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Strength in Partnerships: Rejuvenating library service in a rural community

By Amanda Fullerton and Sara Gillis

In 2013 we were challenged with the task of investigating a sustainable service delivery model for the Musquodoboit Valley, a rural region of Halifax and Halifax Public Libraries’ (HPL) only catchment area without a library branch. During the course of our six-month project we built relationships with the community, collaborated to bring programs to the area, and created a plan for service delivery by applying a community engagement approach, using both community-led and traditional service planning strategies.

A history of library service in the community

The Musquodoboit Valley, and other rural and suburban communities, had access to Mobile Library service until 2012 when, due to a combination of reduced usage, increasing costs, and a reduction in the library’s operating budget, the service was cancelled. Studies of usage indicated many communities were choosing to instead visit their nearest library branch. The exception to this was the Musquodoboit Valley which is geographically isolated from HPL branches.

At the time of its discontinuation, there were six Mobile Library stops in the Musquodoboit Valley totaling just over 7.5 hours of service a week. The Mobile served a group of loyal customers with a strong attachment to both the service and the library staff who worked on the bus. The community response to the cancellation in the Musquodoboit Valley was vocal with residents actively trying to save the service which they’d known since 1961. When Mobile Library service ended, customers were directed to HPL’s Borrow By Mail, a service which had been in place for rural communities since 1981.

In 2013 the library committed to investigating a sustainable service delivery model for this region with the mandate of identifying potential ways to serve a community without a physical library branch in the vicinity. Under the direction of the library’s Director of Community and Branch Services, a term Community Librarian position was created to work with the Community Engagement Manager on a six-month project to better understand community needs and pilot services.

Musquodoboit Valley

The Musquodoboit Valley is a geographically large but sparsely populated rural area in Halifax. Middle Musquodoboit is considered the centre of the valley and is where many services are located, including a pharmacy, two restaurants, a post office, a gas station, a Co-Op, a liquor store, and a bank. The nearest libraries to Middle Musquodoboit are across county lines in Stewiacke (25 kms away) or Elmsdale (37 kms away), both branches of the Colchester East Hants Public Library system. The nearest HPL branch is 40 kms away in Musquodoboit Harbour on the Eastern Shore. The three elementary schools located in the Valley are feeder schools for Musquodoboit Rural High School, also located in Middle Musquodoboit.

At the time of the 2011 Census, 4256 people were living in the Musquodoboit Valley spread...
across 1176 square kilometres. The population has been decreasing in recent years (a 14% decline since 2006) as people move away and few newcomers arrive. Many people who live in the area commute to work in downtown Halifax or Dartmouth, often spending over two hours driving every day. Others have found employment out west and travel back and forth to work. The population, as is common in rural Nova Scotia, is aging with a significant portion being senior citizens.

The Project
An important resource for this project was the Community-Led Libraries Toolkit. The Toolkit was developed after the completion of the Working Together Project in which four libraries across Canada, including HPL, used a community development model to strengthen library connections to the community and to identify barriers to library service. In particular, the project was focused on working with socially excluded urban communities, such as homeless and aboriginal populations. While the community in Musquodoboit Valley may not face these same challenges as these urban communities, many of the approaches outlined in the Toolkit were adapted and applied successfully to this project. We needed to better understand where people gathered, what services existed, and the opportunities and challenges of rural life. We also needed to know what people expected and hoped for from the library. We did use traditional planning service planning techniques but blended these with community-led service planning approaches during the course of the project.

Project activities ranged from offering traditional library outreach and programming, conducted in order to pilot service needs and to provide additional opportunities to speak with community members, to the use of tools such as asset mapping, used to get a sense of what opportunities are present in the community. All of these activities helped us to build relationships in the community.

The specific tools used for this project included the following:

**Community entry**
The concept of community entry, introduced in the Community-Led Libraries Toolkit, was important for this project. We were unfamiliar with the community and had few relationships with residents or service providers. We used the asset mapping process, described below, as a technique to meet service providers. This in turn led to invitations to participate in events and meetings, allowing more opportunities to meet with community members. We also used traditional library services, including outreach and providing library-planned programming in community spaces, as community entry techniques, but with an emphasis on meeting and listening to community members.

**Demographic profile**
Constructing a demographic profile is a traditional tool used in service delivery planning but is still essential when getting to know a community. We used Statistics Canada data to better understand age, income, labour, unemployment, education, and mobility.

**Research**
Conducting research is a traditional approach that can provide valuable insight. A conventional environmental scan was
performed which focused on three main areas, rural library service delivery in Nova Scotia, innovative library service delivery methods, and non-library service delivery to rural communities.

**Asset mapping**
Asset mapping is a process by which library staff meets with community organizations and service providers to learn what the community’s needs are and to identify possible opportunities for partnerships. For the project the Community Librarian met with 11 organizations in the community. This was a great way to introduce ourselves to local organizations and begin forming relationships in the community, as we had no pre-established connections to the community.

