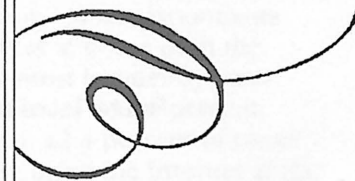


GETTING FEEDBACK BY SURVEYING RESIDENTS: LAPORTE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY CONDUCTS A COMMUNITY SURVEY

by Judy Hamilton



As part of its strategic planning process, the LaPorte County Public Library commissioned a community survey in 2006. The survey was designed to help the Library answer four questions:

1. Who is using and not using the library?
2. How satisfied are users with current library services?
3. What barriers keep people from using the library?
4. What services would community members prefer in the future?

METHODOLOGY

Preparation

The library hired Sara Laughlin & Associates, Inc., to undertake the survey. The Library Administrative Team (Extension Services Manager Fonda Owens, Automated Systems Manager Emily Morris, Main Library Services Manager Brent Stokesberry, Human Resources Manager Cindy Lane, and myself as Director) worked with the consultant to design the survey questions. The questions fell into four categories, designed to answer the four questions above—demographic information, current usage, satisfaction, and preferences for future services.

Meanwhile, the Library searched for a mailing list, which turned out not to be a simple project. The LaPorte County Public Library serves 17 of the 21 townships in LaPorte County.¹ After several phone calls to the County Assessor's Office and a couple of failed attempts to massage the list of property owners received in PDF format, Emily Morris, Automated Systems Manager, was able to export the data into a database, coded by township. From the database, the consultant extracted a random sample, excluding out-of-state addresses and businesses.

The consultant mailed 3,210 surveys with a postage-paid return envelope. Of the sample, 25 were returned with forwarding addresses and were resent. Ninety-nine surveys were returned undeliverable. When the 99 were removed, the total number of surveys delivered was 3,111.

Responses

Of these 3,111 surveys, respondents returned 482 usable responses, a response rate of 15.5 percent.

The consultants summarized the results and created cross-tabulations to compare results:

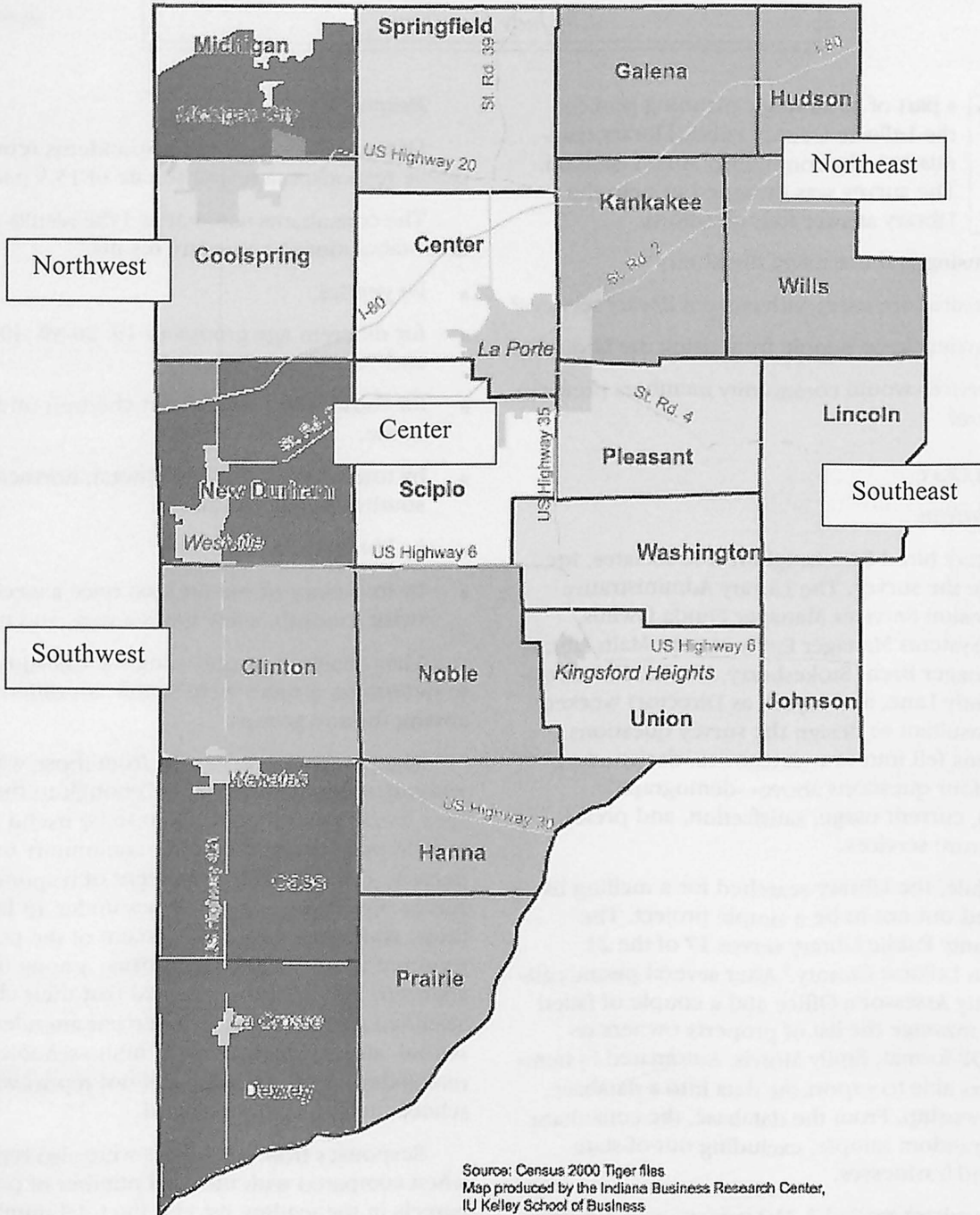
- by gender,
- for different age groups (0-19, 20-39, 40-59, 60-69, and 70 and up)
- for those with and without children under 18 at home,
- by township groups (northwest, northeast, Central, southwest, and southeast)
- by library card status, and
- by frequency of use (at least once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, and never)

