A Center for the Community:
The Long Range Plan for the Amherst Town Libraries,
2007- 2010

"If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then judge better what to do, and how to do it."
Abraham Lincoln

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SUMMARY

During FY 2006, the Library Trustees and staff analyzed the needs of the Amherst community by conducting a study of its demographic profile, community meetings, staff brainstorming, soliciting public comment, and comparing of Amherst Town Libraries' performance with a peer group of heavily used public libraries in Massachusetts. The mission of the Town Libraries will be to stimulate and support the civic and cultural life of Amherst area residents. Program goals and objectives will focus on improvements to the libraries' internal operation, outreach to new users, and program enhancements to meet community information needs.

1. Community Background: The Town of Amherst

Founded in 1759, Amherst is located in the Connecticut River valley in western Massachusetts. The Town has retained its representative Town Meeting with an elected Select Board as its executive body. Town services are administered by a professional Town Manager. As the home of Amherst College, the University of Massachusetts, and Hampshire College, Amherst enjoys a tradition of commitment to public education, a high level of government services, citizen support for open space and agriculture, and pride in its cultural history.

Economic activity in Amherst springs from its educational institutions. The University of Massachusetts employs approximately 7,000 workers, making it the region's largest employer. The student and faculty populations in 2000 totaled 23,470 at the University of Massachusetts, 1,694 at Amherst College, and 1,139 at Hampshire College. Local residents have attained higher than average levels of education. 68% of Amherst residents hold a B.A. or higher degree. Because the primary business of Amherst is education, many residents are teachers, writers, students, researchers, and professional workers with needs for high quality educational support services.

Amherst has become the largest community in Hampshire County. Its attractive location provides scenic landscapes, plus easy access to metropolitan areas in eastern Massachusetts and into Connecticut. The U.S. census count of the town's population has been fairly level, as follows:

1980 – 33,229
1990 – 35,228
2000 – 34,874

Studies by the Amherst Planning Department project the maximum build out population at 43,600, if housing were built on all available lots. However, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission estimates that the town's population decreased 1.8% from 2000 to 2004. Housing ranges from upscale million dollar homes to affordable housing in apartment complexes and government subsidized units. Over 10% of the town's housing stock is "affordable" by state standards, reflecting the town's commitment to provide opportunities for low income residents.

Amherst's population is growing in racial and ethnic diversity. In the 2000 census, the Asian community represented at least 9% of the population, and 5% of the population identified themselves as Black. Over twenty-five languages were reported as spoken at home. Spanish was spoken by 6%, and Chinese was spoken by 2.6% of those responding to the census.

Immigration has had a local impact. Slightly over 9% of Amherst residents reported that they were not citizens of the United States.

2. Amherst Town Libraries: Development

In typical New England fashion, the townspeople of Amherst first organized public libraries in the late 1800s. Residents of North Amherst organized a library association in 1869 and built the town's first public library building in 1893. Readers in the center of town organized a free public library in 1874, and the collections moved into a library room in the newly constructed Town Hall in 1890.

Former resident Samuel Minot Jones transformed Amherst's public libraries with an extremely generous bequest. In 1921 the Town received $661,747 from Jones' estate, and for the next forty years the private, non-profit Jones Library, Inc. served the town with little need for tax support. Trustee John Tyler expressed the ambitious hopes of the Board, saying that the new library should be

> "*the center and home and stimulus and support of the whole intellectual and civic life of the town. It must elevate our schools and inspire our teachers. It must create and maintain an appetite for art as well as learning.*"

A roomy three story library building opened in 1928 providing comfortable reading and study rooms, art studios, a children's wing with its own meeting room, and an entire wing devoted to a 200-seat auditorium with a stage, grand piano, and motion picture projection equipment. Oil paintings, bronze statues, and oriental rugs decorated the rooms, and eleven fireplaces personified "Mother Amherst welcoming her children to the hearth." At the beginning, Jones Library's home-like design was considered radical, and its role as a center for community activities was not endorsed by most professional librarians. Over time, however, this commitment to function as a community cultural center became an enduring legacy, and the building's home-like design is much beloved by library users.

