

# Building and Maintaining Community Support Is Key to Library Survival

By *NANCY REA*

**W**hat if your library's municipal budget is cut to the point that core services—and perhaps even the survival of the library—are at stake? What if the state budget for libraries is cut and your library users no longer have access to databases that they need to search and apply for jobs? What if—and this is a good thing—your library is awarded a grant that requires a significant community match? To respond effectively to any of these scenarios, negative or positive, community support is critical.

Just as I arrived as the new director of a library in 2003, at the beginning of the economic downturn, the city slashed the library budget by more than 75 percent to help close a \$7 million city budget gap, essentially closing the library. What happened next? Trustees, friends and users rallied. Friends obtained more than 3,000 signatures on petitions, trustees sued the city, and users flooded the email boxes of city councillors with pleas and angry messages. Hundreds of people attended the city council meeting on the library budget—the meeting needed to be moved to an auditorium due to turnout—where they testified for hours about the importance of the library to them personally. The result was that the library remained open. To this day, whenever that library's budget is on the table, city councillors remember the outpouring of community support for the library that jammed their email inboxes, and the library's budget has continued to move, however slowly, in the right direction.

During the recent difficult economic climate, libraries and organizations that support them across the state and the nation have faced similar situations, and they have recognized the importance of developing community support to ensure that libraries survive and even thrive.

## AVAILABLE RESOURCES

For more than a decade, the American Library Association has focused on developing training and tools that will help libraries build critical community support. Beyond supporting library issues nationally, the ALA website ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)) is a rich resource for learning how to promote libraries locally. These ALA tools help libraries learn how to contact and communicate effectively with legislators (local and national) and how to involve staff, trustees and other partners. Resources include brochures, training materials, sample fliers, talking points and tip sheets. One of the newest tools is called Mobile Commons, an opt-in service that allows the ALA to communicate advocacy messaging right to the user's cell phone. The service provides talking points on issues and a direct connection to local representatives or senators.

A webinar training program called "Turning the Page" is available from the Public Library Association, a division of the ALA. The self-paced course leads libraries and their supporters through exercises that help them develop a plan for building

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*Voters show their support for a new library at Town Meeting in West Tisbury.*

community support. In twelve to fifteen hours, library staff and supporters learn how to create and tell their library's story, deliver effective presentations, develop a compelling case for support, and build and sustain partnerships along the way. Topics include Public Perceptions, Telling Your Story, You As a Leader, Building Relationships, the "Big Ask," and So, What's Next? Participants are encouraged to come with a specific, self-determined advocacy goal for their library. By the end of the training, participants have a complete Advocacy Work Plan to guide their efforts.

States across the country are using and building on these resources and creating their own programs, developing new ways of building community support for libraries. Last year, Sno-Isle Libraries in Washington ([www.sno-isle.org](http://www.sno-isle.org)) initiated a highly successful Community Ambassadorship Program to highlight the many resources in community libraries. Ambassadors are recruited and trained to tell their personal stories about the library and how it has affected them. Ambassadors then go out into the community to spread the word about library services and the impact on their lives. This is a program that could be easily replicated in other communities.

## A RICH TRADITION

In Massachusetts, support for libraries has a long history. Each year, the Massachusetts Library Association and the Massachusetts School Library Association collaborate to sponsor a Legislative Day at the State House. Librarians from across the state gather to promote library services and the difference

they make in people's lives. These services include databases to help people seek and apply for jobs, materials for students and seniors, services for the blind, and materials for newcomers to this country, to name just a few. Legislative Day is an opportunity to make legislators aware of the importance of library services in all types of libraries and to advocate for funding to keep both libraries and their services in place. The most moving part of the day is devoted to young people, when students read letters written to their favorite authors, from the popular and contemporary Rick Riordan to the teen-oriented Judy Blume to classics like Emily Dickinson.

During election years, the Massachusetts Library Association conducts a survey of legislative candidates. The data inform communities and library advocates about which candidates support libraries and which need to hear more about the library services provided to their constituents. (Results of this year's survey can be found at [www.masslib.org/legislative/2012CandidateSurvey.htm](http://www.masslib.org/legislative/2012CandidateSurvey.htm).)

On a more local level, legislative breakfasts are held in libraries across the state. These informal events are an opportunity for legislators to see and hear about the impact of libraries in the communities they represent. Legislators and librarians share a cup of coffee and hear from library users about how libraries make a difference in their lives. These stories range from touching to heart-wrenching. For example, a small library on Cape Cod provides critical services for the visually challenged. At a North Shore library, a visit by an author provides inspiration for a child, who might now also become an author. At another library, a librarian works with ESL students as they struggle to complete all the steps to obtain a GED certificate.

## BUILDING AND MAINTAINING COMMUNITY SUPPORT IS KEY TO LIBRARY SURVIVAL

A recent addition to statewide library advocacy in Massachusetts is Snapshot Day. A national event promoted by the ALA, Snapshot Day is an opportunity for libraries to record, with pictures and statistics, all of the services and use of libraries across the Commonwealth on one day. This year, on April 12, 188 libraries contributed 2,725 photos of the day, when 104,766 people visited their local library. (Compare this with Disneyland in California, for example, which gets 40,000 daily visits.) More than 6,000 photographs collected from the two Snapshot Days held so far reflect not only the many ways that our libraries are being used, but also the joy that libraries bring to users of all ages and from all walks of life. Photos and statistics from Snapshot Day 2011 and 2012 can be found at [www.masslibsystem.org/snapmass](http://www.masslibsystem.org/snapmass).

