

Case Study #1: Addressing Issues with Sein Public Library

Like many modern libraries, Sein Public Library (SPL) faces a number of issues, ranging from inadequate funding to an increasingly outdated collection. Reviewing a report on the library shows an underlying issue that is common to a lot of long-lived institutions with a history of prior success: These organizations often find themselves “disinclined to innovate and hence less able to meet the dynamic needs of customers. The challenges that libraries are facing today provide them with an opportunity to reenvision their roles and responsibilities so they can remain viable” (Moran & Morner, 2018, p. 8). SPL seems to be stuck in a past where more people read for leisure and checking out books was a library’s primary function. The issues the Sein library faces today appear to arise largely from a tendency to address problems piecemeal when they become a crisis rather than relying on some sort of planning. In order to stop spinning their metaphorical wheels and gain some traction in overcoming the issues facing SPL, the controlling board and staff need to examine and address the library’s finances, collection, facilities, social media presence, and the vision and mission statements.

Most Pressing Issues

Finances represent SPL’s most pressing issue, as well as a root cause of many of its challenges. The library has one of the smallest staffing levels of the surrounding communities and offers lower pay than most comparable libraries – all of which can make it hard to find and keep qualified staff. The lack of staff in turn prohibits adequate weeding, maintenance, and expansion of the collection, not to mention hindering service for library patrons (Sein Public Library, n.d., p. 7). The facilities themselves also show signs of the funding issue, such as leaks in the roof and windows of north and south buildings (p. 6), which tends to be indicative of

delayed maintenance as a stopgap cost-cutting measure but will lead to larger, costlier problems if ignored too long.

The subsequent, and related, issue is the fact that the library collections need attention. Sein Public Library's modus operandi reflects bygone days more than the modern day. For SLP, the "'best seller' reader remains the model consumer of popular titles, [but] actual circulation of these works has declined" (Seine Public Library, n.d., p. 4). Books, reference materials, and support technology are expensive to buy and maintain, and people are more likely to make use of electronic devices and information sources (p. 4), and patrons complain that the library's "eCollection" of digital materials lacks sufficient variety (p.5). One of the last major technological upgrades was a CD-ROM network installed in 1998 (p. 4), and the library even still has VHS tapes in the collection (p. 8). As already noted, the traditional areas of the library – namely circulation, reference, and children's collections – need updating, weeding, and expansion (p. 8). Specific attention needs to be paid to works for young adults and those representing minority voices, such as Asians, Latinos, and LGBTQ+, which survey results suggest are lacking (p. 7). The racial make-up of Sein is changing, with the white population on the decline and non-white residents, which currently make up about 17.4% of the town, expected to continue "growing rapidly, in particular Hispanics and Asians with faster increases than other ethnic groups" (p. 2). The library cannot meet the public's needs if it lacks the materials and information the public is looking for.

Library facilities also need attention. The physical plant, constructed in the 1980s, has proven adequate even beyond the design "to serve the spatial needs of the community for the next quarter of the century," and the design has proven adaptable to technological changes (Siene Public Library, n.d., p. 6). But work needs to be done to make sure the facilities continue to meet

the community needs. Leaks have been found in windows and rooflines, which contributes to the deterioration of the collection as well as the buildings themselves. The Long Range Planning Committee has pointed out acoustic problems due to the cathedral ceiling in the south wing, and a need for a quiet study area (p. 6). About a quarter of Sein's population is 65 and above (p. 2), but the library is not conducive to meeting their needs, with "notable narrow spaces at the entrance and height levels of public desks that pre-date ADA" (p. 6). Serving the public means having facilities everyone in the public can access.

Messaging is another crucial issue for Sein Public Library. In a day when most people rely on the internet for information, SPL lacks a social media presence (Siene Public Library, n.d., p. 8). A 2022 survey reported that more than 40 percent of millennials and half of Gen Z and Gen X got their news from social networks daily, while boomers trailed with a bit more than 25 percent (Watson, 2024). Rather than social media, the library relies on more traditional methods, such as news releases in local newspapers and cable access channel, brochures handed out inside the library, and external signage (Siene Public Library, n.d., p. 8). These methods are not completely ineffective, as they are more likely to reach older residents, but this leaves a large hole in SPL's ability to speak to the public.

And finally, the library needs to review and update its mission and vision statements. Neither has been touched since 1998 (Siene Public Library, n.d., p. 8). An institution's vision statement "begins and drives the planning process. A vision statement, as an act of foresight, outlines what the organization aspires to be" (Moran & Morner, 2018, p. 89). Technological, financial, and other internal and external forces of change can radically alter what a library does for its community, and the mission statement needs to alter along with it, "sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically" (p. 92). Current, up-to-date vision and mission statements should drive

the library's planning and subsequent goals, objectives, and actions rather than reacting to individual situations as they arise.

