile unit, or perhaps a reading station? The decision as to format of service will depend on a number of factors. First, the permanency of the unit can be decided. An extremely sparsely populated area, with intermittent clustering, could benefit from mobile service. However, that decision may be based on the assumption that another already established unit is going to extend its services to the rural residents of the area.

This brings up the second factor. Is the service to be initiated one which must function alone, or one which will be a part of a larger system? The answer to this, of course, depends upon each individual instance. Whatever is the most feasible approach for your situation must prevail. It is important for libraries to be aware of an impossible situation and try to leave room for flexibility and development when designing the service.

Another factor to consider is whether or not the population to be served has had previous access to library service, and what was the

quality of that service. With strict enforcement of service and boundaries, in accordance with Minimum Standard for Local Libraries, many areas that once had access to adequate free library service now find that they must pay. Their expectations of what library service should be might be higher than the user who has never used a public library and has little idea what a library may have to offer him/her. The service they will seek for themselves, whether it is from an installation they establish or through one established for them, will be greater than the previous non-user. The design must be ready to reflect their expectations or run the risk of failure.

Even in theoretical planning, it is impractical, and somewhat irresponsible, to neglect financing. Getting the dollars to provide the service often levels Buckingham Palace to a basic thatched hut.

Although a project must begin with a modest budget, it does not have to be committed to continual poverty. Quite to the contrary, if the facility truly becomes a part of the community, whether that community is urban or rural, poverty need not be the library's future fate. The good fairy is not going to zap instant financing. The library is going to work for it, but with community support the boundaries are limitless.

It is most important from the beginning of the design to be realistic about library funding. Libraries are a public function and should be treated like any other public agency and should be required to offer service with the same zeal as any other public agency. This means equal payment for equal service. Has the plan endeavored to serve all facets of the population? Libraries are unique. They have the potential to serve people from pre-natal to golden age. What other public agency has the same potential? Let's make sure we use that potential to its maximum. Libraries have something for everybody; now all we have to do is coordinate the materials with the people. Are libraries ready to face the responsibility of true public funding? Are governments ready to acknowledge their responsibility to libraries? Perhaps, with better community/library communication it will become a reality.

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Any project must have a built-in capacity for change, as must those who administer the project. As the service community changes, the library must be ready and willing to move with its patrons. After all, the purpose of a public agency is to serve the wants and needs of its users. If those desires are not satisfied, the users may turn to other sources, and the agency ceases to justify its existence. What happens to the library that is no longer useful to its community? If it were a business, the competition would probably bankrupt it; but as a library, it might continue ineffectually, penalizing the library and the people it is to serve. The cloistered existence has no place in twentieth century public library service. As a public agent, libraries are vying for scarce tax dollars; the service results must be adequate to warrant their expenditure.

Having amassed the information concerning the basic make-up of the service area, and having discussed realistic service possibilities with local officials and residents, it is now time to develop the actual service. Once the method of service is decided, involving the total community comes into play. The already existing rural library can also benefit from investigating its community and discussing with its officials and residents many of the same ideas as the developing library. Just because an institution exists does not mean that it is set for the rest of its lifetime. Constant reassessment is essential to being a viable part of your community.

It is now time to explore techniques to make the library a constant, but changing part of the community. Many of the following suggestions may seem extremely logical; however, overlooking them could be disastrous to the advancement of the library. Such results could not only penalize the library, but more seriously, it could penalize the public served by the library.

BRINGING THE LIBRARY AND THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER

Having decided that the prime goal of the library is to serve the total community, all that remains is to unite the two in a joint effort. What results are to be expected from the jointure? In each

instance the object is to gain:

1. A means for giving and acquiring knowledge.
2. A means for acquiring funding.
3. Both.

If the main thrust of the association is to give and take information, a logical check list for acquisition and dissemination can be developed. First to be decided is who is to be informed. Those to be informed are:

1. Municipal officers.
2. Social groups.
3. General populace.
4. Staff of library.

Informing the above groups should cover all facets of the community. Each group should have a complete understanding of what services are to be offered and what input they can offer to the expansion or modification of those services. The library should function as the interpreter of the desires of its service community. The worth of that library will be judged by its ability to satisfy the needs of the community.

The method of transmitting the information would be the next logical consideration. Information should be disseminated through:

1. Written communications and visits to the various groups.
2. Posters placed in shopping centers and other high traffic areas.
3. Leaflets distributed by a general mailing or through such organizations as the Welcome Wagon.
4. Appearances on the local radio and television programs.
5. Newspaper articles and related activities.
6. Questionnaires to survey area needs.
7. Programming for the residents of the area.

The idea is to communicate. Let people know what you are doing. Include not just the currently interested patrons, but also the non-users. The organization must be pulsating enough to catch the interest of an increased portion of the population. Stagnation is an unhealthy situation.