### Wikipedia Defines Public Library Advocacy

“Public library advocacy is support given to a public library for its financial and philosophical goals or needs. Most often this takes the form of monetary or material donations or campaigning to the institutions that oversee the library. Originally, library advocacy was centered on the library itself, but current trends show libraries positioning themselves to demonstrate they provide ‘economic value to the community.’”

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/public\\_library\\_advocacy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/public_library_advocacy)

### TAKE ACTION!

The newest effort in Massachusetts is called Take Action! Build Community Support, a project sponsored by the Massachusetts Library System and six other affiliated organizations. The intent of the project ([guides.masslibsystem.org/LibraryAdvocacy](http://guides.masslibsystem.org/LibraryAdvocacy)) is to provide libraries and their advocates with a toolkit for building grassroots community support.

Three pilot training sessions were held this fall in different parts of the state. The first portion of the two-part program focused on components of the toolkit, and the second looked at examples of implementation, with participants sharing their library advocacy success stories and challenges.

The toolkit includes a workbook (adapted from an ALA workbook), an ALA-produced “small but powerful” guide for building public support, and four resource sheets developed for the training. Steps outlined in the workbook include the following: identify issues, develop goals, identify the audience, craft a message, identify partners and develop strategies. A “Step-by-Step” action sheet includes “First Steps,” such as offering meeting space for local legislators to hold office hours and getting media coverage for library programs and events; “Striding Out,” such as using social media to promote the library; and “Giant Steps,” like making presentations to community groups, hosting a legislative breakfast, and creating a video of the library for YouTube.

The training presents universal principles that any library or organization could apply to build community support. The following are some of the most important tenets of the training:

- Don’t wait for a crisis; build relationships now.
- Be out in the community.
- Know your resources and partners.
- Building community support needs to be a primary consideration in every decision made about services and every user interaction.

One important message of the training is that building support does not need to be difficult or time-consuming. The recommended approach is to take beginning steps and then build on them. Another key message is that community support for your library does not happen all at once and is not a one-time event. Successful libraries and their supporters realize that building community support is a process of building relationships that needs to be ongoing.

A strong example of implementation is given during the second part of the Take Action training. When six regional library systems needed to consolidate in 2010, grassroots support from western Massachusetts libraries and their communities resulted in preservation of a regional site in the western part of the state. This outcome was probably successful because of longstanding community support that was already in place.

What can library supporters do to help build community support for their library?

- Know your library and the important services that it provides for your community.
- Consider the impact your library has on your life and the lives of others in your community.
- Represent your library on community committees and in other venues in the community.
- Consider ways that the library can collaborate with other community partners.
- Promote your library as the integral and critical component to the fabric of your community that it is. 🌟



PHOTO BY OWEN SMITH SHUMAN

Library supporters attend the Legislative Breakfast held at the Groton Public Library.



## Nine Advocacy Steps to Success

Securing support is an ongoing challenge for libraries of any size. It can seem particularly daunting in small and rural communities with many needs and few resources. But small can be powerful when making your case for support.

Advocacy is about persuading funders and other decision makers to give you the support you need. It begins with the people who believe in libraries—you, your staff, board members, friends, volunteers and users. Making your case for support is all about getting organized and focused. The best way to do that is to keep it simple.

### 1. Don't wait for a crisis. Make yourself essential.

Advocacy works best when the library has a track record of excellent service and a reservoir of goodwill with the community. You may not have the nicest building or biggest collection, but you can become renowned for your excellent service. Learn to speak the language of those you seek to serve. Sponsor literacy, employment and other classes that address community needs. Develop partnerships with other organizations.

### 2. Build your team.

You will need a core group of supporters to help strategize. Start with your library's trustees, friends or biggest fans. Try to find people who both believe in the library and are well connected in the community. Research shows that even people who don't use the library appreciate its role and wish to support it. Always remember to ask for support.

### 3. Have a clear, memorable message.

You will need a simple, powerful message, one that is easy to say and remember—about ten words. And you should use it consistently in publicity materials and presentations. The more you use it, the more likely people will “get it” and act.

#### Examples:

“Our community deserves a twenty-first-century library.”

“Kids need libraries as much as they need schools.”

Develop three supporting messages or talking points and a few good statistics, stories or examples to build your case.

### 4. Target your audiences.

Be specific. Who needs to hear the message? To whom do they listen? It's hard to reach everyone, so identify those whose support is most critical and make them your highest priority. Key public officials, parents and seniors are typical target audiences for libraries.

### 5. Identify strategies.

How will you deliver your message to the people you want to reach? Who will deliver it? Your action plan should identify specific strategies, a timetable and who is responsible. The more times and the more ways you deliver the message, the more impact it will have.

### 6. Practice word-of-mouth marketing.

Good, old-fashioned word-of-mouth is still the most powerful form of communication. But to be effective, it needs to be done consciously and consistently. And it is most effective when others do it for you. Don't just tell people, ask them to “Please tell your friends.”

### 7. Have an enthusiastic, articulate spokesperson.

A message will only take you so far. You will also need a spokesperson who can deliver it with passion, who is comfortable and skilled in that role. That may or may not be you. While you know the library best, it is often better to have a supporter be the front person.

### 8. Evaluate constantly.

Don't wait until it's over. Keep an eye out for what's working and what's not. Are you getting positive media coverage? To how many groups have you spoken? What kind of feedback are you getting from people who come into the library? Ask representatives of your target groups whether they know about your campaign. Keep a checklist and make adjustments as needed.

### 9. Don't stop.

Make an ongoing effort to keep your community informed of how the library contributes to the community and what it needs to provide the best possible service. It is much easier to win support when key officials and community members understand its importance and are enthusiastic.

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*From The Small But Powerful Guide to Winning Big Support for Your Rural Library, used with permission from the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services, American Library Association*