They analyzed results using the Chi-square analysis to determine if there were significant differences among the sub-groups.

The percentage of results from those with and without children were similar enough to the percentages in the general population to be useful in predicting the opinions of the entire community to within five percent. For example, 28 percent of respondents to the survey reported having children under 18 living with them, compared with 28.7 percent of the population as reported in the 2000 U. S. Census. Among those with children, 74.1 percent reported that their children attended public school, 8.9 percent attended private school, and 3.7 percent were home-schooled. The remainder—13.3 percent—did not report what type of school their children attended.

Responses from townships were also representative when compared with the total number of property parcels in the mailing list and the total number of surveys mailed, so these results could also be applied to the library district as a whole. For statistical analysis, the consultants combined individual township results into five groups of townships by location within the county (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: LaPorte County Township Map



Results for gender, age, library card status, and frequency of use are limited to the survey group, since response ratios differed from the percentages of each group in the actual population. Nearly four of five respondents were female. Responses from the age 40 and higher groups were overrepresented compared to their percentage in the overall population. Library card holders are over-represented in survey responses—85.7 percent—compared with the actual percentage of the population that holds a library card—53.0 percent. Two-thirds of respondents (66.4 percent) had used the library at least once in the past year, while 3.7 percent had not and 29.9 percent did not respond to this question. No data on frequency of use of the library as a whole was available, so conclusions drawn from the survey represented only survey respondents.

The survey also included other demographic questions not used in cross-tabulations, including language spoken at home and news sources used.

Biases

Any research methodology has biases, and this survey was not exempt. Because the survey was mailed to property owners, it excluded residents who did not own property. Some areas of the Library's district are made up of apartments, mobile home parks, and retirement centers/nursing homes whose residents may be users of the Library. They were undoubtedly underrepresented, if not excluded, in the survey. The overwhelming majority of respondents were adults, so the opinions of those aged 19 and younger are not represented. The survey was in English. Recipients unable to read English well are undoubtedly underrepresented.

