

Acton Public Library Strategic Plan, 2021-2024

MESSAGE FROM THE LIBRARY DIRECTOR AND BOARD CHAIR

Old Saybrook is a small and vibrant suburban town, situated on the picturesque Connecticut coastline. The Acton Public Library has been a part of the community since 1854 when a group of women started the Ladies Circulating Library for a \$1.00 contribution. The library has grown and changed along with the community of Old Saybrook for 167 years.

The Acton Library Board of Trustees recognized the critical need for a strategy for the future. Being more adaptable to current and future needs and having the ability to use our physical space in a more flexible manner are high priorities. While we had a pause during COVID, we realized that our high priority items continued to have value.

Amanda Brouwer, Library Director
Nancy Walsh, Chairperson, Board of Trustees

PLANNING PROCESS

A successful public library reflects the community it serves, and therefore needs to periodically engage in a process of gathering community input and reassessment of the services and programs it offers.

The Acton Public Library contracted with Maxine Bleiweis & Associates (MB&A) in October 2019 to facilitate a strategic planning process, intended to be completed in June 2020. While the process began on schedule in January 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the planning process was paused from March 13, 2020 until October 14, 2020. At first re-starting virtually, the work moved to in-person in July 2021.

In crafting the Acton Public Library's new Strategic Plan, the opinions of more than 500 Old Saybrook residents were recorded. Residents participated in focus groups, took online surveys in January and/or November 2020, were interviewed, and attended Advisory Council meetings. Below is a brief description of the data collection process.

- A series of four focus groups was held on January 15. Groups were comprised of business owners, nonprofit and faith leaders, middle schoolers, and parents of children in the school district. A total of 34 individuals participated. Seven telephone interviews with "key community stakeholders" were also conducted between January 27 and February 5.
- A survey, in online and paper form, was available from January 6 to February 6, 2020. 355 individuals completed the survey. After re-starting the strategic planning process in October 2020, a new online survey was made available from November 6 to December 1, 2020. 170 individuals completed this survey.
- A Community Advisory Council, consisting of 12 members of the Old Saybrook community, was created. This group met a total of five times to learn about 21st century libraries and strategic planning, hear the results of the community assessment, craft a community vision, and select the library's service priorities. After re-starting the process in late 2020, the group met virtually to review the community vision and service priorities in light of the

pandemic.

- A Work Group, composed of three Board of Directors members, the library director, and four staff members, met four times to review the community needs assessment and library data, conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, write goals and objectives based on selected service priorities, and discuss barriers to the success of the plan.
- Input from Library staff was solicited through interviews with five key staff members and general participation at two staff meetings, including one session focused exclusively on the development of action steps.
- Consultants also reviewed materials including demographic and census data, city board and commission minutes and reports, and news stories.

THE COMMUNITY

As a key institution in the life of its community, it is essential for the library to ensure that it is learning from key constituencies about what is going on in the lives of community members. Through surveys, focus groups, and interviews, community members shared a variety of perspectives on Old Saybrook. The key themes that came out of the community assessment were:

- **Emergence of collaboration between sectors.** Community leaders particularly noted that there were beginning to be successful partnerships, at least in the planning and discussion stage, and that momentum should be maintained for the benefit of the town.
- **The seasonal nature of the community and associated impact on economic well-being.** As a town whose population swells in the summer, Old Saybrook faces unique challenges and opportunities.
- **Changing demographics and generational/economic divides.** This theme was exemplified by two survey respondents, quoted below.