**Outreach & Community Events**
Being visible at community events and able to provide key library messages is good promotion, but can also provide an opportunity to engage directly with individual community members. A great deal of effort went into capturing comments and feedback so it could inform our service plan recommendations. The Toolkit recommends door-to-door visits as a community entry technique but as this was not feasible in this rural area, being present at as many community events as possible was crucial.

**Programming**
During the course of the project, HPL staff provided programming at area schools and community spaces. Because HPL has no branch in the community, it was necessary to partner with community groups, further building the community-library connection. As a community entry tool, programming is a great way to meet community members and engage them in discussions about service needs.

**Community Meetings and Committees**
The Community Librarian actively participated in local organizations, committees, and meetings and provided information services in the community.

**Community Partner Evaluation**
To offer programs in the community, it was essential to partner with other organizations, and we also had opportunities to collaborate and co-plan programs with local organizations. The feedback that these organizations have to offer is valuable especially considering how well-established these organizations are within the community. Based on a tool developed by Edmonton Public Library (Edmonton Public Library, 2013, pp. 33-34), we used a simple survey to gather feedback from community partners.

**What we heard**
After six months of engaging with the community, several themes emerged. Many of the comments focused on how much residents missed the Mobile Library and there seemed to be a desire to reclaim the social experience of the Mobile Library, not just the delivery of library materials. The Mobile Library visits provided an opportunity for the community to gather and offered up a chance to run into neighbours.

Borrow by Mail is used by many in the area, and was noted as being a convenient way to receive library materials, but the service does not allow for the social experience and browsing that the Mobile Library did. In addition, through our discussions with community members we uncovered several misconceptions about the service. Many did not realize that they were eligible, assuming it was intended only for housebound people. Others assumed there was a cost for the service, and some assumed it was expensive for the library to pay for and chose not to use it so that it was available for those who really needed it.

Community members identified several other barriers to using existing library services. At times Musquodoboit Valley residents will find themselves at HPL branches but hesitate to
borrow because they are unsure when they will be able to return the item and the worry of accruing fines is significant.

Another barrier we came across was the unreliable access to, or unavailability of, high speed internet in pockets throughout the community. This prevents some community members from making full use of HPL’s digital collections, resources, and services such as Ask a Librarian. We would never have even guessed this was an issue had we not spent time in the community speaking with residents.

The schools in the area felt very disconnected from the library. One school principal expressed her frustration at seeing the library’s bi-monthly promotional publication, listing all the programs knowing that these opportunities were not easily accessible to her rural students. Packing students up and putting them in a bus to visit a branch and participate in the library’s School Time programs was not possible because of time and expense. The Summer Reading Club was also challenging as there were minimal opportunities for the schools to engage with the library.

From Project Phase to Service Plan Development
Based on all the information gathered from the community during the project phase, 14 recommendations were made for future library service delivery to the area. These recommendations have been incorporated into a service plan and we are now working towards implementation.

One of the first actions was to create a permanent Community Librarian position. Based on feedback from the community and the success of the services piloted during the project, we had evidence that this position should be supported on an ongoing basis and to start working on some of the initiatives outlined in the service plan.

The Musquodoboit Valley Service Plan has three main objectives:

*Increase engagement with the Musquodoboit Valley community by expanding the library’s presence in the area*
- Nurture connections between the library and the community by having a Community Librarian visible and present; explore opportunities to have a satellite office in the community
- Participate in community events, which provide opportunities to speak to community members
- Develop and implement a plan to bring programming to schools in the community
- Participate in local groups, and have the Community Librarian available as a resource to support community-based projects and initiatives
- Experiment with different ways of promoting library services, knowing that our traditional methods are not used by many in the community

*Provide public library services, collections, and programming in the Musquodoboit Valley that offer opportunities for community members to gather and connect.*
- Bring programming to the community, using existing community spaces, that provides opportunities for the community to gather
- Create a promotions plan for the library’s Borrow by Mail service that eliminates the misconceptions about the service; connect with former Mobile Library customers who chose not to use the service
- Research ways to allow for a browsing collections to be brought to the community that supplements the Borrow by Mail service
Address barriers that prevent residents in the Musquodoboit Valley from using the library’s existing services and collections

- Investigate current borrowing policies and practices with the goal of eliminating barriers to accessing library material
- Explore the concept of a returns box in the community

Another challenge we faced was the difficulty in evaluating what we were doing as we didn’t have any conventional outputs, like gate count or circulation to measure. As a way to measure impact we turned to qualitative feedback to. The community partner evaluation tool from Edmonton Public Library was particularly useful and we also captured less formal comments we received. For example, a woman in the area active on many volunteer boards said to us at an event in the summer where we had a booth, “You have a real presence here now” which was an indication that we were meeting our goals.

Challenges and Successes

Using a Community-Led approach allowed this project to be successful - we emerged from the project phase with information we needed to move ahead and develop a thoughtful service plan. There were certainly bumps along the way and some surprises too.

