

## DIRECTOR'S REPORT

April 2004

*The Web is cool, but the library is magic. Where else can the spirit of generations of writers stir your soul?* Arthur Plotnik. "Who Loves You Like the Library?" 2003

Dichotomous thoughts. I anticipate retirement joyously -- which is merely an acknowledgement of my intention to be self-indulgent in all those activities so long on hold – school, business, travel, bridge, workouts, gardening, and watching Jamie grow. I am, nonetheless, deeply concerned about the vulnerability of our nation’s public libraries (this one in particular), especially the erosion of public funding. A contemporary essay asks, “What is the speed of dark?” I hope we don’t soon learn.

It's in – a veritable treasury of statistics! All about Bellingham Public Library. As you have an opportunity to study the Hennen report, you will become more aware of the extraordinary institution that is Bellingham Public Library. The Hennen study is important because it provides real benchmarks for service evaluation. It evaluates public libraries within population peer group rankings derived from a combination of input and output measures that are collected from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Most public libraries in the United States participate in reporting standard data annually to an appropriate state agency, usually the state library. The collecting agency collates and verifies data before reporting results to NCES. NCES then formats the data making it available online to any interested party. Tom Hennen has taken this data for over 9,000 public libraries, creating a master database, and developed a ranking tool that has been adopted nationwide.

There are six input measures and nine output measures. Each measure is weighted and a total score computed – for Any Public Library, USA. As library services change and expand new measures are considered for adoption. (Is counting is a national obsession ?) The adoption process is rigorous and often takes several years.

For example, libraries and online database compilers would like to include a “hit” rate or “transaction” rate for database use. However, formats vary so broadly and “sets” are defined so differently, that no consensus has emerged on what can be counted, what should be counted or how to capture elemental data. Therefore this very interesting but illusive information is a piece of the big picture not yet subject to comparative measurement. Since database subscriptions represent a sizable chunk of the acquisitions budget, it would be quite nice to place a relative use value on that expenditure. But, I suspect this is not soon to be realized.

On the other hand, a standard far more likely to be adopted in the next few years is a space allocation or square foot per capita recommendation. Formulae are derived from both quantitative and qualitative data plus building code requirements, ADA, and a variety of other factors including best practices and use patterns. The ideal standard for communities with population bases between 50,000 and 99,999 is two sq. ft. per capita, though 1.5 sq. is considered nominally acceptable. (BPL, including Fairhaven, has barely half the minimally recommended space allotment and nearly three times the use.)

That figure drops considerably to 0.9 sq. ft. per capita for the next population set, 100,000 – 250,000, a figure that assumes such communities support branch library services. Growth predictions suggest that Bellingham will reach a density of 100,000 sooner than later. Assuming

a branch library of approximately 12,000 – 15,000 sq. ft. in the northeast quadrant of Bellingham and 10,000 sq. ft. at Fairhaven, the local RUDAT team preliminary space needs assessment is pretty much on target at an estimated 71,000 sq. ft. for a main library.

If there is a sense that Bellingham Public Library is bursting at the seams – ‘tis true. As staff pull together to work more efficiently, to improve workflow and meet growing demands for service, they can only be commended. But there is a limit. I wish you the best of luck. I hope the promise becomes reality. There is no greater fun than planning a new library, unless, perhaps it’s building one.

*Ciao*