The overall planning methodology allowed the Library to compensate for some of these biases. In addition to the survey, the Library held six focus groups which were attended by a large number of knowledgeable individuals. Three focus groups were held in LaPorte and three more were held in branches in Rolling Prairie, Coolspring, and Union Mills. The consultant also conducted six interviews with community leaders. Included in the focus groups and interviews were the Superintendent of the LaPorte Community Schools, several youth agency leaders, and several parents of school-aged children. When the consultant realized that no one from the growing Spanish-speaking community had participated in either focus groups or interviews, she asked the Library to identify someone for an interview and completed a phone interview.

KEY FINDINGS

The survey report received by the Library contained a very detailed analysis of the survey responses. Findings reported here are some of the key observations.

Internet access

More than 70 percent of respondents reported having Internet access at home. Of those with access, nearly one-third had dial-up only. Most respondents who did not have Internet access at home used the Internet somewhere else. The most frequently mentioned location was friends/relatives—37.4 percent. The library ranked second, with 22.4 percent of those without home access reporting using the Internet at the library. Respondents in different age groups differed significantly in their levels of high-speed Internet access. Nine of ten in the two younger groups (20-39 and 40-59) had access of some kind; they were much more likely to have high-speed access via cable or broadband. Nearly one-third of those in the 60-69 age group and more than half of those in the 70 and over age group had no access.

Internet access varied significantly among the township groups. The northeast township group was most likely to have access, although nearly half had dial-up access; the southwest township group was least likely to have access.

Internet access also varied significantly among those who used the library more or less frequently. Those with dial-up access were more likely to use the library at least weekly. Those with high-speed access were more likely to use the library monthly or a few times a year. Those with no access were more likely not to have used the library in the last year.

Awareness

More than one in four respondents reported getting no information about the library at all. Among those who did, the newspaper was the most frequent source of information, followed by posters and flyers in the library and friends/colleagues. Radio was the least frequently mentioned source. Females were more likely than males to get information about the library. Card holders were more likely to find out about library services through friends/colleagues, newspaper, and the library's posters/flyer, newsletters, and web site. There were significant differences in where respondents from the four age groups get information about the library. Those aged 20-39 were less likely to get information from the newspaper and more likely to get it through school. Those aged 40-59 were less likely than younger respondents to get information through school, but more likely to get it from the newspaper. Those aged 60-69 were most likely to get information from the newspaper, but less likely to use radio, school, or the library web site. Those in the 70 and older age group read the paper and were the most likely of any group to listen to radio. They were least likely to get information at school or via the library web site.

Two-thirds of respondents did not use the library web site. Of those that did, the most frequent use was

to check the library catalog, followed by renewing and reserving items. Those with children at home were significantly more likely to use the web site. Card holders were more likely to use the library catalog on the web, check library hours, renew an item, and reserve an item; those without cards were more likely not to use the web site. Residents of the northeast townships were significantly more likely to use the library web site to find locations, but the percentage was very small for all township groups.

Only a handful of respondents indicated using the library's online resources. The database used most frequently was Ancestry Plus, but even that accounted for only 3.7 percent of responses.

Barriers to library use

Among the 145 respondents who had not visited the library in the last year, "Don't need to use the library" was the reason most often cited for not visiting. The next most frequently mentioned reasons were "Got information from the Internet" and "Didn't have time." These three categories accounted for 60 percent of responses. Males were significantly more likely to say they don't need to use the library than females. Those without library cards cited seven reasons significantly more often than those with cards: Don't need to use the library (36.2 percent), Use Internet (21.7 percent), No time (17.4 percent), Use another library (15.9 percent), Buy own materials (13 percent), Don't enjoy reading (4.3 percent), and Didn't offer services I needed (1.4 percent).

There were significant differences among township groups: Residents in the northwest and northeast townships reported using other libraries more frequently. Northwest and Center township residents were more likely to get information from the Internet. Those in northwest, Center, and southeast townships responded more frequently that they did not need to use a library.

Among those who had not used the Library in the last year, the 20-39 year old respondents were most likely to explain that they "Got information from the Internet."

Library use

Library card. Among respondents, 85.7 percent were card holders. Females and those with children under 18 were significantly more likely to have a library card. There were not significant differences in those holding library cards in different age groups, township groups, or among those visiting more or less frequently.

