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Community Building Plan: Tifton-Tift County Public Library

The Tifton-Tift County Public Library (TTCPL) serves all of Tift County. Currently, the TTCPL does not have a community building plan, but the need for community building in the city of Tifton is apparent. In a city lacking a central public hub and a spirit of community involvement, a primary goal for the library should be to address this need for the citizenry that this library serves. This plan will serve as first steps for the library to undertake over the next two years (2012-2014).

Current Library Statistics

Exact statistics for the TTCPL are unavailable because it serves as a branch of the Coastal Plain Regional Library (CPRL) system. However, because the TTCPL is the largest branch by far in the TTCPL, the statistics for the CPRL can be used to get a general idea of the operational environment for the TTCPL. The annual operating of the CPRL is \$1,640,863 for fiscal year 2011 which comes to a per capita expenditure of \$17.52 (IMLS, 2012). This is on par with other libraries in the region. There were 433,230 circulations and 245,243 library visits in fiscal year 2011 (IMLS, 2012). Approximately 42 programs for children and adults have been provided in the last three months (Coastal Plain Regional Library, 2012).

Community Building

Library as Voice

The TTCPL currently exists outside of the main political life of the community. No member of the library's staff or its board regularly attends city council meetings in the capacity

of representing the TTCPL to its primary funding agent. Similarly, the TTCPL sends no representatives to the meetings of the Tift County Board of Commissioners or the Tift County Board of Education (the library's other two funding agents). Before the library can begin community building within its own walls, it must begin to reach out to the existing community apparatus to see what needs can be found there. The library must transform from an entity that only takes resources from the government apparatus with little feedback as to how those resources are being used. Instead, the library must begin to become involved with the entire community apparatus and must be seen as a pool of valuable resources and people instead of an expenditure. This can be achieved by encouraging interested library staff and board members to attend these meetings and make comments during public forum sessions. Additionally, these community members should be rallied to volunteer for community projects and for service on local boards.

Library as Space

Tift County has no centralized meeting space that is open to all members of the community regardless of their backgrounds. Although Tift County's many places of worship occasionally open their doors to external groups, some members of the community may feel unwelcome in churches and synagogues. Further, the TTCPL has a centralized location on the north side of downtown Tifton, GA near the center of the county. As such, the TTCPL has a prime opportunity to become a hub of community activity for a variety of community building efforts.

Previously, the TTCPL offered its board rooms and multi-purpose rooms for use by the public for meetings, parties, rallies, and forums for a minimum expense (under \$20 per session,

no matter how long it lasted). However, a redesign of library policy in the last five years has placed a number of onerous restrictions on use of these spaces, and it has upped the price to \$50 per hour of use. This has led to nearly no one in the community utilizing these spaces. However, I can personally attest to the fact that the community remembers a time when this was a resource as many people still call each week to ask about using the space, only to be shut down by the new (and unknown to them) policies. The TTCPL can revert to the old price structure and compromise some of the newer usage policies to encourage the community to once again view and use the TTCPL as a hub of activity. This would achieve a dual-role: for the TTCPL, it would raise its status to the community as a facilitator of community building efforts (and would raise the usage stats of the TTCPL), and for the community, it would provide a non-partisan, non-affiliated public space for use at little-to-no charge.

Library as Rallying Point

Many community building ideas fizzle because individuals feel like they are alone in their desire to make their communities a better, more connected place. However, by joining existing groups, these individuals can begin to build a network of like-minded individuals that could then assist with new projects, turning that person's efforts into one of the ripples of courage Robert F. Kennedy famously opined about (1966). The library could become a hub of community effort that could galvanize these causes. However, the library currently does not have a volunteer apparatus. The TTCPL would form a Friends of the Library group to address this hole. Although this would have financial and operational benefits for the TTCPL, it also fills a community building niche by giving the community a popular institution to rally around. It further aids by assisting in building a culture of community service in the city. Lastly, it brings

together people from unlike backgrounds with similar interests: education for all ages and the promotion of civic resources. By introducing these people to one another, a million possibilities for the future are unleashed.

Conclusion

The TTCPL has been involved in passive community building for decades. By being a constant presence in the community, the citizenry has come to know that the TTCPL is a stable and persistent entity. However, the TTCPL has not undertaken community building in a systematic way in the recent past. Although there are many other areas in community building that the TTCPL will eventually want to undertake (i.e. outreach to Hispanic and LGBT communities, outreach to out-of-town college students), I believe community building must start by using the existing apparatus of the library before it can expand into new areas. This three-pronged plan makes use of these library's three biggest resources: its staff, its space, and its allies in the community. By further encouraging a systematic approach to development, the TTCPL will further entrench itself as an ally of community building that will, in time, become a destination for community changers of the future.

References

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