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Susan is currently reading *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner.

Rural Libraries

The Heart of Our Communities

I know there is concern about the viability of all types of public libraries, but I hear the most serious worries voiced about the future of rural librar-ies. Rural libraries are at a turning point; I believe that they can become the catalysts that strengthen and unite their communities. To prepare this column, I have generously used information that was gathered by Carla Lehn, California state library programs consultant, for her presentation to the Association of Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL) Conference in September 2006.

To set the stage, I would like to put rural communities in context with their metropolitan neighbors. This information comes primarily from the **Rural Policy Research Institute** (www.rupri.org).

- Eighty-four percent of all land in the United States is rural, and 25 percent of the population lives in a rural area.
- Rural areas experienced dramatic outmigration in the 1980s. This trend reversed itself in the 1990s, when 2.2 million more Americans moved from city to country than from country to city. These new residents often bring service expectations that were developed in more urban settings.
- The outmigration of rural residents that continues is largely the young and the most highly educated.

Here are a few striking rural living conditions:
- The rural poor experience 30 percent more inadequate housing conditions than the urban poor.
- Fifty-seven percent of the rural poor do not own a car, and nearly 40 percent of the rural population live in areas without public transportation.
- Twenty-two million rural residents live in federally designated medically underserved areas.

Employment issues are challenging in rural areas:
- Rural workers are nearly twice as likely to earn the minimum wage than urban workers.
- Rural poor families are more likely to be employed and still poor. In 1998, 66 percent of poor families had at least one family member working, and 16 percent had two or more members working.
- In 1999, 27 percent of rural workers older than age 25 received wages that, when earned full time for a full year, would not lift a family of four above the official poverty line.

Education is limited in rural areas:
- Fewer rural residents than urban residents ages twenty-five to thirty-four have a B.A. degree or higher.
- More rural residents than urban residents eighteen years and older have no high school diploma.

It is clear that rural communities have some challenging differences from more metropolitan areas. Now let us see how rural service delivery is also more challenging. Marilyn Bok, writing about rural America and welfare reform, has documented rural communities' unique challenges:

- isolation;
- low population density;
- mobility disadvantages;
- scarcity of financial resources;
- lack of expertise and human resources;
- personal familiarity;
- resistance to change and innovation; and
- lack of ancillary services.[1]

We also have specific information about rural library issues. Bernard Vavrek, in his 1995 article, "Rural and Small Libraries: Providers for Lifelong Learning," identified these planning issues that must be taken into consideration when working in or with rural libraries:

- library financing;
- traditionally conservative nature of rural and small towns;
- lack of academically trained staff;
- need for skill development of library trustees;
- limited, if any, analysis of community needs;
- perception that rural library typically is a place of books;
- technology is huge challenge; and
- provision of targeted services to Native Americans and tribal libraries.[2]

Rural Needs and Solutions

In 2004, the American Library Association (ALA) Task Force on Rural School, Tribal, and Public

Libraries was established. They succeeded in getting more than eleven hundred responses to a survey regarding rural libraries. Information on the task force and the survey is available at www.ala.org/ala/olos/outreachresource/ruraltf_finalrpt.pdf. Here are some highlights.

- Survey respondents identified money as their greatest library challenge.
- Specific rural area concerns were poverty, depopulation, population growth, and illiteracy. Although it may seem contradictory that both depopulation and population growth are concerns, it relates to the fact that the young and educated are leaving, and the new residents are primarily outsiders who have service expectations based upon from whence they came, a challenging dynamic that many rural communities face.
- Rural library training needs are also significant. The greatest needs are computer skills training for both staff and library users. This is closely followed by training in basic library skills, again for both staff and users. Another very specific training need is the opportunity to provide library staff with academic training and the funds to be able to take advantage of that training.
- The greatest technology needs are hardware, followed by technical support and training.
- When asked about professional association membership, 41 percent stated they belonged to ALA, 18 percent to PLA, 13 percent to the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), and fewer than 5 percent to the American Indian Library Association (AILA). Questions regarding membership in a state

association or in ARSL were not included.
- When asked what ALA resources would be of benefit, 71 percent answered that they would like "advocacy for library funding and support." Other potentially beneficial resources included staff development events, such as conferences and institutes, and online communication and continuing education.

All this data would suggest that the challenges for rural libraries are virtually insurmountable, but that is not the case. How can we move rural libraries from a negative, deficient place to a positive, strong position in their communities?

A technique called asset mapping is an important tool of asset-based community development that is described in *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*.[3] This model suggests the development of activities based on the capacities, skills, and assets of a community, rather than on just trying to fix what is wrong.