Frequency of visit. Just over 15 percent of respondents reported visiting the library at least once a week; 24.7 percent visit once or twice a month, and 26.6 percent visit a few times a year. The remaining third

never visit or didn't respond. Those with children under 18 were more likely to visit at least monthly. The oldest users—age 70 and up—were significantly more likely to use the library at least once a week, or never. The youngest were most likely to use the library once or twice a month. Users aged 60-69 were more likely to use the library a few times a year.

Purpose for using the library. Leisure/entertainment was cited by just over half of respondents as their reason for using the library; pursuing personal interests was selected by 32 percent. Relatively smaller numbers used the library for school assignments (but note that very few respondents were in the 0-19 age range), job-career interests, and cultural experiences. Females were more likely to use the library for school assignments/homework and for leisure/entertainment. Those with children were significantly more likely to use the library for school assignments/homework, job/career information, and leisure/entertainment. Those who visited the library once a week or more were more likely to be pursuing a personal interest and participating in cultural experiences. Respondents in the 40-59 age group were significantly more likely to use the library for job-related purposes and leisure/entertainment purposes. Not surprisingly, those 60-69 and 70 and older were significantly less likely to use the library for school assignments.

Types of use. Overall, 323 respondents checked 927 uses, an average of 2.9 uses per respondent. Checking out books was the most common use, accounting for 59.8 percent of all responses. Three other types of use accounted for more than 20 percent each—asking a question (23.9 percent), using a restroom (20.7 percent), and using a photocopier (20.1 percent). Least frequently used were notary service and tutoring (1 percent each) and pay phone (1.7 percent). Males were more likely to read the newspaper at the library. Those with children were more likely than those without to check out materials, use the restroom, use Internet, use pay phone, or attend a program. Northeast residents were much less likely to have checked out materials in the last year. Frequency of use had a significant impact on types of use. Those who used the library weekly, monthly, or a few times a year were more likely to check out materials. Weekly users were most likely to have read newspapers, asked questions, used the photocopy machine, read magazines, used the pay phone, or attended programs. Respondents in the 20-30 age group were significantly more likely to attend a program, while those in the 60-69 and 70 and older were less likely to use the Internet. Those 70 and older were significantly less likely to check out materials or use the restroom.

Location. The Main Library in LaPorte accounted for more than half of the use. Among the branches,

Coolspring was most frequently visited and Kingsford Heights least frequently visited. The 70 and older age group accounted for the largest percentage of users at the Fish Lake, Rolling Prairie, and Union Mills branches.

Satisfaction

Overall, 81.3 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with library services (Figure 2). Highest areas of satisfaction were:

- Library employees are courteous and polite (81.5 percent)
- Knowledgeable employees are available to assist me (80.5 percent)
- Library buildings are well maintained (80.5 percent)
- Interior of the library is functional (78.2 percent)
- Library's check-out period is adequate (74.5 percent)
- The fewest respondents were satisfied in six areas:
- Library Web site contains valuable information (25.5 percent)
- Library Web site is easy to navigate (25.9 percent)
- Library audio book collection meets my needs (31.7 percent)

Library DVD collection meets my needs (37.1 percent)

Library public programs are interesting to me (38.4 percent)

Library computer is available when I need one (39.2 percent)

The largest percentage of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" responses were in two areas:

I am able to find a parking place when I visit the library (21.4 percent)

Library hours are convenient for me (10.4 percent)