By the 1970s the Jones Library, Inc. endowment was unable to meet the needs of a growing town population. Amherst Town Meeting voted to amend the special act that founded the library and to create a Library Services Department. In 1972 new state legislation expanded the Board of Trustees and enabled increased tax support for Town Libraries, combining the Jones Library, North Amherst Library, and the Munson Memorial Library in South Amherst. The publicly elected, six-member Board now governs all three libraries as one system. The Trustees also act as the Board for the Jones Library, Incorporated, a private non-profit corporation whose assets continue to contribute significantly to library services.

In 1990 the Jones Library began renovations, redesign, and an expansion of the building to 50,000 sq. ft. The Library Building Committee arranged the new space assignments to emphasize three major roles: meeting the demand for "Popular Library" services and materials, development of a "Preschoolers' Learning Center", and creation of dedicated space for a "Reference Library". After the library's re-opening in 1993, service levels doubled. Circulation reported at all town libraries in FY 1987 totaled 247,505, and in FY 1997 it was 504,651. Reference services expanded from 16,888 inquiries to 34,175 over the same ten year period.

Amherst Town Libraries are now among the busiest public libraries in western Massachusetts, second only to the Springfield City Library system. Due to the strength of its

collections and staff expertise, demand on Town Libraries is growing from the region's population. The Jones Library offers up-to-date circulating collections for children and adults, professional information assistance seven days a week, wireless access to the internet, and sixty volunteer tutors providing instruction in the English as a Second Language Center. The Special Collections department preserves local history and houses nationally known collections of manuscripts by poets Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, and materials from other Amherst residents. Individuals and groups frequently use several public meeting rooms and display space. Branch libraries in North and South Amherst focus on popular collections geared for use by neighborhood families and on information assistance.

3. The Library's Mission in the 21st Century

The Trustees and library staff composed an updated mission statement for Amherst Town Libraries in 2003. The Trustees have reaffirmed this mission to guide the library's long range planning through 2010.

> *The Amherst Town Libraries strive to stimulate and support the civic and cultural life of all people of our region by providing access to materials, assisting them in their quest for information, preserving the history of our region, and serving as a meeting place for the community's educational and cultural pursuits.*

4. Description of Planning Methodology and Assessment of User Needs

In preparation for long range planning, Library Director Bonnie Isman and the Board of Trustees began an outline of a planning process in June, 2005. In August, the Trustees' Long Range Planning Committee met with planning consultant Donna Jenson who was tapped to assist staff. The consultant would facilitate two group discussions exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the current program of services, and the opportunities and threats that would have an impact on library development in the years ahead. One session would be for all library staff and the other would be for invited participants representing key groups in the community. Ms. Jenson also guided the Board in a discussion of goal setting, based on her experience in consulting with a wide array of non-profit agencies and organizations.

Fact sheets were assembled for use in the group discussions, using the results of the 2000 U.S. census and local information resources. The Trustees and staff also selected a "Peer Group" of Massachusetts libraries based on similar levels of service and community expectations. Using the Mass. Board of Library Commissioners' statistical reports, comparisons were made among the "peer" libraries rather than to statewide averages for towns of similar size populations. (See fact sheets attached as Appendix A.) The Trustees noted the lack of state or national standards for public library services.

News releases announced the public meeting with the question "What will the library look like in 2010?" A planning blog was created by Reference Librarian Rosemary Loomis to share planning information and to encourage comments from library users. The blog site is available at http://2010planning.blogspot.com.

Thirty-nine employees participated in the Long Range Planning Meeting, facilitated by Donna Jenson on October 19, 2005. Staff response to the morning planning session was overwhelmingly positive. A common theme was the impact of low levels of staffing due to recent budget cuts.

Staff identified the following **strengths:** Material-sharing with other libraries; free access to the Internet; library open seven days a week; many and varied programs for kids and adults; Friends of the Library; beautiful, comfortable, homey building; strong and diverse library collections; and a supportive public. Staff also found these **weaknesses:** Not enough staff; lack of communications among departments; lack of a crosswalk; insufficient parking; lack of space for computers; high turnover in staff in some departments; Library's HVAC system; and not enough money for equipment and supplies. **Opportunities** included need for more staff and more cultural diversity; expanded eBook and digital collections; possibility for coffee bar; better use of space; promotion of library services; expansion of programs to teens. The staff also saw **threats**, such as, unstable patrons and lack of a security force; no time to learn new technical skills and keep up with technology; local and state budget cuts and lack of funding; reduction in hours.

