

Public Library Strategies for Building Stronger Economies and Communities

BY DANIELLE PATRICK MILAM

The business of local economic development today is in flux. Communities face considerable challenges as they assess their strengths and competitive position amid changing global markets, technology advances, and the transition to new economies that produce ideas and thrive on rapid exchange of information.

The game has changed. Traditional local economic development strategies that sought to attract outside industries and invest in manufacturing and distribution infrastructure are now giving way to strategies that build the local assets of a knowledge economy: a focus on education outcomes, skills and pipelines for information-era jobs and workforce, a diverse and thriving small business sector that has regional and global reach, infrastructure for rapid and current information and data exchange, and investment in civic spaces that promote the interchange of ideas and cultures.

In this context, public libraries are taking the opportunity to review their roles, resources, programs, and partnerships to improve the human, social, and physical assets that will build the next economies. In survey and case study work with members of the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), an association of the leading public libraries across the United States and Canada committed to strengthening the public library as an essential part of urban life, we found evidence of strong public library initiatives and partnerships that may serve as maps and models for new and collaborative local economic development approaches.

This article is based on a larger research publication issued by the Urban Libraries Council in January 2007, *Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development*. The full report can be accessed online at http://www.urbanlibraries.org/files/making_cities_stronger.pdf or by contacting the ULC at (312) 676-0999.

Four primary findings were highlighted in the ULC publication *Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development*:

- Public libraries are an essential part of local early education networks working to increase levels of school readiness, education attainment, and success.
- Libraries connect with other local institutions and associations to ramp up the educational and technological skill level of the workforce and offer access to online job searches and applications.
- Public access to digital databases and specialty programming for entrepreneurs lowers the barriers to market entry and supports the startup and sustainability of local businesses.
- Library facilities continue to be a strong anchor for downtown and neighborhood development and public spaces that attract foot traffic and civic activity.

Early Childhood Education

Storytime for children and families has long been a staple activity of public libraries. Over the past decade, however, public libraries have significantly expanded their focus and resources in the work of early childhood education, spurred by significant research findings on development of the child's brain. Improved expertise in child development, communitywide outreach programs, and more parenting content for family programs are some of the advances.

Community awareness of the connections between early childhood education and economic development is on the rise. Awareness is in part driven by concern over the growing gap between local educational outcomes and the educational requirements of new-economy jobs. The drop-out rate continues to

We found evidence of strong public library initiatives and partnerships that may serve as maps and models for new and collaborative local economic development approaches.

soar in both cities and suburbs across the nation at exactly the same time information-age jobs require more education, higher-level thinking, and analytical and creative skills.

Awareness is also driven by new research that directly ties investment in early education to economic development outcomes. Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, economists at the Minneapolis Federal Reserve, encourage public officials and administrators to invest in early education because the financial returns related to school readiness and academic success are far more significant than most state-funded economic development projects. James Heckman and Flavio Cunha, researchers at the University of Chicago, identify early education investment as efficient and effective public investment because the benefits tend to compound, creating a solid foundation for later investment in human capital development, including literacy, educational achievement, and workforce development.

A number of promising and widespread early education strategies that align with this new research and awareness have emerged in libraries across the country. Public libraries are leading or participating in community coalitions to raise awareness about the importance of reading early and often. “Brooklyn Reads to Babies” is one of a number of tightly focused, multilingual campaigns where public libraries work in collaboration with community partners such as hospitals, child care providers, family courts, and media outlets to reach families with young children.

Targeted, effective library partnerships and programs for parent education and child care provider

training are also on the rise, expanding the quantity and quality of child care in communities across the country. The San Antonio Public Library’s “Little Read Wagon” sends librarian trainers and books to every area child care provider, from centers to home-based operations. The Providence Public Library has produced a curriculum, “Cradles to Crayons,” and conducts bilingual nine-week sessions for families to learn about literacy development in their one-to-three-year-olds. Highly structured programs such as the “Raising a Reader” program conducted by the San Luis Obispo (California) Public Library, First 5 of San Luis Obispo, and the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education serving the predominantly Hispanic community surrounding Oceano Elementary School are having significant effects on parenting knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Evaluations have found a notable increase in parents’ time spent reading with their children, changes in parental attitude about the importance of reading, and increased use of library resources.