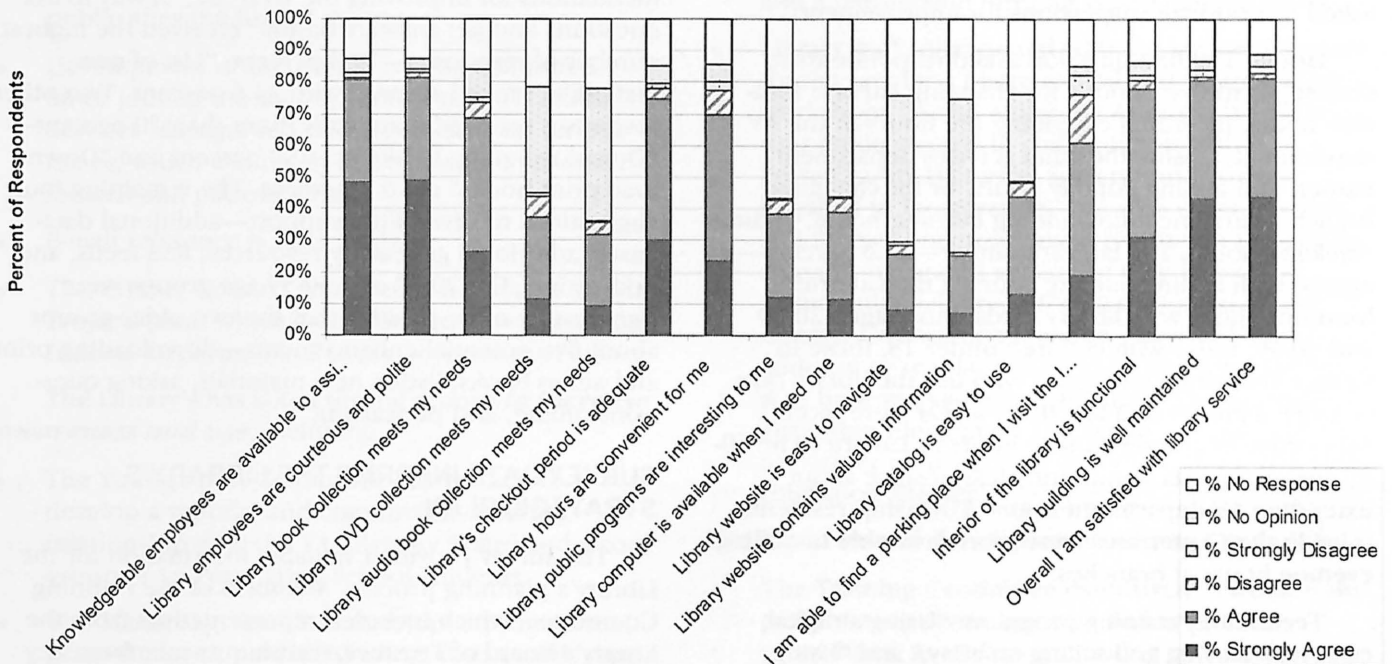
In the cross-tabulations, there were a number of significant differences in satisfaction in the two gender groups, those with children at home and without, the five township groups, between those with library cards and those without, and among age groups.

Females were significantly more positive than males about the collection meeting their needs and the circulation period being adequate.

Those with children at home were more likely to agree that DVDs met their needs, that library programs were interesting, that the web site was easy to navigate and contained valuable information, and that the catalog was easy to use.

Responses from the township groups showed differing levels of agreement with collection adequacy,

Figure 2: Opinions about Current Library Services



check-out period, library hours, parking, and functionality of facilities. Overall satisfaction was significantly higher in northwest, Center, and southwest and lower in northeast and southeast.

Those with library cards were significantly more positive about library employees, collection, hours, catalog, parking, and facilities. Among those with cards, 93.2 percent were satisfied, compared with 71 percent of those without.

The youngest age group—20-39—were significantly more positive about the content and ease of use of the library web site and they were in stronger agreement than other age groups that the catalog was easy to use. Those 60-69 were less positive and more likely to have no opinion about computer availability in the Library. They, and those aged 70 and older, were less likely to agree that the web site is easy to navigate. Respondents aged 70 and older showed significantly greater agreement that parking is available at the Library. The lowest level of agreement that parking is available was among the youngest age group.

Many respondents wrote comments at the end of the survey. Facilities received the most comments, including many compliments and a few suggestions regarding adding a drop-box, parking and noise issues, and overcrowding, especially at the Rolling Prairie branch. Hours received the second-largest number of comments; staff rated the third largest number of comments, while computers and technology ranked fourth and programs fifth. The comments were useful in understanding the areas where respondents were pleased with service and where they were frustrated.

Future Service Improvements

In the final section of the survey, respondents were asked to prioritize suggestions for improvement.