Programming is a particularly effective technique to enhance library use. Even in the most rural communities, a hall or church basement is available for programming. Pick films that apply to the

group you are trying to reach. "The plight of the urban community" is hardly a topic for the local grange. In the same respect, "the problems of small eggs in the Rhode Island Reds" is not going to appeal to a suburbanite woman's club. Keep the topic pertinent. The second consideration is community involvement as a means of funding. This means seeking funds through various individuals and groups as a method of support to increase governmental funding.

Social, civic and religious groups can be beneficial in providing funds for the library. An effective method of fund raising is to develop a program and launch it yearly. The object is to make it a function of the community. The program should be dynamic enough and appealing enough to withstand time. It should be a function that the community enjoys and is willing to participate in on a yearly basis.

An example of a well structured community oriented program is the one conducted annually by the Norwin Public Library. The program is termed a "Read-a-Thon" and was conceived by past Board President, Bernard Roth. It functions similarly to the bike and walk-a-thons. A child enlists sponsors to pledge a certain amount for each book he or she reads. Prizes are provided for the top readers. The program is geared toward the younger readers, and introduction has been done through a puppet show performed in the various schools within the library service area. The library service population is 34,000+, and the project usually nets between $1,000 and $2,000 per year. The local PTA's have taken a particular interest in the project because it encourages children to improve their reading habits.

The "Read-a-Thon" is certainly a very worthwhile program, but is the net amount adequate to finance a library? Organization fund raisers should be supplemental to sound, consistent governmental funding. The strongest point to the program is that it encourages use of the library. The children who participate have parents who can see the benefits that come from improved reading habits. The program procedures involve citizens at all levels. Fund raisers by organizations are excellent for supplemental funding. The real asset of the community is its support. That support can be invaluable in acquiring govern-

mental funding.

A public agency should receive public funds. Public libraries are public agencies and not charitable institutions. Why are libraries not receiving adequate public funds? Does the library understand the funding priorities of its local municipality? Does the library committee communicate with its local government?

In order for the library to become truly a part of the community, it must not only attempt to inform the community, but the library must be equally informed concerning the activities of the community. This information includes developing a rapport with its local government. Know where your officials are spending Community Development Act funds, anti-recession funds, Revenue Sharing funds and all other income revenue. Find out what the municipality's long range goals are and where your organization fits into the design. Do not be afraid to be heard. You are a public agent. You do deserve public funds.

CASE STUDIES

Since a formula does not exist for organizing the library and the community, it would be helpful to study actual applications of the aforementioned theories. Therefore, two different instances of rural library development will be presented. Through these examples it will become evident that each situation is different, and it will be up to the library administration to choose those principles that fit their situation. Even though the theories are in relation to rural areas, many find appropriate applicability to any form of library. It is not just the rural library that should be part of its community. All libraries should endeavor to be a part of the community they serve. Communicating is the only way to successfully become a part of that community.

Case 1

Case I deals with a township that is essentially a suburb of several different municipalities. It has no one central district, although it does have rather large shopping malls. By population it is the largest municipality in the county. Until a few years ago the

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residents were permitted to use three state-aid libraries freely. With the strict enforcement of the service area requirement, the libraries were no longer permitted to serve freely the township residents.

The citizens were accustomed to adequate library service, and they enjoyed it freely. They began to pressure the local municipalities, township and the school district, into again providing the community with good library service. Simultaneously, the county government provided funds for the purpose of developing public library service in the unserved areas of the county.

Local government officials inevitably ask, "Why can't we use the school libraries?" Rather than spend numerous hours debating the pros and cons, a demonstration exercise was conducted. The senior high school library, which is most centrally located, was open to the public three nights a week from 6 to 9 p.m. and on Saturday from 9 to 5. Professional librarians were to operate the library, and the school district and township would split the cost of the salaries.

The project was operated from September to December. Use patterns were slow in September but began to increase in later months. The overriding factor was that the collection could not satisfy the needs of the public users. After all, the high school collection was designed to satisfy a community of students involved in a curriculum of learning. Obviously, the collection and service offered are designed to support the educational system and not the needs of the general public. Therefore, the use of the school library resulted in a failure. However, it did adequately answer the question of using the school libraries in lieu of a public library.

Perhaps the logical solution would have been to contract from the already existing state-aid libraries, but the municipal officers and the local residents were not interested in this solution. They preferred to have an institution that was theirs and not someone else's.

After several months of planning, a group of interested citizens developed a concept of a quadrant system of library installation. The initial step would be placement of one unit in the western quadrant of the township. Application was made to the county for funds under its

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special development project, and matching amounts were provided by the school district and township in meeting the application requirements. It is important to note the communication level that exists between the library supporters and the local municipalities. Each is communicating wants, needs, and possible solutions.