The assets model starts with the assumption that even though there are issues to be addressed or problems to be solved, everyone in a community—individuals and organizations—has something positive to contribute. In the assets model, the glass is seen as half-full. It assumes that the community can help itself. It also suggests that if assets can be identified, then mutually beneficial connections can be made between those assets. Building on these connections, often scarce resources can be stretched farther, and a greater impact can be made for the benefit of the community. Libraries are specifically included in the book

because they are viewed as rich local institutional assets.

The more traditional approach to community building focuses primarily on what is wrong and is referred to as the deficiency model. This approach looks at the glass as half empty, meaning that it assumes that the community or organization has little or no ability to help itself. Starting from this position has additional negative results. First, looking at only what is wrong makes people in the community *believe* they are deficient and keeps them from feeling empowered. Second, it makes people believe that only someone from the *outside* can help them with their situation. Finally, this approach also tends to fragment efforts to provide solutions because everybody picks off one of the problems or issues to solve.

Given the context of the assets model, I think we can identify a number of assets in our rural communities and libraries.

- Rural people are the biggest asset. These folks love where they live, want to stay there, and are dedicated to strengthening their communities so their children will be able to stay in their community if they want to, after they finish high school or college.
- Rural human resources are another significant asset. This includes library staff who are truly dedicated and work with very limited resources. Also included are library trustees, library volunteers, and library supporters. We also must include the library users because meeting their needs is the rural librarian's top priority.
- Library buildings are huge rural assets. They are often the only governmental presence in rural

communities and may be a point position for a variety of public services. They serve as community centers and the town gathering place. Bookmobiles that travel throughout the rural landscape are also very visible assets when visitors are few and far between.

National Responses

We also have national rural assets that we must consider. We cannot begin that conversation without acknowledging the contribution of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, whose infusion of technology and support for rural libraries is unparalleled. That support has taken the form of not only hardware and software, but also funding of support projects. The foundation has clearly focused their endeavors on identified rural library needs. Current initiatives include:

- The Rural Library Sustainability Project is providing support in participating states for training workshops. It also is aiding in developing technology sustainability action plans to ensure that public access computing continues in rural libraries far into the future.
- WebJunction is addressing many of the online communication and training issues that were identified in the 2004 rural libraries survey. It is a huge resource in creating the online communities of practice and peer connectivity that is necessary to sustain public access computing and staff excellence.
- The Maintain IT project is just getting started and is designed to promote sustainable best practices and models of technical

support for public access computers in public libraries.

Although the Gates Foundation has been inordinately supportive, their generosity is not common in rural communities. In California, the James Irvine Foundation recently released a report that showed that 90 percent of private giving occurs in Los Angeles and the Bay Area. While the average California county received $102 in foundation giving per person per year, most rural counties receive fewer than $10 per person per year.[4] I think that similar trends can be found in other states, but I believe that the trend could be mitigated by presenting an assets model approach to rural communities and foundation funders.

The Library Community

We are fortunate that the national library community is stepping forward to provide support for rural libraries.

The ALA task force that commissioned the rural survey also made recommendations that are being followed. The Committee on Rural, Native, and Tribal Libraries of All Kinds has been established and is addressing one of the highest needs identified in their survey—the interest of rural libraries in advocacy. The committee released its **advocacy tool kit** last summer in New Orleans. Check it out at www.ala.org/ala/ olosbucket/supporttoolkit/ toolkithome.htm.

PLA also has a Rural Library Services Committee. That committee has been in place for a number of years and serves as a forum for discussion of rural library issues and also develops programming to address those issues at ALA and PLA conferences. PLA is also

preparing an advocacy tool kit which was tested at the PLA Spring Symposium in San Jose, California, and hopefully will be available for distribution by the Annual Conference in Washington, D.C.

For many years, ARSL and its conference have been the most significant annual opportunity for rural librarians and library staff to come together to share their knowledge and success stories of effective public library service in rural America.

The Western Council of State Libraries (state libraries that are west of the Mississippi River) is addressing the need for access to library staff education through the development of the library practitioner certification program. This effort was funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and will be administered by the Bibliographical Center for Research (BCR) located in Aurora, Colorado. It was available as of January 2007.

California Initiatives

Many state libraries around the country are also busy developing assets for rural libraries. I am most familiar with California's rural library initiative, which is funded by Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds. The program goal is to overcome the barriers that deter rural library staff from participating in many activities that their colleagues in more urban areas take for granted.