Workforce Training Resources

Rapid changes in employment markets and skills have spurred many communities to reassess the bench strength of their local labor market. They have developed collaborative strategies among public agencies, education institutions, nonprofits, and private sector employers to build workforce competencies and opportunities. As new jobs created in the knowledge economy call for higher-level skills, many communities are realigning their workforce training strategies. Public libraries, with their broad reach to the job-age population, are attractive partners. More than three-fourths of ULC libraries surveyed have enhanced their collection for workforce development, including career information resources, workplace literacy programs, improved access to technology, and staff dedicated to employment services.

With job searches, applications, and training increasingly carried out on the Internet, public access

technology, databases, and programs are an integral part of local workforce development strategies. Libraries partner with workforce agencies and community colleges to deploy public access computers and training resources in libraries, narrowing the gap among technology haves and have-nots. In a recent survey by Hart Research sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, it was found that 70 percent of people using public library computers do not have Internet access at home or work.

Public libraries have taken lessons from the successes of the one-stop workforce centers. Many have consolidated career resource materials into user-friendly career information centers. The Memphis Public Library has even taken the workforce center concept mobile, reaching out to neighborhoods via the “JobLINC” mobile job and career readiness center. JobLINC provides job listings from the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, public access computers, onsite résumé preparation, and job interviews. Originally designed to reach one community, these mobile services are now available in the broader county service area.

Workforce development efforts may overlap with service plans for English-speaking adult learners, as well as services targeted to new immigrant and refugee populations, which are sometimes offered in multiple languages. Rick J. Ashton and Danielle Patrick Milam’s survey of library services found that many libraries offer free bilingual computer classes. Moreover, new English language instruction curricula are being developed with content related to career and job search and training in places as diverse as Queens, New York; Hartford, Connecticut; Seattle, Washington; and Arlington Heights, Illinois. Given the influx of new Americans to U.S. cities and suburbs, services to this growing segment of the workforce may gain greater prominence as the number of foreign-born Americans increases.

In sum, library resources and services related to workforce development both augment the reach and

reduce the costs of local workforce development agencies. They also reduce costs to local employers through technology and literacy training, and connections between job seekers and employers. Widely located throughout suburban and urban communities, libraries are important access points for individuals to secure targeted training on computers, conduct online search for jobs via current and extensive databases, and find career development opportunities. The approaches vary greatly from community to community, according to the local mix of education and employment partners that can link job seekers with employment training and opportunities.

Support for Entrepreneurs

Even in the knowledge economy, small business drives creation of more than three-fourths of new local jobs. Perhaps the biggest shift in local economic development practice is the move away from strategies that seek to attract outside industry, toward increased resources and attention to local entrepreneurs. Data from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation’s Index of Entrepreneurial Activity show a slight rise in new enterprise start-ups, particularly among specific populations such as men, Latinos, and seniors. The same data note that immigrant start-ups are far outpacing start-ups by entrepreneurs born in the United States.

Business collections and programs have long been a core part of library information services. Use of these resources is on the rise. Increasing and widespread use of online databases for consumer market information, product research, and financial tracking comes from local start-up entrepreneurs, seasoned investors, and retired business people. These resources are often available online from home or work, on demand, requiring only a library card for access. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh recently found that the most frequently accessed online resources are business information: company profiles, product and distribution information, rankings,

investment reports, business leads, and market data. Entrepreneurs can also use library facilities such as the Enhanced Business Information Center or “e-BIC,” at the District of Columbia Public Library, featuring a state-of-the-art video conference room, business start-up training, and computer terminals.