Thirty people participated in the Open Forum on Long Range Planning on October 24, 2005. At this session facilitator Donna Jenson invited the Director to share her vision of the library in 2010. Bonnie Isman described entering the library using a safe, convenient crosswalk linked to an expanded public parking area; smelling the coffee from a “Friendly Books Café” run by volunteers; using self-check out machines; exploring the reorganized space on the first floor of the library, and visiting a new teen space on the second floor. She also envisioned a return to quiet reading space due to the phase out from cell phones to the use of new telecom brain implants.

In response to this fanciful picture, the participants were divided into small groups to report what they liked and disliked about the vision and what they needed from the main and branch libraries. Six of the nine groups mentioned the need for more hours of service at the main and branch libraries, especially restoring the hours cut in FY 2005. Five groups liked the coffee shop idea. Four groups wanted a room for teens, a full-time volunteer coordinator, additional computers (including the self-check out machines), more emphasis on the Special Collections department, and a crosswalk to the parking lot. (Note: the crosswalk was installed temporarily in January, 2006.)

The Chairwoman of the Amherst Disability Access Advisory Committee assisted in reviewing the main library for architectural access to library services. Deb Waldron toured the building in her wheelchair and discussed several issues of concern. While she rated the library’s public restrooms as “the best in town”, she warned that overall the building design was very confusing and needed improved signage and posted floor plans. Assistive equipment is needed at computer workstations as are more study tables that accommodate wheelchair users. Ms. Waldron agreed to enlist the Disability Access Committee’s help in the promotion of the library’s collections and services which are designed for readers with special needs.

Branch library access is also a concern. The Munson Memorial Library building is handicapped accessible; however, the North Amherst Library is not. The charming hundred year

old North Amherst building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as is the Jones Library. A summary of the Jones Library ADA survey is attached as Appendix B.

5. Goals and objectives

Two Key Long Term Issues Greatly Influence Planning for 2010:

A. *Budget Limits*, especially the budgetary reductions anticipated during the next two years. These restraints are caused by large increases in staff benefit costs, rapidly increasing energy costs, and Proposition 2 ½ funding limits. Library operating budgets will require additional private fund raising to meet program goals.

B. *Space Limits*. The inability to easily expand usable space at the Jones Library and the branch libraries may require re-allocation of existing space to new uses. Jones Library collections and computers have outgrown the space plan designed in 1990. Both branch libraries collections exceed their shelving capacity.

Goal I. Enhance high quality library services by strengthening the internal structure and organization of Town Libraries.

A. *Staffing.* Support personnel development with on-going staff training, including cross-training between departments.

B. *Collections.* Reexamine collection development and collection retention policies, giving appropriate consideration to overlap with the holdings of area academic and school libraries.

C. *Safety*. Increase safety for staff and public through improvements in the Library's facilities, safety policies and procedures.

D. *Diversity*. Expand collection and staff diversity to reflect community populations.

E. *Space*. Reconsider use of existing Library physical spaces, including community spaces, for effective operations. Consider the need for off-site storage and/or compact shelving.

F. *Infrastructure.* Improve access to information by strengthening the technological infrastructure required to link libraries, by addressing materials preservation needs and by expanding catalog access to the library's collections and services.

Goal II. Increase public awareness of the value of Town Library services

A. *Communications.* Establish partnerships with local media to improve external (public) communications.

B. *Fund-Raising.* Expand the Library's fund-raising efforts.

Goal III. Meet the public's needs for information, education and cultural resources

A. *Update and enhance services to persons with special library needs, such as the needs of English language learners and of people with physical handicaps*.