“As great as our community is, there is always room for improvement. Although my family is fortunate having resources and opportunities available, some talented youth miss out on opportunities either due to lack of economic resources, language barrier, or family/parent uncertainty living in a culture different from their native culture.” (Survey respondent, age 56-65)

“I sometimes see a divide between newer residents and older ones, haves and have-nots, and is like [sic] to unify everyone over the common purpose of wanting a wonderful place for all.” (Survey respondent, age 36-45)

- **A desire for a more physically and interpersonally connected community.** In the words of a teenage survey respondent:

“Currently our community just exists, it isn’t much of a community—rather groups of people that know one another that make up a whole rather than a whole that knows everyone.” (Survey respondent, age 13-18)

The COVID-19 pandemic brought each of these themes into starker reality than ever before. The Advisory Council met in February 2020 to hear the community assessment and to develop a community vision, presented below. After a ten month pause, the Advisory Council reconvened

virtually to reconsider its recommendations from February and March 2020, and noted specifically how the pandemic led to increases in the desire to find and use outdoor spaces, forced a focus on technology adoption to connect to one another, renewed focus on supporting local businesses, and showed how collaborations could address community needs, such as the funding of free meals through the school district as a positive way of addressing food insecurity.

COMMUNITY VISION

Based on the results of the community assessment, and updated by experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Advisory Council developed the following community vision statement:

*We want to create a vibrant community with accessible and inclusive public spaces where all people, regardless of status and circumstance, **can meaningfully connect through a variety of methods.***

*We face the challenge of engaging all voices as we chart our path forward into an uncertain future, with limitations in our local government, shifts in how residents spend their time and resources, **and an acknowledgement that there are residents who face barriers to meeting their basic needs.***

*We want to create a culture that inspires and encourages all residents and stakeholders to invest time, resources, and energy to build a community where all feel welcome and **proud to be a part of Old Saybrook, including its natural beauty.***

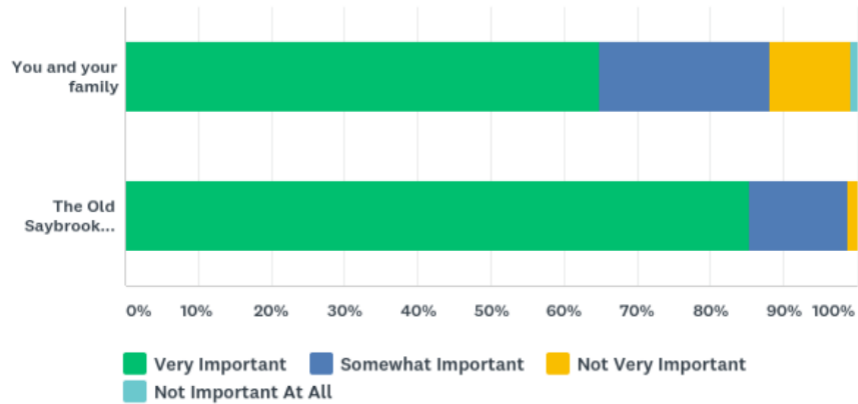
(The sections in bold type were added when the Advisory Council re-convened virtually in December 2020 to reflect on its recommendations in light of the pandemic.)

THE LIBRARY

As part of the community survey that was conducted in January/February 2020, a series of questions were asked about the library. While many of the specific questions and responses were rendered less meaningful due to the shift in services during the pandemic, several questions offer key insights into how the community views and uses Acton Public Library.

An overwhelming majority of respondents think that the library is very important to the Old Saybrook community: (85%); when combined with those who responded “somewhat important”, the total reaches 99%.

Q4 In your opinion, how important is Acton Public Library to...?



While it may not be surprising that people with children had the highest response to the library being very important to them and their family (75%) and to the community as a whole (90%), it may be encouraging to note that 58% of teenagers see Acton Public Library as very important to their community and 39% say it is “somewhat important.”

Survey respondents also saw the role of the Acton Public Library contributing to the community in the following ways:

	A lot	Some	Not too much	Nothing at all
Providing a comfortable place for people to spend time	56.09%	36.53%	6.64%	0.74%
Creating educational opportunity for people of all ages	47.25%	41.39%	9.16%	2.20%
Providing a trusted, reliable place for people to learn about new technologies	41.33%	43.91%	12.92%	1.85%
Helping spark creativity among young people	36.94%	44.78%	15.30%	2.99%
Promoting a sense of community among different groups in your local area	33.83%	50.19%	12.27%	3.72%
Helping people when a natural disaster or major problem strikes the community	31.68%	43.13%	17.94%	7.25%
Serving as a gathering place for addressing issues in your local community	28.15%	47.04%	20.37%	4.44%
Helping people decide what information they can trust	26.82%	48.66%	18.77%	5.75%
Helping people find jobs or pursue job training	22.78%	45.95%	25.10%	6.18%

Finally, survey respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with library services and staff across the board.