Library partnerships in the area of small business support are evolving, with some interesting new practices emerging. Libraries are now working with local partners to offer innovative small business planning and development workshops. The Brooklyn Public Library has taken this concept a step further. With funding from Citigroup Financial Services, they offer a “Power-Up” business plan competition. Start-ups and businesses ready to grow receive instruction on business plans, finance, marketing, and business development. Finalists present their ideas to a panel of jurists. Awards range from \$5,000 to \$15,000. In Columbus, Ohio, the library works with the Small Business Development Center to conduct workshops for pre-ventures, start-ups, and existing businesses.

Many places are making business start-up and development information and instruction available in multiple languages. For example, the Boston Public Library is partnering with the Small Business Center at the University of Massachusetts to develop a Spanish version of the popular workshop “Getting Started in Business.” They are partnering with ACCION, a microbusiness support agency, to publish a small business reference guide for navigating the rules and regulations of twenty leading area industries in multiple languages. Hennepin County Library is marketing to and conducting bilingual workshops for entrepreneurs from the large Minneapolis area Hmong population.

In Arizona, public and community college librarians have established a statewide network, called Arizona Economic Development Centers, which partners with local business and economic development agency staff to ensure that library resources,

training, and facilities are integrated into local and regional economic development strategies. Business librarians are active on local economic development boards. Many of these librarians are also working with a statewide coalition of strategic planners that seek to stimulate growth of healthy regional small and microbusiness clusters.

In these ways, public libraries make a significant contribution to reduce market-entry barriers and costs for prospective entrepreneurs, strengthen connections with and the sustainability of existing enterprises, and help small business support agencies broaden their reach in the community.

Vibrant Community Places

Local economic growth strategies have always placed high priority on development and redevelopment of places, with success gauged on the amount of foot traffic generated and amenity value created. Early strategies that focused solely on buildings have now evolved to more ambitious goals: active destinations for both residents and visitors, synergy through co-location of important local cultural institutions, and even temporary activities and services in places such as public squares and markets.

There is growing evidence that library facilities are having a significant impact on downtown and neighborhood vitality. In Chicago, Andrew R. Albanese reports public libraries are considered a priority building block of public investment for neighborhood redevelopment. Nashville, Seattle, Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, Memphis, and Kansas City are only some of the cities that have seen downtown activity increase with investment in new downtown library facilities, many of which were designed by world-renowned architects. As a destination alone, these libraries are drawing high numbers of visitors and tourists.

Developers of suburban malls and commercial properties are finding a good fit between the public pur-

poses of libraries and the retail objectives of commercial spaces. The activity and versatility of libraries make them notable. They work as easily in a commercial strip, mall, or downtown as they do in a mixed-use or residential neighborhood. Developers in Jefferson County, Colorado, and San Luis Obispo have sited libraries as anchor tenants for commercial projects, noting that tremendous foot traffic is generated without competition for sales.

There is a growing perception among decision makers, developers, and residents that public library facilities are community builders, contributing to neighborhood stability, safety, and quality of life. Carlos A. Manjarrez, the researcher for the ULC study “Making Cities Stronger,” noted that “thoughtful placement of public library branches can catalyze urban areas in need of economic boost” (2007, p. 22). As an example, he cited the impact of a new branch facility in a commercial area of Memphis: “Six of the eight storefronts were vacant when the library moved in. Now, four years later, the shopping strip is completely full. Though the South Branch Library is not the only factor in the revitalization of the South Mall commercial strip, it is reasonable to conclude that local businesses reap a ‘spin-off’ benefit from the 100,000 visitors that stop by the library each year” (p. 22).

Creativity in library facilities may be best illustrated with the growing number of hybrid facilities that combine the services of public libraries and other agencies. Although some joint ventures are conceived as a way to leverage limited development funds or maximize the public benefit from public facilities, others are projects where community leaders have seen the opportunity for synergistic activities that benefit residents. For example, leaders in the Cleveland Heights-University Heights neighborhoods jointly planned a structure that houses public library services and an after school program, including space for theatrical productions, school classes, art classes, and art studios.

