

Worthington Libraries History

2004-2010

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Change is in the Air

“When you are growing up there are two institutional places that affect you most powerfully: the church, which belongs to God, and the public library, which belongs to you. The public library is a great equalizer.”—Keith Richards

In 2004, Worthington Libraries began a strategic planning process to chart the course for the library’s next stage of development. This process involved the library board, staff and hundreds of community members as the Library actively sought input, ideas, vision and feedback. A community strategic planning group composed of 13 people representing all areas of the library’s service district and life stages (from teens to seniors) helped the organization determine the major focus areas of the plan: services, children and families and stewardship.

The larger initiatives of the plan, which included extending service to the northeast part of the library’s community and modernizing the existing facilities, would hinge on securing an additional source of revenue.

2004 was the first year the Library used its cash reserves to make up the difference between revenue and expenses. Without an additional funding source, the library’s cash reserves would be exhausted by 2007, making it difficult to maintain current levels of service, let alone expand them.

As such, the 2005-2008 Strategic Plan, as it was passed by the library’s board of trustees in May 2005, provided the framework for discussions of placing an additional property tax levy before voters. After much debate about when to go on the ballot and how much money was needed, the timing and the case ultimately proved to be on target, and the Library was successful in passing a 2.6 mill permanent operating levy on November 8, 2005.

With additional revenue secured, the Library went to work on keeping levy promises and implementing the strategic plan.

New services were added. Downloadable digital audiobooks and online tutoring were made available from the library’s website and library staff provided regular outreach activities at Slate Hill Elementary School and the Lazelle Woods Recreation Center.

Worthington Libraries was once again selected as a finalist for the prestigious Library of the Year award in 2006 (the library also achieved this distinction in 2001, 2002 and 2003).

While being a runner-up for such an honor is nice, winning is much better, and win they did in June 2007 when Worthington Libraries was named the national Library of the Year by *Library Journal* and Gale Publishing.

The award, which includes a cash prize of \$10,000, is given annually to the library system which best illustrates the following: service to the community, creativity and innovation in developing specific community programs, dramatic increase in library use and leadership in creating programs than can be emulated by other libraries.

The award ceremony was held in Washington, DC on June 25 during the American Library Association's annual conference, with many staff, board and community members in attendance. Francine Fialkoff, editor-in-chief of *Library Journal*, explained why she personally thought Worthington Libraries was the right choice for the Library of the Year award, citing the library's "amazing amount of programs, innovation in all areas, excellent budgetary practices and commitment to literacy for patrons of all ages."

In accepting the award, library director Meribah Mansfield stated, "Our work is joyous and a blessing in our lives."

Later that summer, on July 20, 2007, the Library hosted the largest event in its history to celebrate the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final installment in J.K. Rowling's popular series. The event was 15 hours long and featured the participation of several community businesses. More than 5,000 people attended and many talked about it for weeks after.

In late 2007, the Library began several construction projects to fulfill the strategic plan goal of modernizing the existing buildings and extending service to patrons in the northeast part of its community.

Small additions would be made to expand the circulation departments at both Old Worthington Library and Northwest Library and space would be reconfigured to make both libraries more attractive and easier to use. Designated teen spaces would be created and new children's entrances would be commissioned. New furniture, additional computers, carpeting and shelving designed to better merchandise the library's collection would provide the finishing touches to the building renovations which were complete in 2009 (both libraries remained open throughout the renovations and all parts of the collection remained available).

Although Worthington Libraries owns land adjacent to the Lazelle Woods Recreation Center in northeast Columbus (in the

Worthington School District), it was still not economically possible for the Library to build and operate a full-scale freestanding facility on that property.

An alternative solution was found by using existing available space at the nearby Worthington Park Shopping Center to create a storefront library. Although smaller in scale at only 5,280 square feet, the Worthington Park Library, which opened in April 2008, was developed in conjunction with neighborhood residents and contains a large children's collection, popular reading library and 25 public computers.

The Worthington Park Library also houses the system's only dedicated Homework Help Center. Open from 3-6 pm Monday-Thursday during the school year, the Homework Help Center provides students with dedicated computers, tutors and other resources needed to assist them with schoolwork.

The funding model for Ohio's public libraries also changed in 2008. Ohio's 2008-2009 biennium budget set aside 2.22 percent of the state's total general tax revenue for public libraries. This was believed to be a more stable income source for public libraries than the previous Library and Local Government Support Fund, which had been funded through a percentage of only the personal income tax. The name of the fund was officially changed to the Public Library Fund to more accurately reflect its purpose, but the optimism over this new funding model did not last long.

