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Testimony for Working Group on the Future of Libraries

Structures and organizations

The defining feature of Vermont libraries writ large is the lack of structure. Many states – notably Massachusetts, for reasons that will become clear – have statewide systems, so a card issued in Boston works in the Berkshires. Vermont, by virtue of our habit of local control, instead has 185 libraries, each with its own card, integrated library system, budget, policies, etc., etc.

I would suggest that some form of a centralized collection, with an integrated catalog, would be a badly needed first step to improving the situation.

This fragmentation also results in massive duplication of effort and waste of resources statewide. Yes, every library is going to want to buy the latest bestsellers, but there are any number of ways this could be mitigated:

The reality is that some readers want alternative forms of a book: Audiobook either streaming or on CD, large print, braille, downloadable ebook in either Kindle or epub format. Large libraries typically purchase some / most of these and multiple copies in print and downloadable formats to meet demand. The current system requires each library to purchase as many formats as they can, and prohibits small libraries from accessing most of the formats for any given title until months after its release.

There's a working example of how it could work: VTLIB does a good job through its ABLE program of helping libraries and blind users with its braille collection. And it used to do a fine job of providing support for – in particular – large print versions as well. This was discontinued with the ending of the central library collection as part of the 2015 budget cut by the Shumlin Administration.

That closure saved the state money, but cost many times that for libraries as a whole, as libraries around the state scuffled to make up the gap for the many mostly senior readers who rely on large print to keep them reading. And it created inequalities between communities blessed with large libraries with relatively ample resources and those with very limited purchasing budgets.

Then there's the issue of storage. If there were a system of sharing resources, not every library would have to hold every book of every major series. For example, Rutland could keep the back catalog for Clive Cussler, Bennington for Martha Grimes, Brattleboro for Frank Herbert, and so on, with the expectation that the holding library for each of these titles would replace them as needed and keep them available for interlibrary loan.

Currently, the state works on an ad hoc network. It's a mix of hub-and-spoke and point-to-point. Within the Catamount Library Network (CLN) consortium at least, that's a result of the failure of a hub-and-spoke system. Lessons can and should be learned from it.

When intraconsortial lending was set up for CLN, the default was that books borrowed from a sister library were always ordered from the largest library (Rutland Free) as long as Rutland had a copy, then the next largest, and so on down to the smallest. This worked up to the point where it overloaded Rutland's ability to handle the load:

- It resulted in very fast loan times, as we were shipping three times per week (in part to keep up to demand), where smaller libraries might only ship once a week;
- Loans were reliable, because literally the first thing an RFL circ staff member does every day is check for consortial holds, then they are processed and, if it is a shipping day, put into the courier bins.

But because it was an unfunded mandate, there was no support for our library. What the state had once done (and paid for) from its central collection now fell to libraries like RFL.

- We were providing some 5,800 items and requesting 3,700 annually (including in-house holds).
- This resulted in our "overusing" the courier system, and paying the subsequent overuse penalties for shipping items for other libraries' borrowers.
- RFL staff were overwhelmed by the volume. One day we received nine (count 'em 9) bins via courier.
- The courier service was overwhelmed by the volume. Their small cargo vans weren't set up to handle that many big, green, library bins. So, they started overloading the 50-pound-max bins, which resulted in broken bins (that we were charged for) and complaints from both our staff and the drivers.
- RFL was paying staff at least an hour a day to pull and ship books, and a similar amount three times a week to unpack and reshelve items. Again, this was a service that had been provided by the state library, and when the then-administration slashed the budget, it fell to individual libraries to pick up the slack. Demand has continued to increase for this service and is likely to continue in our "order online, have it shipped" consumer culture.
- As the consortium continues to grow, we have run out of storage space to hold books until they are bagged, binned, and shipped. The need for more circulation space to handle out-of-library loans is a major driver toward our needing to consider a space expansion, which is going to run into hundreds of thousands of dollars.

So, the lesson is that it was a quick, efficient way to share resources around the state, but because it was an organic system that just grew up instead of a designed network, it quickly outgrew our ability to provide the service.

A well-designed hub-and-spoke system could achieve many worthwhile benefits:

Reducing road miles, costs (and greenhouse gas emissions) by shipping items the shortest distance (with hubs in Burlington, Brattleboro, Rutland, and Barre??).

Reduce wasteful duplication.

To control costs, VTLIB could contract with public (or college) libraries to do the work ... kind of like how it works now, only subsidizing the libraries doing the heavy lifting instead of penalizing them.

This could also work for specialized collections (by format like large print / audiobook on CD, by genre, nonfiction specialization, or language). Given that Vermont is making strides to have a more diverse population, the latter is going to be a challenge going forward. A library with half a shelf in

languages other than English is not going to be of much use for a community with a diverse population. VTLIB has made some very positive baby steps to address this (the Welcoming Library for kids, for example).

Please feel to reach out with any questions / concerns at randal@rutlandfree.org or via cell at 802-683-9778. And thanks again for doing this work.

Randal