Getting community input wasn’t always straightforward and we had to be careful that we were listening to community members and not only service providers. Service providers may have the loudest voices, but they also may not have a true grasp of what their communities want and are bringing their own perception of what libraries DO into the conversation. Whenever possible we tried to seek out opportunities to meet with individual community members.

There was a desire for things to happen in the community more quickly than we were able to deliver. As soon as the project began, several organizations stepped forward to offer space for the library to use for a satellite site. It’s important, however, for the library to make sure all the logistics are in place before such an endeavour is undertaken to ensure that it is sustainable in the community.

It’s important to note that community-led work can be very time-consuming. The foundation of this type of work is relationship building and it can take a lot of time to build trust and cultivate meaningful relationships in your community. Traditional service planning can be much quicker when decisions are made based on statistics and research, but it can easily lead to assumptions and mistakes.

The successes far outnumber the challenges and for every difficulty there was an enduring benefit. Taking the time to build relationships in the community set us up for success by establishing a strong foundation. Because we do not have a branch in the area, we have to rely on partner organizations to share their spaces with us and without exception they have been very generous in this regard. Having strong relationships in the community also allows us to be aware of what else is going on so we can avoid duplication of effort. This prevents us from alienating existing service providers and also reduces the risk of assigning resources to something that is not needed –
something particularly significant to consider when working in small communities.

Being in close contact with the community as we developed ideas for a service plan also kept us from making assumptions. One striking example of this was around the provision of virtual service in the area. The idea had been floated for a number of years that rural areas could be served through eBook lending and other online tools. Now that we have engaged with the community we know that due to the lack of adequate high speed internet in many areas that this is an inequitable way to provide service. Though we can certainly continue to develop our online resources, we cannot rely on them as the sole service delivery mechanism.

Where we are now
It has been just less than a year since the project was completed and we’re hard at work implementing the service plan. Community Librarian Amanda Fullerton travels to the community regularly, usually a couple of times a week, combining several meetings and programs into a day’s visit.

The library’s connection with schools in the community has increased dramatically. Amanda provides regular programming, including book clubs at both an elementary school and at the high school. Through a partnership with the high school’s Our Healthy Schools committee, she offers lunchtime programming for teens. With support from youth programmers at one of our library branches, programs are brought to the three elementary schools on a regular basis.

Amanda participates in a number of community committees including a C@P committee, a school-based teen health centre committee, and a coalition of service providers in the region. In partnership with the local literacy association we’ve provided a number of literacy-based programs open to families in the community.

Summer 2014 marked the most successful Summer Reading Club in recent memory (including years when the Mobile Library was still in operation). More children participated and read more books because Amanda went out into the community and had weekly Summer Reading Club meet-ups in a local park. This was an opportunity for participants to not only report on their reading activity but to also participate in activities and borrow material.

We recently piloted two well-attended adult programs in the community, both done in partnership with local community organizations. The Community Health Board sought out Amanda to facilitate getting a gardening program off the ground. This event was tremendously popular, attracting attendees from the city. Our next offering was a library developed program that offers participants a hands-on opportunity to learn more about First World War service men and women’s lives through their service files.

We also look for opportunities to facilitate more informal community gatherings, hosting an ice cream social on a beautiful sunny summer day in a local park, for example. Borrow by Mail staff joined us, an opportunity for them to meet community members face-to-face, when they typically only communicate via telephone or email. On another occasion we set up the 3D
printer in a community space. We provided tea and had a chance to chat with people while the printer worked away, creating a Batman symbol shaped cookie cutter and other trinkets to the amazement of everyone in attendance.

Having a library staff person present in the community has also allowed us to better share information about existing library services. Our Borrow by Mail service has seen a 12% increase in clients, with the majority of these coming from the Musquodoboit Valley. We mentioned earlier that we had uncovered several misconceptions about Borrow by Mail, and that this was preventing people from registering for the service. The increase in clients is no doubt due to having a library staff person in the community, speaking to residents about the service and answering questions. Other library services have also benefited from word of mouth promotion. A community interested in starting a book club was able to expand the size of the group after they were made aware of the library’s Book Club Kits, for example. The cost of purchasing a title every month was a barrier to some in the community. The kits eliminate this barrier and make it easier for the entire group to access the title.

Initially people were perplexed as to why we were spending time in the community and listening to them when there was no plan to bring back the Mobile Library or build a branch in the area. Understandably, it is difficult to separate the idea of a library from the traditional “structures” that are associated with them. But the concept of having a librarian in the community as a facilitator and collaborator is beginning to gel. At the conclusion of the project, when we thanked our community partners for their support throughout the project phase and told them that we would be making the Community Librarian a permanent position, their reaction was one of delight. Amanda’s phone began ringing right away, with community partners calling to share ideas for further partnerships.

The authors
Amanda Fullerton is a 2013 Dalhousie School of Information Management graduate. She worked on the Musquodoboit Valley project in a term position in for six months and became the full-time Community Librarian in March 2014.

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References