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Building New Libraries in Massachusetts: an advocacy case study

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The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is located in the Northeastern part of the United States. As one of the original thirteen colonies, Massachusetts has a uniquely rich cultural history.

Massachusetts' population of 6 million makes it the 12th largest state in the United States, and is almost exactly the median for all the states, making it statistically 'average'. Its population is roughly the same as that of Switzerland, Honduras, Israel, Laos, the Slovak Republic or Jordan.

In area, it is one of the smallest of the states, and roughly the size of Belgium, Albania, El Salvador or Armenia. Despite its small size, Massachusetts contains remarkable variety. Its communities range from Metropolitan Boston, with a population of 3 million, to dozens of small communities in the rural western part of the state with populations of less than one thousand. Massachusetts is unique among the states in that county government is virtually nonexistent. As originally envisioned by the Pilgrims in 1620, the basic unit of government is the town.

With one of the highest literacy levels in the United States, as well as an extremely well educated population, Massachusetts' economy is now driven by information-intensive industries such as medicine, financial services, software development, telecommunications and other high-tech industries. As a result, over the last four decades, the Massachusetts' economy has been subject to regular, severe downturns.

Massachusetts is unique in that nearly every one of its 355 cities and towns has an independent public library, all of which were established around the turn of the century from various association libraries, subscription libraries, and, in one instance, a young ladies' reading library,

which were themselves founded in the 19th century. These public libraries are fiercely independent, and are both a great strength, because every citizen has convenient access to a community library, and a great weakness, as so many are inadequately funded.

In the absence of county government, the state plays a particularly important role in Massachusetts. Federal funds are also administered by the Board of Library Commissioners, the agency responsible for library services in the Commonwealth, under a state rather than a federal plan. During the 1990's, I had the honor of serving as the director of this state agency.

Massachusetts is also unique in that there are 160 colleges and universities in the greater Boston area, the largest concentration of academic institutions in the world. These institutions have libraries possessing collections estimated at 100 million titles, plus hundreds of millions of manuscripts and other special collections.

On the negative side, Massachusetts has some of the most poorly staffed and poorly supported school libraries in the United States, ranking nearly last in every indicator. This may be partly due to the small size of many communities, their traditional dependence on local public libraries to support school programs, or because of the surfeit of riches in the state's many public and academic libraries.

Overall, there are an estimated 2500 public, academic, school and special libraries serving the state's 6 million residents.

1990-2000: A decade of dramatic change

In 1990, Massachusetts was in the midst of one of its periodic economic downturns, with drastic reductions in state and local funding affecting libraries of all types.

Within a two-year period, ten public libraries were forced to literally close their doors for lack of funds. Statewide, library hours were reduced by 15%, a loss of over 10,000 hours. 125 branch libraries, or one out of five library branches, were closed, never to reopen. One out of six library staff members lost their jobs during this period. Times were truly desperate for Massachusetts libraries.

The state's libraries faced other massive challenges as well. Tremendous inequities existed in library services between the smallest and largest, and between the richest and poorest communities. The enormous collections of the nation's largest aggregation of academic libraries were virtually inaccessible to the vast majority of residents. And despite an aggressive program of shared automated systems which had made Massachusetts a leader in the 80's, the state had fallen behind other states in the development of a statewide 'virtual' library due to a decade of legislative neglect.

Massachusetts' turn-of-the-century public library buildings also presented another daunting challenge. Most lacked adequate reader seating, space for computers or space for children's programs and few were accessible to the handicapped. Though architecturally attractive, many were actually unsafe, and virtually none were capable of providing adequate library service in the

late twentieth century, much less the twenty-first. The total cost of upgrading the state's main public library buildings was estimated to be nearly one billion dollars.

Even library service for the blind had suffered. During this period, Massachusetts' statewide library for the blind ranked nearly last nationally in every indicator of service.

Last, the public library systems that existed at the time lacked the resources to adequately train library staff to meet the challenge of providing residents global access in an information age. Massachusetts librarians were rapidly falling behind.

In 1990, the situation looked pretty hopeless.

So where did Massachusetts libraries stand a decade later?

In 2000, the situation had dramatically changed. New expanded regional systems now linked over 1,700 libraries of all types, dramatically increasing access for all residents of all communities. A new statewide virtual catalog provided online access to over 73 million volumes, all available via interlibrary loan within a day or two, and an electronic library of over 1 million online articles.

The vast gulf between the 'have' and 'have-nots' that existed only a decade earlier had been dramatically reduced. Even the smallest public library in the most rural part of the state could for the first time offer its residents 'state of the art' library service.

Annual state funding for libraries had doubled. In fact, total new funding during the decade exceeded \$78 million – about \$4,000 in new funds per hour for each working hour during the ten-year period!

And this was not all. Over 200 new and renovated public library buildings had been opened or were under construction, the result of a state construction grant program that made over \$200 million available on a matching basis and stimulated nearly \$600 million in public library construction. Literally one half of all Massachusetts' public libraries now had facilities capable of providing expanded library services to a rapidly growing group of new library users.