Libraries are adept collaborators, with a broad mix and distribution of services, many of which tie directly to stronger local economies and communities.

With a rich variety of public and cultural program offerings, the public library increasingly functions as an important and lively civic “third place.” Go to any public library Website and you will see a calendar of events with author talks, cultural festivals, and civic events. For many communities, the library is the convener for community conversations and interchange of cultural perspectives. The library’s role as community salon has burgeoned in recent years as popular communitywide events such as “One Book One City” are conducted in a number of public, private, and business venues.

What’s Next?

With more than sixteen thousand branches in some nine thousand public library systems, public libraries are widely distributed in cities and neighborhoods across the country. They are adept collaborators, with a broad mix and distribution of services, many of which tie directly to stronger local economies and communities. ULC research shows that public library resources, programs, facilities, and partnerships can be integral to growing and sustaining local economic development. Accordingly, the “Making Cities Stronger” report concludes with a number of thought-starter ideas for further spreading the economic and community development impact of public library facilities, collections, and services.

Public libraries can expand delivery of high-quality early childhood education services and training that lay the foundation for and ensure the lasting and compounding benefits of a competitive community workforce. They can also help communities gather and marshal data on school readiness, academic success, and quality child care.

With an expanding set of services and partnerships, library employment and career resources can continue to help bridge the gap between technology haves and have-nots. Access to computers, computer training, and the Internet will make library employment support services more mobile and adaptable. Partnerships with local employers can foster greater exchange of information about workforce trends and readiness. These more effective collaborative approaches can help communities retool and reposition their assets.

Today, one in three business start-ups fails within three years. Offering greater access to current data on products, suppliers, financing sources, competitors, and business development expertise, libraries can deliver invaluable support to the local enterprise sector. Library online databases can also help local or regional enterprises expand into new global markets. Some of this effort will happen inside the library as it expands staff training on the use of new databases, aggressively markets new business information resources to the local business community, and offers more tailored support for business start-ups and expansions. Other efforts will involve external dynamics and partnerships, producing greater community and regional awareness of small business development in the global context, identifying local opportunities in the emerging knowledge economy, and developing sustainable small business clusters.

Finally, with library facilities serving strong and active civic places, construction and renovation of library buildings can complement both public and private sector developments and benefit the whole community.

In a changing world, new streams of commerce and global exchange will create new local economic

opportunities and challenges. Public libraries have shown they are resilient and creative public institutions and active agents for local economic and community development. They are positioned to foster the growth of the next workforce; encourage the next set of entrepreneurial ventures; and enrich civic partnerships to map, model, and build strong local economies and vibrant, livable communities.

References

- Albanese, A. R. "Libraries as Equity Building Blocks." *Library Journal*, May 15, 2001.
- Ashton, R. J. and Milam, D. P. "Welcome, Stranger: Public Libraries Build the Global Village." Chicago: Urban Libraries Council, 2008.
- Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. "Entrepreneurial Activity Remained Strong in 2007 With Major Shifts Among Men, Women and Immigrants, Says Kauffman Foundation Study." Kansas City, Mo.: Kauffman Foundation, April 24, 2008. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from <http://www.kauffman.org/items.cfm?itemID=1036>.
- Hart Research. "Public Access Computers in Public Libraries." Study commissioned by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Seattle, Wash., 2006.
- Heckman, J., and Cunha, F. *The Technology of Forming Human Skills and the Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Rolnick, A., and Grunewald, R. "Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return." *Fedgazette*, Mar. 2003. Retrieved June 10, 2008, from <http://www.minneapolisfed.org/pubs/fedgaz/03-03/earlychild.cfm>.
- Urban Libraries Council. "Making Cities Stronger: Public Library Contributions to Local Economic Development." Chicago: Urban Libraries Council and Urban Institute, 2007.

Danielle Patrick Milam is senior vice president/program and development for the Urban Libraries Council.