B. *Support access to lifelong learning by providing support for information literacy through displays, classes, and other group activities.*

C. Encourage the development of literacy skills in children and Young Adults.

D. *Extend user access to library resources through the use of information technology.*

6. FY 2007 Action plan with timeframes and measurements for evaluation achievements

GOAL I	**Strengthen the internal structure and organization**
A. Staffing	FY 2007: Provide staff training, including cross training between departments
	Schedule: Year long
	Measurement used: Report number of staff that attend professional conferences, C/W MARS and WMRLS training courses during the year & Number of staff that attend in-house training sessions annually. Staff evaluations of in-house trainings.
	Responsibility: Director & Dept. Heads
B. Collections	FY 2007: Focus on Children's collections overcrowding – plan for weeding and distribution of surplus to school media centers or academic collections
	Schedule: September, 2006 – January, 2007
	Measurement: Count Juv. Discards and transfers; Create enough shelf space to shelve Juv. collection backlog
	Responsibility: Children's Librarian, Tech. Services staff
	FY 2007: Meet with staff at school media centers to discuss sharing materials in world languages. Distribute available materials.
	Measurement: Contacts with school staff, # items shared.
	Schedule: February 2007 – May 2007
	Responsibility: Children's Librarian, Adult Services Librarian
C. Safety	FY 2007: Update Disaster Manual, add exit signage, and educate staff. Replace worn carpets, repair roof, and replace delivery van.
	Schedule: July-October, 2006
	Measurement: Staff evaluation.
	Responsibility: Director, Curator, Building Supervisor
D. Diversity	FY 2007: Establish initial goals for staff diversity and create partnerships.
	Schedule: September – December, 2006
	Measurement:
	Responsibility: Trustees, Director
E. Space	FY 2007: Seek internal storage opportunities, dispose of surplus items. Explore options for public coffee bar or refreshments.
	Schedule: August – January, 2007
	Measurement: Identify # sq. ft. needed and amount available
	Responsibility: Director, Curator, Building Supervisor
F. Infrastructure	FY 2007: Upgrade older computers, review status of acquisitions and cataloging services. Preserve Town research materials.
	Schedule: September-reports from Heads of IT, Reference and Technical Services on current status and project in progress. Report from Curator on preservation activities for the year.
	Measurement: Set base line performance levels
	Responsibility: IT Direction, Reference Librarian, Technical Services Librarian
	FY 2007: Replace HVAC controls to improve energy efficiency

	Schedule: July – October, 2006
	Measurement: compare energy usage for FY 2006 and FY 2007
	Responsibility: Director, Building Supervisor
GOAL II.	**Public Awareness of Town Libraries**
A. Communications	FY 2007: Contact Amherst Bulletin and initiate monthly column on library service stories
	Schedule: July-contact editor and get approval, August assign Trustees on a monthly schedule for preparation of columns
	Measurement: number of columns printed, increase in usage of services profiled
	Responsibility: Trustees
B. Fund Raising	FY 2007: Set a coordinated time line for fund raising by Trustees, Friends, staff; Draft and distribute brochures on planned giving to Town Libraries
	Schedule: July – October
	Measurement: # meetings held, brochures distributed. Total funds donated.
	Responsibility: Director, Trustees
GOAL III.	**Meet user needs for information, education, and cultural resources**
A. Users with special needs	FY 2007: Review barriers to access in Town Libraries; improve signage. Install adapted computer stations and study tables
	Schedule: Sept-Jan, 2007
	Measurement: review by Disability Access Advisory Committee
	Responsibility: Director, Reference Librarian, Adult Services Librarian
B. Information Literacy	FY 2007: Present a series of computer skills classes. Promote use of downloadable media and digital resources
	Schedule: Sept – June, 2007
	Measurement: number of classes and students; student evaluations
	Responsibility: Reference staff
C. Children's learning skills	FY 2007: Present a series of children's learning activities. Survey and report on available learning opportunities for young teens.
	Schedule: July-June
	Measurement: number of events and attendance. Distribution of report
	Responsibility: Children's Librarian, Adult Services Librarian
D. Information Technology	FY 2007: Add computers for public use. Upgrade older computer stations. Mount newspaper index in user friendly software.
	Schedule: Sept – June, 2007
	Measurement: Usage statistics from public use of computers
	Responsibility: IT Department, Director, Reference Librarian

<u>Attachments</u>
A. Statistical Fact Sheets
B. ADA Report