In 2009, public libraries in Ohio were dealt a tremendous blow when Governor Ted Strickland proposed reducing state library funding by 30 percent on top of an already-anticipated 20 percent reduction in state funding. This would have resulted in a 50 percent funding reduction and meant that many small public libraries, which are totally reliant on state funding, could have closed.

When the governor's proposal was announced on a Friday afternoon in June, Worthington Libraries went to work to lead the rallying cry to "Save Ohio Libraries." By Saturday, Worthington Libraries had crafted a logo for the campaign, created by digital library manager Kara Reuter, and a message that would be picked up and used by libraries throughout the state. Mandy Knapp, an adult services librarian, also took the personal initiative to create the website saveohiolibraries.com which became a statewide clearinghouse for information about the campaign (she was later recognized as one of *Library Journal's* "Movers and Shakers" for her role in the advocacy campaign).

Libraries across the state urged patrons to contact the governor and state legislators with personal appeals to save library funding. Hundreds of people attended rallies in Columbus, Cleveland, Toledo and Portsmouth to show their support of libraries, and even more used social

media sites like Twitter and Facebook to galvanize their friends and families to action. It was an amazing outpouring of support for libraries.

As a result, the statehouse was flooded with thousands of e-mails a day, crashing servers and raising the ire of some elected officials, but ultimately proving the point that library service was important to a lot of people in Ohio.

The campaign saved public libraries from the most drastic of cuts. In the budget, as signed by Governor Strickland on July 17, 2009, the funding formula for the Public Library Fund was temporarily reduced to 1.97 percent of the general tax revenue (as opposed to the original 2.22 percent). This will result in an approximate 11 percent funding reduction over the next two years. The anticipated loss for Worthington Libraries' state funding in 2010 is \$910,572 or 9.4 percent of projected total revenue.

In addition to the funding crisis, 2009 also began another strategic planning cycle for Worthington Libraries. The development of the library's 2010-2012 Strategic Plan included a different twist as the information-gathering part of the process was conducted in partnership with the City of Worthington and the Worthington Schools.

Although at different stages in their strategic planning cycles, all three organizations believed they could benefit from community discussion and worked with the help of consultants to outline a process for community inclusion. This project also made economic sense as costs of the project were evenly shared.

A steering committee was formed and included representation from the three organizations and the wider community. Committee members served as sounding boards and helped guide the project through its various stages. They also provided a name: *Worthington Area 360°: Shaping Our Future Together*.

The process included a telephone survey, focus groups and a two-day Visioning Conference attended by more than 60 residents. The information gathered informed the library's 2010-2012 Strategic Plan, approved by the library board in March 2010, and provided the City of Worthington and Worthington Schools with information to guide the development of their individual plans.

Perhaps the biggest change to take place at Worthington Libraries in several decades came in January 2010 when director Meribah Mansfield announced her retirement after nearly 19 years of service to Worthington Libraries. She decided to leave in order to pursue a new path as an ordained deacon in the Episcopal Church.

Under her leadership, the library experienced significant growth, going from one to three facilities, earned a national reputation for

excellence and more than tripled its use. In 2009, Worthington Libraries circulated 3,561,742 items.

Mansfield prided herself on being a good steward of taxpayer dollars. The Library completed its first Comprehensive Annual Financial Report in 2006 and was awarded both the Government Finance Officers Association's "Certificate for Excellence in Financial Reporting" award and the State Auditor's "Making Your Tax Dollars Count" award (both awards were also received in 2007 and 2008).

Mansfield is recognized as leader in the state and naturally looks to build relationships with other systems. The library's once strained relationship with the Delaware County District Library is now much more inclusive with their staff regularly reaching out to the staff of Worthington Libraries for information and guidance as they continue to deal with population growth.

In 2009, the Delaware County District Library passed a one mill 10-year property tax levy which will provide funds to build a new library facility near the Franklin County border. They used levy planning materials provided by Worthington Libraries as their guide to passing a successful levy.

Mansfield worked hard to develop and maintain the library's relationship with the community and to grow the library staff, several of whom have gone on to become directors of other libraries.

One of those staff members was Chuck Gibson, who worked at Worthington Libraries from 1995-2007 before leaving to become the director of the South Georgia Regional Library System.

While Meribah Mansfield will be a decidedly tough act to follow, Gibson will try to do just that when he returns to Worthington Libraries as director in August 2010. He will be the library's first male director in more than 200 years, and his leadership sets the stage for a new chapter in the library's long and successful history.