Hours. The first question asked respondents to choose up to five options for changing LaPorte location hours, including extending the hours in the AV department, closing the adult services department earlier, and adding Sunday hours, or for changing branch hours, including adding evening hours, adding weekend hours. The largest number—27.6 percent—agreed with adding Sunday hours at the LaPorte location. Those with library cards, those aged 20-39 and 40-59, those with children under 18, those in Center Township, and those who use the library one or twice a month or a few times a year were more supportive of adding Sunday hours in LaPorte. The 60-69 age group was significantly less positive about extending AV department hours. Township residents outside the Center area were more favorable to adding evening hours at branches.

Technology training programs. “Using a digital camera,” “Buying and selling on eBay,” and “Using

Microsoft Excel” were the top three choices for technology programs at the Library. Those with children were significantly more interested in technology training programs in Excel and Powerpoint. In seven of the nine topics suggested, there were significant differences among respondents in different age groups. In three areas, the interests of 20-39 and 40-59 year olds were comparable—Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Powerpoint, and eBay. The 40-59 age group was also interested in programs on Microsoft Word, digital camera, and scanner. The 60-69 year olds were more interested in genealogy than the others, and had modest levels of interest in learning to use a digital camera and eBay. The 70 and older age group was least interested, although there were not significant differences between them and other age groups in three topics drawing the least interest among all respondents—introduction to the library catalog, Wordperfect, and e-mail.

Technology to add. Respondents were given seven choices for additional technology. They chose self-check stations (21 percent), color photocopy machine (17.6 percent), color printer (15.6 percent), and wireless access (14.7 percent). Fewer respondents were interested in the Library adding Internet or catalog computers or a scanner. More than half—57.5 percent—selected no choices for technology additions. Those with children were significantly more interested in adding wireless access, self-check machines, and Internet computers. Card holders were more favorable toward self-check than non-card holders. In two of the seven choices, there were differences among age groups. Wireless access and self-check were selected by significantly more 20-30 and 40-59 year olds.

Web site enhancements. Among the eight recommendations for improving the Web site, “A way to ask questions and get answers online” received the highest number of responses—29.3 percent. “List of new materials” ranked second, with 24.6 percent. Two other responses received marginally more than 10 percent—“Download audio books” at 10.9 percent and “Download print books” at 10.7 percent. The remaining four suggestions received little support—additional databases, additional genealogy resources, RSS feeds, and podcasting. The 20-39 and 40-59 age groups were significantly more positive that the two older groups about five potential enhancements—downloading print and audio books, listing new materials, asking questions online, and podcasting.

SURVEY DATA INFORMS THE LIBRARY'S STRATEGIC PLAN

The survey provided valuable information for the Library's planning process. Members of the Planning Committee, which included representatives from the library's Board of Trustees, community members, key

Library staff, and the Director, reviewed the survey results, along with reports from the focus groups and community leader interviews and demographic and library performance reports. The survey information helped form the Library's Mission, Vision, and Key Success Factors. Many of the activities in the plan addressed weaknesses revealed by the survey or addressed priority future changes.

In an all-day retreat, the entire staff also reviewed the survey results, along with the other reports. In small groups, they read and had lively discussions of the reports, which helped them see the Library through the eyes of their customers and potential customers.

The Library's strategic plan identified five Key Success Factors:

1. Expand access to information through technology.
2. Increase awareness and use of Library resources and services.
3. Increase collaborative efforts.
4. Provide ongoing staff and board development.
5. Update facilities to meet changing needs.

In the six months since adoption of the plan, the Library has made great strides in each of these areas. To **expand access to information through technology**:

- Automation staff continued to work on the development of the website; the new design will be a complete departure from the existing web page design, featuring a new Library logo. It will be highly interactive to draw users into the site. Staff in all departments are gearing up to provide content. The initial version of the site will go public after the first of the year.
- Development of the online catalog continued. Since joining the staff in June, a new Technical Services Manager has worked to clear up various issues, which will result in a catalog that is easier for staff and patrons to use.
- E-mail reference is now available.
- The County Council approved the Library's Capital Projects plan, which awaits final approval from the Indiana Department of Local Government Finance.

