

Meeting User Needs III

Thoughts on our Next Decade

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I have written two other documents under the banner *Meeting User Needs*. Both documents were written to highlight changes in the world around us and to identify how we would react. Both proved accurate. This is the third document in that series.

We are monitoring dramatic decreases in library funding in some U.S. cities. Ironically, these decreases are coming in the midst of a huge boom in library popularity. Nevertheless, library systems in major cities are reeling from significant budget cuts or proposed cuts.

Canadian libraries are faring better, but our funding model tends to see libraries struggle when there are periods of high inflation combined with local concentrations of low income or fixed income residents. Analysts are predicting a period of higher inflation. We are monitoring how American libraries are dealing with this crisis to see what lessons we can learn.

You all know that one of my favourite comments is that our best budget protection is the provision of great service. We need, always, to remain vital to people's lives.

Many of you remember the budget cuts that this library system endured in the early nineties. It was not a pleasant experience. Our way out of that dilemma was to become more customer focused. We launched system-wide holds and customer-placed holds and introduced public computers; Council began to fund us again.

This document represents my best guesses about our future over the next few years. This document outlines some of the challenges and pressures I expect us to face and the responses we are planning to make. This document is intended to help us face real challenges by developing strategies that allow us to flourish.

Contents of this report

1. Assumptions about the next ten years

When planning for the future, we all carry assumptions in our heads. Writing down these assumptions allows for unspoken factors that influence decisions to be shared. Assumptions are supposed to be the views of experts about *external factors* likely to affect an organization's future.

2. Board Strategic Priorities 2007 - 2011

All of our plans for the future must incorporate the Hamilton Public Library Board's Strategic Priorities.

3. Facilities Master Plan

The Library Board approved a Facilities Master Plan in 2007. It establishes the mood we are trying to achieve in all branches and it is the primary reason we have been able to attract funding for our buildings. The City of Hamilton is planning to produce a ten-year facilities plan this coming fall and we will update our Facilities Master Plan to mesh with what they produce.

4. Strategic focus for the next few years

This part of the report includes major actions we intend to take over the next few years.

5. Concluding Comments

1. Assumptions about the next ten years

Assumption #1: Our very survival as an organization is dependent upon us remaining relevant and vital to the lives of people

Libraries were one of the first public services to face external competition. As electronic information has proliferated, libraries have shown a remarkable ability to re-focus their business and to define it less by format (books) and more by content.

The Hamilton Public Library Board's shift to a Mission Statement stating "Freedom to Discover" is more than the adoption of a new slogan. It represents a commitment to the reason libraries are a societal necessity and must remain strong. There is a danger that, without libraries, a technology-driven world could see people with money have access to incredible amounts of information while people without money have access to almost nothing.

We have to demonstrate, repeatedly, that our city is stronger and more vibrant when its library system is strong. We can only prove this point by continuing to provide value to customers each and every day.

Assumption#2: All of our funding is vulnerable

This is probably our safest assumption. It is being made by almost all analysts. The reasoning is simple. Baby boomers are getting older and health care costs will continue to increase well above inflation. In addition, governments will have to repay their debts, creating pressures on all public funded services. There are fears of increased inflation. Inflation is hard for property-tax driven municipalities to manage since it severely affects residents on fixed income.

Assumption #3: More library buildings require renovations than our funding will allow

Regulations for the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act* will make it hard for many small and older library buildings across the province to offer services. We will see more emphasis on the development of multi-use facilities so that the costs of accessible washrooms, etc, can be shared by partners. It is possible that library systems may have fewer buildings but larger ones. As we know, there is a growing tension between the desire of some customers for quiet spaces and the fact that many newer, computer-based services are noisy. This makes the construction of libraries, particularly smaller ones, challenging.

Older cities such as Hamilton will also have to invest more heavily in roads and sewage treatment, creating additional competition for limited Capital funds.

We are learning valuable lessons by watching how many American libraries are facing their current budget problems. Our Library Board is committed to the concept that library systems are healthy when there is a balance between our spending on staff, buildings, and collections.

Assumption #4: Electronic material will soon form a significant portion of our circulation.

The length of this explanation does not mean that this assumption is more important than others. It means that it has emerged so quickly that it requires more discussion.

Amazon sold an estimated 500,000 Kindles in 2008 and more than 1,500,000 in 2009. The launch of Apple's iPad and of the HP tablet later this summer is expected to speed the trend toward people reading books on electronic screens. Apple had been hoping to sell 3,000,000 iPads in 2010 but will exceed that figure in less than three months. We know that school systems and universities are turning to electronic textbooks as a means of reducing costs. My daughter's Grade 9 math book is on-line. Students are going to become even more comfortable with reading from screens instead of paper.

Early indications suggest that many dedicated print readers of fiction are likely to gravitate to electronic formats. It is easy to increase the size of print in electronic readers, making many

more books available to senior citizens and to those with vision problems. It is easy to carry more books when travelling or to download books from home when needed.