Advocates make the difference

So what was the 'magic ingredient' responsible for such a dramatic change? The magic ingredients were advocacy, a plan, and a willingness to seize an unplanned opportunity.

The story began with a very obvious first step: the development of a legislative agenda. While many library groups had been advocating for particular pieces of legislation or particular budget increases, they were not speaking with one voice and, in fact, were actually competing. The result was that no one group was successful in achieving its goals.

While a number of other states had successfully used an annual library legislative agenda, the development of a legislative agenda by the Board of Library Commissioners was a first for

Massachusetts. Working with various key players, the Board was able to create a package that provided funding for a number of programs, including the library for the blind, technology and aid to financially-strapped public libraries. In order to achieve the goal of a single agenda, we worked to develop *consensus*, which may be described as a situation in which no one gets everything they want, but everyone agrees to support a shared course of action that benefits all.

With the whole library community working together, the results were indeed magical. Unknown to most, the legislature's Ways and Means committee had advance revenue figures that showed the economy was turning around, and libraries were one of their first priorities for new funding.

The second step was the development of a long-range, statewide plan. Beginning in 1992, the Board began working with hundreds of librarians representing libraries of all types to develop what became the ***Strategic Plan for the Future of Library Service in Massachusetts***. This twelve-page document became the blueprint for the new network linking libraries of all types, the virtual catalog, the full text electronic library, and dozens of other new and innovative programs designed to bring Massachusetts into the twenty-first century.

The plan called for an \$8 million annual increase in library funding, which would have nearly doubled state support for libraries. But because the plan had been developed by so many librarians and library supporters, legislators were hearing from librarians – and citizens – all over the state. While it's not certain how many legislators read the plan, they all knew about how important it was.

The requested increase was unprecedented, and the legislature let us know it. Our response? We offered to submit a plan phasing in the new services over a three year period, and in the process asked for capital funds, which had never before been appropriated for library technology. Over the next three years, we got the new funding -- and the capital funding as well.

The Massachusetts Public Library Construction Program was the result of a similar unexpected opportunity:

In 1990, the Massachusetts Senate President, a great supporter of the Boston Public Library, introduced a one-time appropriations bill to provide state support for the renovation of that library. In order to help secure legislative support, he also included additional funding for other construction projects. The initial grants, which had to be matched by local funds, were so successful that we were able to get a second bill introduced to fund even more projects.

It was at that point that library advocates again played a key role. At a hearing for the bill, after the state agency head had quoted statistics and studies, a group of library supporters unexpectedly produced a piece of battered wooden 'gingerbread'. It had fallen off their library roof and been found by one of the trustees that morning as they gathered for their trip to the state house! They made their point dramatically, and the bill was passed the following week, making an additional \$45 million available.

Once the 'pump was primed', we moved to establish a waiting list of other libraries ready to undertake renovations, until over the course of several years and several bills, a 'one-time'

special appropriation became an established program with a stated goal of renovating every public library in Massachusetts.

By the late 1990's, we had developed a statewide program aimed at turning library advocates into a true advocacy network. By 1997, we began offering advocacy workshops for local librarians and trustees. Now, each year hundreds of librarians and trustees attend training on how to more effectively achieve local goals, and in the process we gain hundreds of supporters for our statewide goals.

In 1990, one hundred people attended an annual library legislative day at the statehouse. By 2002, there were two statewide events, attended by over 400 library supporters, and legislators now vie for the opportunity to address these library advocates. In addition, over 20 legislative breakfasts are now held throughout the state, and very few of the state's 300 legislators fail to attend or send an aide.

The results have been dramatic. Based on our experience, we believe that similar results can be achieved by others and offer the following nine steps to creating more effective library advocates.

Nine steps to creating more effective library advocates

Step 1: Library advocates need to understand how government works

First of all, it is impossible to be successful in the legislative arena without an understanding of how government works. Over the years, I have heard many stories of library advocates asking for money only to discover that the budget had already been passed, or asking for a legislator to support a legislative goal when no bill had been introduced. In both cases, their efforts were well intentioned but useless.

If you are interested in improving libraries, you must become an expert on local, provincial and national programs, how they operate, and how they're funded. You must also become knowledgeable regarding the processes of government. You must understand how law are developed and passed, local, provincial and national government budget processes and how regulations are promulgated.

Good library advocates are educated library advocates. And how can they become educated? By attending workshops, briefings and conference programs. If there are no such workshops, briefings or conference programs to attend, then organize them! I can assure you they will be well attended.

Happily, not only is the process interesting, but you will be surprised at how easily you can turn your knowledge into results.

Step 2: Develop a common agenda – and develop a plan

The famous American philosopher Yogi Berra is quoted as saying that: “You’d better be careful if you don’t know where you’re going, because you might just get there”. In library terms, this means that you can’t get what you want if you can’t articulate what you want.

Almost all advocates start as local advocates, so it is extremely important that every library have a local plan. Once you’ve developed your local plan, then work on, contribute to and then support your provincial and national plan.