In November 2020, a new survey was sent out to community members to try to understand how the pandemic impacted residents. In response to library-related questions, 76% of respondents said they had visited the library's website since March 2020. When asked what respondents missed about the library, 56% reported missing in-person programs and events; 48% a place to gather, relax, and spend time; and 32% reported missing the library staff.

Opportunities

From survey responses, focus groups, and interviews, two main opportunities for Acton Public Library became clear:

- Acton Public Library can act as the Old Saybrook community's hub

Community members spoke about looking for the library to be more closely connected to town departments (e.g., Youth and Family Services and Parks and Recreation) and to the schools. There was an appreciation that the library offers space for community groups to meet, and excitement about the idea of enhancing intentional collaborations. Examples given were aligning library programming with artists at the Kate or offering resources that connect to Youth and Family Services program topics or Old Saybrook Public Schools curriculum units.

- Acton Public Library can be the key community institution that can help to identify and offer programming and services that meets emerging community needs.

There were a number of emerging needs that were named by community members for which the public library can play a key role. These included specific services for the business community and job seekers, middle school and high school aged students, materials and resources in Spanish and Portuguese, and programs to reduce isolation for seniors.

“As with many of the findings related to the community and the library, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has made addressing these opportunities more salient and more urgent. We are fortunate to have a very flexible and creative staff. While we were making sure that staff and our community members remained safe, we wanted everyone to know that the library was ready to support them in new ways. Staff switched to virtual programs and learned how to be productive at home. We made sure that there were ways to interact with other people and also determined that we could utilize our creative staff members when they began offering educational and engaging craft kits to take home. We utilized outdoor spaces to have storytimes for our youngest patrons and we started boosting our online resources so people could still read, listen, and watch. As we moved forward, we created a curbside model that remains popular, offered a new self-check machine, and the opportunity to apply for a library card on our website. Many lessons were learned during this time period and have really shown the staff how dynamic they truly are.”

-Amanda Brouwer, Library Director

MISSION STATEMENT

With these opportunities and the community vision statement in mind, library leaders developed the following new mission statement:

APL's mission is to build a welcoming community with free and open access to information and experiences that engage the imagination, inspire learning, and foster the exchange of ideas.

PLAN FOR 2021-2024

FOUNDATIONAL STRATEGIES

In order to be successful, a plan needs to be built on top of a strong foundation. There are three elements that have been identified as essential to Acton Public Library's plan having the impact in the community that it hopes to:

Staff. It is common to see new service delivery goals added to an existing staff structure. Optimally, in order to meet the goals outlined below, a first step is to reexamine the staffing structure so that it supports the goals. This can and should be done in a way that works collaboratively to understand tasks that do not further the goals and then shifts responsibilities to those activities that do. If this is not done, it can overwhelm an organization.

Space. In a similar vein, the space configuration of most libraries remains the same as it has been for over 100 years. As the focus of the public library shifts from inventory control (knowing where physical materials are at any given moment) to collaborative learning, space conflicts arise

creating tension between active space and the traditional “quiet” space. With a plan that emphasizes Acton Public Library’s role as a community hub, a comprehensive look at how space is currently used and can be reconfigured is essential.

Equity. In measuring success, public libraries have often counted “how many” with less of an eye to “who” and “how.” As communities change and a desire to be responsive to unmet needs is articulated, it is important to shift the lens of the library to equity – creating the ability for all community members to access library programs and services in the manner that works best for them. This not only includes looking at who is participating in library services, but also thinking about how people are engaging, including their ability to access services and resources in both physical spaces and virtual spaces through use of technology.