We assume that printed books will continue to be the prevalent format for fiction for some time but that electronic formats will gain a strong and dedicated following far more quickly than had been expected even a year ago. We also assume that e-book customers will demand that libraries provide free access to virtually anything ever published, creating both an opportunity and an expectation that will be hard to meet.

We will have to monitor this assumption closely since the trend is relatively new. There is concern that the use of e-readers may explode so quickly that it will be hard for libraries to react before dedicated readers gravitate to other ways to get material. There is also concern within the publishing and book distribution industry that, if e-books are quickly accepted by more than 10 – 20% of consumers, the price of printed books may rise dramatically and cause the shift to e-publishing to escalate.

There is also the possibility of a related trend. Some major publishers are beginning to consider publishing some titles (e.g. new authors) in electronic formats only – no print at all. If this occurs, the demand for electronic access may speed up even more.

Without doubt, libraries need to understand this trend and to be prepared to support electronic readers, just as we have supported people as they shifted to newer music and video formats. This trend has been more obvious in academic libraries over the past few years. It does not result in smaller libraries or fewer staff but it does mean a shift in expectations and services.

Assumption #5: Current services and processes will continue to change repeatedly.

This is a safe assumption. The services provided by libraries have changed enormously over the past ten years. There are fewer in-person reference questions and fewer telephone questions but these reductions are balanced by increases in electronic use. All analysts predict that the shift toward electronic services is accelerating, not slowing down.

It seems that there is no longer any opportunity to take a deep breath and re-group. The changes that we are likely to face will be driven by customer expectations and by economics. The management of constant change will become a priority for all library systems.

Assumption #6: Future jobs will be less repetitive and will focus more on public service.

This is also a safe assumption. It is one made by analysts in virtually all industries. Computers and even robotics will take on more and more repetitive tasks. We have seen this in the past (remember calling all customers about picking up their holds?) and we will see it escalate in the future. The impact is clear. Future jobs will be more focused on direct customer service and less focused on off-desk activities.

Assumption #7: Competition from the private sector for services we once considered our exclusive domain will continue to increase.

This seems a safe assumption. Google Book Settlement, the potential for database providers to sell through delivery agents other than libraries, and the emergence of inexpensive downloadable movies and books all point to a future where the traditional services of libraries will face even more “competition.” Those libraries that best survive such pressures will be those that remain relevant and that develop an organizational culture of adaptation.

Assumption #8: privacy/intellectual property issues will become more complex.

Libraries distribute copyright material. New media make it easier for copyright material to be shared, modified and edited. New media sites often reject responsibility for the ways customers modify copyright material but international law (WIPO) is attempting to provide limitations. There is enormous pressure from entertainment oriented corporations to add

restrictions to fair use components of copyright law. It is hard to anticipate the affect on public libraries but easy to assume there will be an impact. New Canadian copyright legislation was introduced just last week and if it passes, as written, will have an impact on libraries.

2. Board Strategic Priorities 2007 - 2011

The Hamilton Public Library Board has adopted the following strategic priorities.

Strengthening the Community

The Hamilton Public Library will be a source of civic pride. We will offer welcoming public spaces where ideas are freely explored, events take place and people of diverse backgrounds feel equally at home. The library will make a positive social and economic impact. The library will preserve Hamilton's historic past and help community members to shape our future.

Strengthening Individuals

The Hamilton Public Library will serve people in ways that are relevant to their unique circumstances. The library will make it easy for users to find what they are looking for and to delight in the discovery of things that are new. We will unite people, information and ideas using technology and personal service. The library will search for exciting ways for community members to become engaged in the development of library services.

Strengthening our Organization

The Hamilton Public Library will be a global leader, helping to ensure that public libraries remain relevant institutions. With a strong culture of leadership, the Hamilton Public Library will be both dynamic and resourceful. The library will embrace change to ensure that we are both relevant and effective. Staff will be encouraged to think, to contribute and to grow as knowledge workers.

3. Facilities Master Plan

The Library Board approved a Facilities Master Plan in 2007. It says a great deal about the mood that board members expect all physical and virtual libraries spaces to provide. Here is a key quote.

"Public libraries have learned that the public likes facilities that look attractive and that make them feel comfortable. While inside library branches, people want to use cell phones, eat, drink, and stay connected. At the same time, others demand space that allows them to escape. The nature and the quality of the space that is provided affects the way that people use that space, the frequency with which they will use that space, and their attitudes toward the library system. There is an expectation that facilities will be cleaned, maintained, and upgraded on a regular basis."

4. Strategic focus for the next few years

Here are a number of potential changes to our library system that recognize the assumptions we have made, the Library Board's strategic priorities, and the directive statements found in the Facilities Master Plan.

Public spaces

Recent construction and renovation projects all adhere to the Library Board's Facilities Master Plan. Ancaster and Turner Park create the mood that customers expect. Plans for Central and for the Lynden Branch contain these elements as will Waterdown. We have used as many of these elements as possible, given budgets, in the Westdale, Concession, Dundas and Sherwood renovations and will do the same at Terryberry, Red Hill, Barton and Kenilworth.