To overcome barriers for access to staff development opportunities, a library video-conferencing network has been created in about forty libraries throughout the state. Through collaborations with community colleges and county offices of education we have been able

to gain coverage throughout most of the state. We video-conference training sessions and meetings that rural library staff would otherwise not be able to access because the trainings are held in areas which are not accessible for them, particularly in the winter months. We also use video-conferencing to ensure rural library participation when we are gathering information on all types of issues.

Webcasting and webinar technology has expanded the use of virtual meetings and workshops. Depending on the topic, the audience and the time required, some sessions are video-conferenced, some are webcast, and some are simultaneously video-conferenced and webcast. All these meetings and workshops are archived on the **Rural Library Initiative Web site** (www.rurallibraries.org) so they can be accessed by library staff when convenient for them or for later reference. Check out the **Rural Library Training Resources** (www.rurallibraries.org/training/index.html).

The **rural electronic clearinghouse** (http://resourceroundup.net) is an online archive of commonly needed resources that enables libraries to "*share* the wheel, rather than *reinvent* it." The clearinghouse was designed by rural librarians. In 2003, a task force of rural librarians identified and prioritized the topics. Editorial guidelines were developed stipulating that materials and resources available through the clearinghouse should either be *from* rural libraries or *clearly relevant* to rural libraries. The philosophy of the clearinghouse is to be selective and representative, not encyclopedic. There are a number of categories grouped under "Model Projects and Best Practices," "Library Administration," "Policies,

Procedures and Manuals," and "Training."

Conclusion

In summary, those of us who work in rural libraries and those of us who are charged with supporting rural library services, are in a potentially positive position right now. Probably more than ever before, there are dollars, people, and resources being expended in huge numbers on our rural library issues—some wonderful assets are being developed for rural libraries.

But we may be suffering from a wealth of those riches because there are so many different initiatives. It can be challenging to keep them all straight and to strategically integrate these resources into a cohesive service model. I think we need to focus on three key issues:

- **Reduce project fragmentation and create synergy.** We have to develop a comprehensive plan that takes all these great resources and creates synergy. We have to work to ensure that rural libraries reap the benefits of what is available.
- **Get more people in the circle and out of isolation.** We must find a creative solution to allow more rural library staff to participate in national, state, and regional activities. The Gates Foundation has sponsored some meetings where this participation has begun but it must occur nationally and in each state and region.
- **We need to expand the circle.** We need to connect rural-affiliated groups who have a concern about and a stake in the successful development of local rural libraries. We need to bring people together who care about *rural issues*, not just about rural libraries, so that
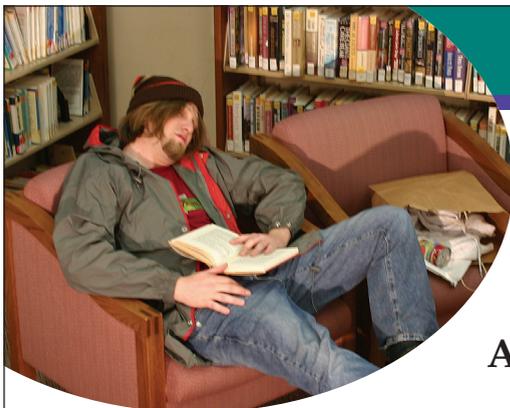
we can use all our assets and demonstrate that rural libraries are essential to rural communities.

Using the assets model in developing a sustainable future for rural libraries is critical. With the current national interest in rural library sustainability, we must seize the day and take advantage of all the knowledge and services at our fingertips. And none of us has the resources alone to do what needs to be done. If we strategically partner with other organizations that are interested in supporting strong rural communities, our assets will be recognized, our capacity would be expanded, and we can be assured of a sustainable future for rural libraries. 🅿🅻

References and Notes

1. Marilyn Bok's "Rural Prism" can be found in Appendix A of *Rural America and Welfare Reform: An Overview Assessment* (Columbia, Mo.: Rural Policy Research Institute, 1999) www.rupri.org/publications/archive/old/welfare/p99-3/p99-3.pdf (accessed Dec. 3, 2006).
2. Bernard Vavrek, "Rural and Small Libraries: Providers for Lifelong Learning," 1995, www.ed.gov/pubs/PLLIConf95/library.html (accessed Dec. 3, 2006).
3. John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Pr., 1993.)
4. Putnam Community Investment Consulting, "Foundation Giving in California," Nov. 2006, www.irvine.org/publications/new_pubs.shtml (accessed Dec. 3, 2006).