STRATEGIC GOALS

After listening to the community, learning about trends in public libraries, and talking to library staff and key stakeholders, five goals, along with measurable objectives, were developed that will guide the Acton Public Library forward through the next three years.

Goal 1. Foster community, peer, and intergenerational engagement

Goal 2. Satisfy Curiosity & Stimulate Imagination

Goal 3. Promote Civic Engagement

Goal 4. Support Local Economic Development

Goal 5. Provide Exemplary Service

Goal 1. Foster community, peer, and intergenerational engagement. Offer opportunities and services that reflect community needs and interests, feature community voices, and create meaningful community and intergenerational experiences in an environment where everyone can feel welcome. In particular, Old Saybrook’s young learners and their families will have the resources they need for success and lifelong learning.

Objective 1.1 Expand outreach to community organizations

(measurement: 1) connecting with a minimum of 2 community groups per month, 2) increase in co-sponsored programming)

Objective 1.2 Offer programs that promote connections between and for learners of all ages

(measurement: increase in program attendance, number of intergenerational programs offered, increase in repeat attendance)

Objective 1.3 Create physical and virtual spaces that meet community needs for learning and collaboration

(measurement: space usage)

Possible activities:

- Identify newest and most active community groups and assign a library liaison
- Engage in intergenerational programming (teens/seniors; parents/children)
- Assess current space usage at different times of day
- Wear nametags that show which languages are spoken by staff members

- Consider outdoor spaces that the library can use for programming
 - Identify the flexibility of the library's space to accommodate needs
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Goal 2. Satisfy Curiosity & Stimulate Imagination. Community members will have the resources they need to explore topics of personal interest and continue to learn throughout their lives. Community members will have materials and programs that excite their imaginations and provide enjoyable reading, viewing, and listening experiences.

Objective 2.1 Develop, build, and maintain collections and resources that are relevant and engaging

(measurement: increase in collection turnover rate and digital downloads)

Objective 2.2 Offer stimulating programs that provide hands-on learning opportunities

(measurement: program attendance)

Objective 2.3 Expand outreach to cultural organizations

(measurement: number of contacts)

Possible activities:

- Develop collections in languages spoken by Old Saybrook community members
- Implement intergenerational programming
- Assign staff liaisons to cultural organizations
- Explore “maker-in-residence” options to bring writers, artists, and hands-on makers into the library

Goal 3. Promote Civic Engagement. Community members will have the information they need to support and promote democracy, to fulfill their civic responsibilities at the local and state levels, and to fully participate in community decision-making.

Objective 3.1 Increase outreach to civic groups and local leaders

(measurement: increase in contacts by 25% over baseline at the end of two years)

Objective 3.2 Expand and promote resources and databases with reliable information

(measurement: increase in usage by 25% at the end of two years)

Objective 3.3 Provide engaging opportunities for community members to learn about topics of local interest.

(measurement: increase in attendance/return attendees)

Possible activities:

- Hold an Open House for civic and community leaders
- Assess what current resources are most used and most requested
- Train all staff members and trustees to respond to questions about local topics

Goal 4. Support Local Economic Development. Employers, entrepreneurs, and job seekers will have the resources they need to grow and succeed.

Objective 4.1 Increase library staff capacity to assist local employers, entrepreneurs, and job seekers in physical and digital spaces.

(measurement: number of staff trained by the end of two years)

Objective 4.2 Expand outreach to the business/entrepreneur community.

(measurement: increase in outreach contacts by 50% over baseline at the end of two years).

Objective 4.3 Offer physical and virtual resources and spaces that meet the needs of business owners, entrepreneurs, and job seekers.