Step 3: Help library advocates understand – and be able to articulate – legislative goals in terms of local needs

It has often been said that all politics is local. What is the problem we’re trying to solve? How does this piece of provincial or national legislation impact our library and our community? Why is this appropriation important to the average person? Does it make a difference for children?

When you are trying to secure a legislator’s support for your library agenda, it is always important to understand that their primary question will always be how it affects their constituents. You are that constituent, and you must be able to explain how it will impact their community in terms that they can understand. If you can’t, then you probably won’t get their support.

Step 4: Understand – and use -- the power of the ‘sound byte’

In today’s political environment, all issues are fought out in ‘sound bytes’, that simple, dramatic image that represents a complex issue, and galvanizes public understanding – and opinion.

We gather endless statistics, but what we are ultimately looking for is that one image that will capture the public’s attention. For instance, a recent study found that most Americans consider taking a child to the library ‘virtually synonymous’ with being a good parent. This is a wonderful quote – and a potent sound byte.

In Massachusetts, we collected reams of statistics on the sorry state of library buildings. What made the headlines? Did we mention that we described some of these libraries as ‘death traps’?. That got plenty of media attention – and \$45 million dollars for library renovation projects.

Step 5: Never be afraid to ask!

Library advocates should never be shy about asking legislators for money. There are two reasons for this: First, because everyone else is asking and second, there is no known way to get what you need if you don’t ask for it.

It is one of the basic principles of fundraising that you can only raise money by asking, and the same principle applies to the legislative process. If you’re shy, then start out by ‘tagging along’ with someone who isn’t. Soon you’ll realize that legislators are not ‘put off’ by your requests, and someone shy will be ‘tagging along’ with you!

Libraries receive pennies for every dollar invested in classroom education, despite the fact that they are a major component of our educational system, and the primary force in early childhood literacy. We must be prepared to confront legislators who support education, but are willing to cut libraries!

Step 6: Get involved – and involve others

It has been said that ‘the world is run by those that show up’, and advocacy is one instance where ‘showing up’ really counts. Events such as legislative days and legislative visits are an important opportunity for library advocates to meet legislators – and each other. But this can’t happen if no one shows up.

It is vitally important that every library supporter take the time to participate in such events. Many is the time that we have seen legislators show up at such events, only to find that there are no library supporters present from their district! What a lost opportunity.

Not only should you take the time to attend these events, you should always make sure to fill your car with other library supporters. I recall once when two busloads of library supporters unexpectedly arrived at the state house. Within minutes, the word of the crowd’s arrival had spread, and a steady stream of legislators and legislative aides began to arrive, all eager to discover whether the crowd members were constituents and to express their support.

This is where the power of citizen advocates makes an enormous difference. If you are a librarian, you may be perceived as speaking in your own self interest. That is why trustees or Friends of Libraries groups can be so important, as they are perceived as truly speaking for the public. Their advocacy for library legislation and funding will get the attention of legislators. For this reason, every library should take the time and effort to develop a Friends group. It’s hard work, but well worth the effort in the long run.

Unfortunately, many local advocates can’t see the value of becoming active at the state or federal level, because it’s just too abstract or just too hard to see the results. Here, we must help them see that advocacy at the federal level will make them more effective advocates at the state level, and advocacy at the state and federal level will make them better advocates at the local level. Connections, confidence and a better command of issues are the rewards of becoming involved.

Step 7: Recognize – and reward -- library supporters

One of the most frequent complaints of legislators is that people are interested in meeting with them when they need something, but that they very seldom receive any thanks after the bill is passed or appropriation successfully obtained.

It’s always important to remember to thank those legislators who have helped and supported libraries. The best way to do this is by inviting them to appear at events and then shamelessly spotlighting their contributions. It works even better when you can get coverage of the event in the local newspaper or television station. You will find that they appreciate the recognition, and you will find it even easier to get their attention in the future.

Many advocacy groups provide special recognition awards or ceremonies, and have found, not surprisingly, that it's always easy to get someone to show up to receive an award.

Step 8: Never get discouraged

Not every plan will succeed right away, but one thing is certainly true:
Nothing has ever been accomplished without one.

I have heard many stories of libraries that took ten, twenty, or even thirty years to build. The important thing is that they were all eventually built – every one of them. Be positive, be persistent, and you will eventually succeed.

Even during bad times, it is important that library supporters continue to advocate for better libraries and improved library service. When times improve, it is often already too late, as funds have been allocated to other projects and programs that didn't wait or take no for an answer.

Step 9: Enjoy yourself!

Whether you are already successful or laying the groundwork for future success, remember that what you are doing is important for your community, your province or state, and your country.

Meeting legislators is tremendously interesting; helping get a new law passed or getting money for libraries is enormously satisfying.

As library advocates, we are doing a wonderful thing. We are preserving our cultural heritage and identity. We are helping guarantee the future of our children, improving our communities, helping foster democracy and, ultimately, creating a better world.

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