The Library's has taken several actions **to increase awareness and use**, including:

- The Young Adult Committee has worked to develop a rapport and comfortable working relationship with the YA Advisory Board and a core group of La Porte High School students.
- The Marketing Team has developed promotional printed pieces, paid advertising, direct mail, signs,

public service announcements, and supported staff promotion to patrons, in order to focus on convenience factors (multiple library locations; reserve/renew online; online databases and website available 24/7; drop boxes always open; the book-mobile comes to you, etc.), as well as the specific resources being highlighted in 2007—large print materials and databases.

- All public service departments are actively managing their collections based upon customer use and feedback, weeding unused materials, and adding popular items. They use circulation system statistics to determine whether new additions to collections are actually used and adjust purchase decisions accordingly.

To **increase collaboration** with other groups in the community:

- Three professional staff are members of service clubs; two additional staff completed Leadership La Porte County in 2007 and two more staff will participate for 2008; all professional staff have increased their participation with such organizations as Chamber of Commerce, Convention & Tourism Bureau, Habitat for Humanity, Mayor's Committee on the Arts, Downtown La Porte Association, local churches, and schools.
- The Programming Committee and its sub-committees for children's, teens, and adult programs at all locations have worked to develop high quality programs, which have been well attended.
- The Marketing Team drafted a Community Involvement policy, partnership/sponsorship policy and a partnership form for Board consideration.
- Library staff collaborated with the Lubeznik Center for the Arts for a photo exhibit and "Young at Art" workshops, "Stroll Along the Avenues" a walking tour guide created in collaboration with the La Porte County Historical Society and Partners Engaged in Preservation; and with other libraries and literacy organizations in Northwest Indiana on a greatly-expanded version of One Book/One Community. Library staff also competed in the Literacy Council Spelling Bee – and WON! In addition to regular school visits and teen groups, staff have worked especially hard with Springfield Township Elementary and South Central Schools to partner on programs, communication, and early childhood literacy.

Staff and board development initiatives included:

- The Training Committee extensively reworked the performance review process and orientation procedures, as well as promoting continual

awareness of the need for internal staff communications.

- The Reference Department has provided monthly workshops for staff to develop their understanding and use of online databases. The Training Committee has provided staff training on excellent customer service and is planning a fall workshop on dealing with difficult patron behavior.

Initial steps in **upgrading Library facilities** included:

- Extension Services, with input from the bookmobile's local service provider and Maintenance and Grounds, prepared bid specifications for purchasing a new vehicle.
- The Director and the Extension Services Manager, with Board of Trustees advice and consent, have pursued property acquisition for a new branch library in Rolling Prairie. The process of selecting an architect will begin this fall.

CONCLUSION

The survey provided a vast treasure of very detailed information that the Library plans to use well beyond the planning process itself. It helped the Library's leadership and employees understand:

- The Library is highly regarded and is already doing a good job of satisfying the needs of regular users.
- Key assets are knowledgeable and friendly staff, clean and functional facilities, and up-to-date collections, especially those designed for leisure/entertainment and school homework support.
- Less-frequent and non-users are not as satisfied with current services, but understanding the barriers that keep them from using the Library and their priorities for new services offers the Library an opportunity to reach them.
- There are a few key barriers that keep people from using the Library. Several of them are within the Library's control, e.g., not knowing what the Library has.
- Many residents are not aware of the Library's technology and are not taking advantage of it.
- The Library's services are used differently by different groups. Use varies by age, gender, location, children at home, and library card holder status.
- Residents of the Library's district have clear priorities for future enhancements of hours, technology, and other services.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy R. Hamilton has been director of La Porte County Public Library since 1980. She has a B.A. in History from Millikin University (Decatur IL) and a Masters in Library Science from the University of Illinois. She is active in her community in the Chamber of Commerce, United Way, Rotary, Mayor's Committee on the Arts, and others.

She received the Athena Award from the Chamber of Commerce in 1989 and was named Business Woman of the Year in 1985. La Porte County Public Library has received many awards, including Indiana Library Federation's "Library of the Year" in 2006.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The other townships are served by four other libraries – La Crosse Public Library, Michigan City Public Library, Wanatah Public Library, and Westville Public Library – and the Library did not want residents of these library districts to receive its survey.