Plan of Action

The priorities mentioned above are given priority based on the severity of the issue (such as the lack of appropriate funding as an ongoing, systemic problem), but addressing them effectively means tackling them out of order, as it were. The proposed plan of action below is designed to facilitate efficient, effective, and sustainable improvements so that Sein Public Library can meet its patrons' needs.

First, the library should revisit and update its vision and mission statements. While this has a lower "urgency" compared with the other issues, strategic planning should flow from these statements so that the plan of attack can be coordinated and have a greater chance of success. This should be under the direction of the library board, but the committee should also include library staff, city governing officials, and input from the community. Strategic plans for addressing the other issues should arise from the work on these statements, both immediate needs and a rolling five-year plan that is revisited each year.

Concurrent with the vision and mission statements, Sein Public Library needs to establish a social media presence. This will help increase awareness and visibility for the library, its services, and its programs. The messaging may be limited to announcements and news at first, but the planning that arises from the vision and mission statements needs to incorporate social media and other forms of messaging. Board and staff should explore training options for best practices in communicating via the internet.

The collection needs to be addressed. First, the library should examine circulation and feedback data to determine what materials patrons want or need that are not available.

Cost-effective surveys such as SurveyMonkey may help with this as well. The culmination of this data, combined with the strategic planning, can help with weeding outdated and unused materials and expanding the eCollection. The library reports that staffing is an issue for the weeding process (Siene Public Library, n.d., p. 7), and patrons have complained of a lack of staffing to help locate and/or access digital resources (p. 5). Given the town's financial woes (p. 3 & 5), increased staff is unlikely. Instead, the library should make use of volunteers, working toward the phase-in of a "Friends of the Library" committee or similar group. SPL lacks sufficient staff to do everything themselves, and trying to do so has not served the library or its patrons very well. On the other hand, a formal group of volunteers gives SPL control over who helps and when, and staff could provide training at regular periods to help with the process. Such civic involvement also increases public awareness and buy-in for the library.

The facility issues also need addressing. Factors that compromise the controlled environment, such as roof and window leaks, should be addressed first, but the library board also needs to have a more thorough inspection conducted to look for other potential weaknesses in the building. Given that a renovation has not happened since 1984 and the building is likely out of compliance with the ADA (Siene Public Library, n.d., p. 6), a more thorough, long-term study of the interior arrangement of the facilities and the needs of patrons is warranted. Facility planning arises from the vision and mission statements, and the priorities and schedule of further renovations would need to be included as a result of the study and strategic planning.

Most of the above cannot happen without money, of course. The position of finances at the end of this plan does not mean that it is addressed last. Rather, the breadth and depth of the issue makes it something that requires ongoing challenges and planning. Despite the low funding levels of the library, SLP's financial woes do not appear to be due to any particular

animus to spending money on the library, as sometimes happens in local politics. The fact of the matter is that while Sein is not poverty-stricken, neither is it a particularly wealthy town, and the tax base does not offer much hope for growth. The town lacks space for significant commercial development, and room has almost dried up for residential construction, as well. In addition, the city has lost control of a significant portion of its budget due to state-mandated funding minimums for public schools (Siene Public Library, n.d., p. 3). On the positive side, Sein need not try to come up with a massive funding increase to better serve library constituents. The state offers grants to libraries that meet certain minimum requirements. One such is to spend at least 15% of the total library budget on materials. The local appropriation has been between 10% and 13%, although the current goal “is to have the city satisfy the full 15% responsibility for this requirement” (p. 5). Meeting this funding requirement, as well as the other basic standards, would help alleviate some of the fiscal pressure SLP has become accustomed to. Sein has already shown a willingness to leverage state funds in this manner with its 2019 decision to put up \$800,004 to match state grants for redeveloping downtown (p. 3). In terms of local funding, focus should be placed on meeting at least the minimum standards required for state aid.

Furthermore, Sein Public Library should explore other state, federal, and philanthropic grant options. Many non-profit organizations keep a grant writer on contract, with payments dependent on securing funding. Seeking local donations should not be ignored, either. The town has a tradition of generosity to the library, such as the donation of space by one of the SPL’s founders (p. 3), as well as a donation of the children’s division in 1931 (p. 3-4). An anonymous donation in 1985 of \$40,000 let SPL become part of the automated North Area Library Exchange (NALE) network, which has proven beneficial to the organization, and a 1998 donation from Sein Savings Bank of \$25,000 provided a then-state-of-the-art CD-ROM network (p. 4). An

outreach program could specifically lean into this local history and seek further donations, particularly if there is some kind of upcoming library anniversary that could be celebrated.

Conclusion

These are not the only issues facing Sein Public Library, of course, but they do represent some of the biggest challenges as the library struggles to meet the needs of its community. Strategic planning and further study may reveal more systemic issues that should take priority – which is why plans are studied and updated on an ongoing basis. The library board and staff need to not only update the vision and mission statements and subsequent planning for today's challenges, but they also must commit to following, maintaining, and updating these documents regularly. Otherwise, staying on top of the library's issues will be impossible, to say nothing of getting ahead of them.

References

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