Virtual space such as the library's website and myhamilton.ca will adhere to the Board's desire for space that the public finds attractive and easy to use. Virtual and physical spaces will promote the library's collections, highlighting the work of our Collections Management staff. It is assumed that funding will be harder to find in the future and that it is important to upgrade our spaces whenever opportunities present themselves.

Almost all major studies on the future of libraries focus on the importance of quality library space and the concept of libraries as community hubs located in visible sites. Studies also focus on the changing nature of our clientele. For example, the generation of parents that willingly registered for storytimes is decreasing in numbers. The generation of parents that expect to drop-in and to attend storytimes is getting larger. We have to adjust, not try to force our clientele to adjust to us.

RFID

Radio Frequency Identification technology addresses issues that arise from a number of assumptions and Board directives. We know that business is increasing and that Holds have rapidly climbed from less than 5% of all circulations to more than 20%. We know that Holds require more staff handling than a simple check-out. RFID enables us to maintain services that people expect. The intent is to help existing staff to handle increased business.

Electronic Formats

We are an early adopter of new electronic formats such as downloadable audio and downloadable books. One of our Values is Innovation. We want to make sure that we are prepared to integrate new formats into our service model and are aware of their potential and their problems. We want to be prepared to handle electronic books as more and more customers purchase readers and demand services. We do not want to be surprised. We want to integrate new services that people will increasingly desire.

hpl.ca and myhamilton.ca

Re-casting the portal is a key element in helping us to meet strategic priorities. It helps us to build community partnerships and to build stronger technology skills for staff. It helps our City's economy and reputation to grow, making it easier for residents to find and understand services that are available to them. The new portal is our first use of open source software, making it extremely inexpensive. This, in itself, has been a good learning experience.

partnerships

Community partnerships have been a strength of the Hamilton Public Library for decades. We must continue to explore partnerships where they help us to advance our services and our aspirations. For example, partnering with other agencies to construct multi-use facilities allows us to share accessible washrooms and services. It also helps to create buildings that are more secure. We plan to strengthen our partnerships with key community agencies.

Central Library

The Central Library is in the midst of its renovations and will re-open in the Fall, 2010. The literature on Central Libraries indicates that large Central libraries are moving away from an emphasis on "research" towards an emphasis on "public." We fully expect the renovations to the first floor to meet the Library Board's directions in terms of inviting space and we fully expect it to become a magnet for increased use.

BiblioCommons

BiblioCommons will allow our customers to add reviews to the catalogue, to create reading lists in their own accounts, and to keep track of books they have read or want to read. We are now playing with a live site and we plan to implement the BiblioCommons product this summer. BiblioCommons addresses the concern that current library catalogues provide little

“value” to customers and do not respond in ways that people expect when they search and use commercial websites. BiblioCommons is an important tool to help us stay relevant to customers.

Change and Job security

Services, jobs and responsibilities will change repeatedly over the next decade. We have increased our training budgets and supported all aspects of re-training. We plan to use every retirement or departure as a way to review staffing models. The roles of staff will certainly change and we will hire staff that we feel can adapt to new situations. Librarians, for example, will be hired as much for their future management potential as for their initial responsibilities.

The Library Board has committed to ensure that RFID does not eliminate jobs. This is not a promise that all jobs will remain the same or that other factors (such as municipal economics or the changing ways that customers use libraries) might cause job loss. We will continue to work hard to minimize any and all impacts that change might bring.

As stated in the Assumptions, it is clear that the amount of time that staff spend on repetitive activities will decrease. For example, as downloads become more and more popular (and they will) there may be less staff time required to check out, check in or to re-shelf material.

At the same time, there is huge potential for staff to help customers more formally with questions they are already asking – how to upload and download pictures and send them to relatives and friends or how to download material found on our own website.

Urban and Rural Service Delivery Plans

The Library Board has now passed an Urban Service Delivery Plan and accepted the directions for our emerging Rural Service Delivery Plan. Each plan attempts to expand library services to designated areas of the city. The Board recognizes that it is not possible to maintain or replace all of our library buildings but also recognizes that service can be provided in other ways.

5. Concluding comments

We are in good shape. So far, we have done a good job of anticipating trends and we have adapted to customer needs. Whenever I talk to customers, they continually tell me of their delight in our Holds system and in our ability to deliver good, new material quickly and efficiently. They repeatedly compliment staff and the service you provide.

People genuinely recognize the value we bring to our city. We should be proud. Our services are strong. Our community support is high. We have been able to retain most of our staffing levels and this, in itself, is an accomplishment. We are widely viewed as a responsive organization that continues to focus on customer needs.

You are welcome to ask questions and I will certainly answer whatever I can. We commit to treat staff with respect and to try to protect jobs by ensuring that the Hamilton Public Library continues to provide relevant services that are of high value to our city and its residents.