After the installation was operable, communications continued. In response to a desire on the township's part that the library make use of other sources of external funding, the library formulated a project to submit to the Office of Manpower. The main thrust of the project was to employ people whose function would be to survey the other quadrants and ascertain their wants and needs and to develop programs that would satisfy their desires and enhance the development of library service in the other areas of the township.

The project served a number of purposes. First, it has become an excellent mechanism to correlate the community and library by demonstrating to all residents of the township that the library truly desires to provide them with service. Secondly, the library board has indicated to the municipal officers that the library is willing to work within the realm of public funding. This impression was so great that the township added 14% beyond the library's request for funding. Finally, it has enabled the library to participate in the state-aid program, thus opening the door for possible LSCA grant applications. Communication is exceedingly beneficial!

Case 2

Case II involved a varied cross section of rural areas that range from totally unrelated rural groups to small close knit boroughs. The total number of municipalities to be involved in the project was twenty-four. Planning for each municipality seemed ominous, so the county agency took the responsibility of introducing library services into these areas.

A demonstration model was operated by the county for a year and a half to explore the needs and interests of each community. The unit was semi-mobile and spent three week periods in each community. After

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experiencing this unit, many of the initially negative communities were extremely favorable and supportive when informed of the impending bi-weekly mobile service.

Due to the vast area to be served and limited financing, a mobile unit system using strictly paperback materials was designed. Although the county was sponsoring the service, it was felt that in order to be equitable with other county libraries, local monies would be sought. The design was ultimately to be a joint venture between the county and the local area.

Verbal and written contact was made with each municipality. A list of all social organizations was compiled, followed by written and verbal communication. Surveys were made of the population to indicate interest.

Posters were designed alerting the population to the forth-coming service and placed in the centers of traffic flow in the various areas. In addition, leaflets were produced announcing the coming of the unit and generally distributed.

Scheduling was done in coordination with local officials and various community representatives. Each area had one or two contact persons to assist in the discussions and dissemination of information.

Articles were placed in newspapers that serve the communities to be informed. General articles concerning the county organization also included publicity for the new mobile project. Limited use of radio time was employed. Further usage of the radio and television mediums is definitely planned. Communicating with the population is an ongoing process. Do not fall into such traps as: it was done once, that is enough; or, our study ten years ago indicated these needs. Be contem-porary in your thinking.

Even though many of the areas do not have community centers, they do have fire halls, grange buildings, and church rooms. Various chil-dren's programs have been conducted on the unit. Future adult and children's programs are planned utilizing the aforementioned locations.

Currently the county library and the county community college are working on a project to teach various continuing education courses in

the rural areas of the county. Questionnaires are being circulated to ascertain the desires of the people in these areas.

Also, because of the rural aspects of these communities, there is a literacy problem. The bookmobile, in cooperation with the local literacy council, is being stocked with high interest-low vocabulary materials for use by the population.

The bookmobile staff is considering offering craft classes to children and adults which can also be held in the various firehalls and church rooms of the rural areas. Programming does not have to suffer because the mode of service happens to be mobile.

Detailed in-house orientation for the staff is also performed. Each staff member is taught to provide the maximum service possible. Knowledge of inter-library loan and film loan is keen and strongly stressed. By virtue of the laws of Pennsylvania, patrons are not limited to the extent of the county's collection. Dissatisfied patrons are unacceptable. What they need must exist somewhere. The patron is entitled to quality service.

CONCLUSION

The rational method of correlating the library and the community is through a series of decisions based on logically assembled knowledge concerning the community and the desires of its residents. Regardless of similarities, no two situations are alike. It is best to approach each new encounter with a fresh approach. Unfortunately, no precise formula exists that can guarantee a positive result. The number of variables is too great. What succeeded once, when tried again, might fail. If a sound base exists for each decision, any revision can more easily be made.

Be ready to make revisions at all times. A revision does not mean that the decision which was made was incorrect. Each decision is a series of new decisions, and it is essential to be ready to make those decisions. Logically, the community is not going to remain stagnant. Even if the population in the community remains the same, the mere passage of time will influence current attitudes and life styles.

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Nothing ever remains totally the same. If the library is to occupy the important part of community life that it should, it must be ready to respond to the ever-changing desires of that community.

Libraries want the community to understand their problems and needs. In the same respect, the libraries should also be aware of the problems and needs of the community. Libraries are not celestial objects. They are part of the real world and must react accordingly. Being a true part of the community is a give and take situation.

This discussion does not give a blueprint for aligning the community and the library. What it does provide is a series of logical procedures, some of which may apply to your situation and some which may not. You, as the administrator, must pick and choose those items that will facilitate your individual circumstances. Administration is not a pure science.