(measurement: increase in usage of resources/spaces at the end of three years)

Possible activities:

- Identify current barriers to job seekers or entrepreneurs using physical or virtual spaces such as policies and space limitations
- Assign a staff liaison to the Economic Development Commission
- Visit/research other public libraries with successful business outreach/job seeker programs

Goal 5. Provide Exemplary Service. Acton Public Library will hire, train, encourage, and reward a knowledgeable and dedicated staff. The library will have the appropriate infrastructure in place to support its strategic goals and will be recognized in Old Saybrook as a community hub and trusted resource.

Objective 5.1 Develop an organizational staffing and performance management structure that supports building an effective and patron-focused team.

Objective 5.2 Align the allocation of funding and resources with strategic priorities, including assessment of physical and digital infrastructure

Objective 5.3 Increase community recognition of Acton Library as relevant, community-centered hub in both physical and virtual spaces.

Possible activities:

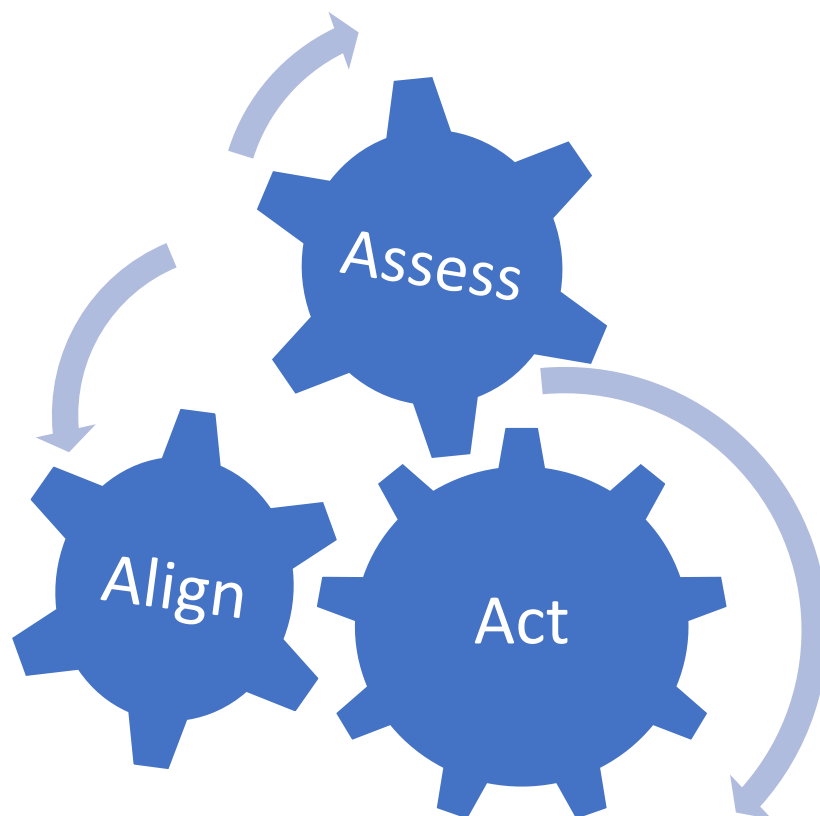
- Assess library hiring practices to attract staff
- Reorganize budget framework around strategic plan goals
- Create a marketing and branding plan including logo redesign
- Engage in overall space planning

WHAT'S NEXT?

The possible activities listed are only a few of the dozens that staff members and Work Group members have brainstormed as ways to bring this plan to life. To ensure that the plan is being implemented in a logical way, each goal and objective will be looked at using an “Assess, Align, Act” framework, which, as shown below, is cyclical.

In the Assess phase, each objective will be examined to understand what the library still needs to know, such as if additional surveys need to be conducted, who staff need to speak to in the community, etc. Once all information has been gathered and the library understands the most effective way to respond, resources (staff, time, budget) should be Aligned to achieve the objective. The alignment piece is crucial and often overlooked; only once the alignment has taken place should the library begin to Act.

Assessment should be built into each action, using the measurements that have been developed for the objectives. Re-alignment can then occur as needed, followed by adjustments in service delivery.



KEY PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

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Board of Trustees

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