

Library Community Networks

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IN THIS ERA of a constantly changing world—e.g., climate change, resource depletion, geopolitical conflict, pandemic disease, technological innovation, data hacks, social networking dependence—there is one issue that communities will need to address, one way or another, sooner or later, and they will need to do it mostly on their own. Local communities will need to find ways to facilitate interpersonal communication so that they can more effectively respond to changes in their immediate environment, that is, their socio-political, economic, and climate-related environments.

If improving communication in order to address change sounds like a good idea, why is there a need for communities to do it on their own? It is because state and federal governments, and large corporations, even relying on various technological innovations, won't be able to do many of the things that will need to be done on the local level.

Large-scale assistance is needed in times of major disasters when survival supplies and rescue machinery are needed, but when the first responders leave, it is the local people who come together to put lives back together again. Big services are just not designed to function very well when it comes to interfacing with the unique qualities and needs of local neighborhoods. In general, local self-reliance makes for better

and more appropriate community responses and planning.

In more normal non-disaster times, it is local people who supply the basic resources and who represent the fabric of a community. We could substitute the word “network” for “fabric,” and it would mean about the same thing: people connecting and interacting with other people. And many of the resources that are available are often provided by non-profit organizations.

As a tool, the process of networking can be a powerful facilitator as well as a motivator, drawing people in and keeping them coming back for more.

Community Planning and Relationships

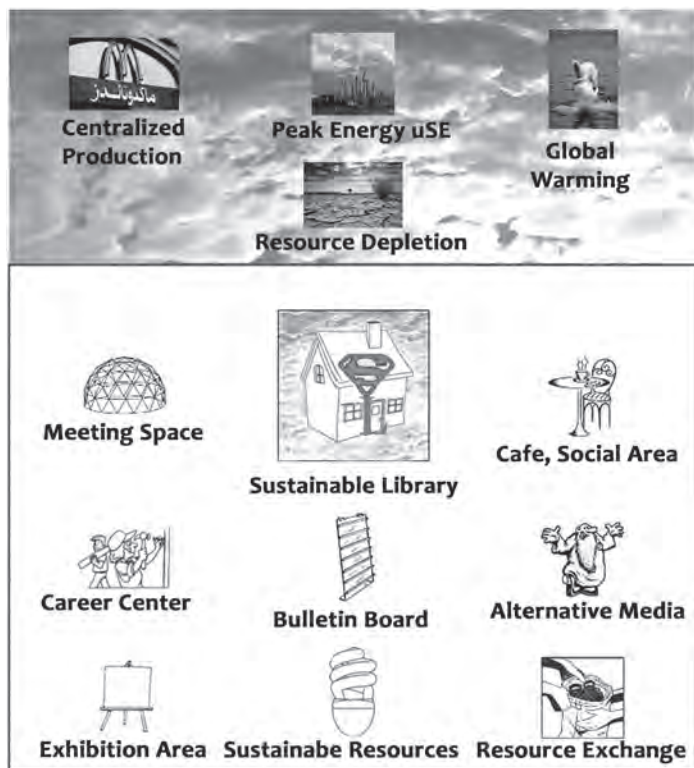
There's a lot of potential for change to occur in the future. One way or another, local communities reflect not only what is happening within their borders, but also what is happening in the larger world. And whatever affects a community, ultimately, individuals need to adjust.

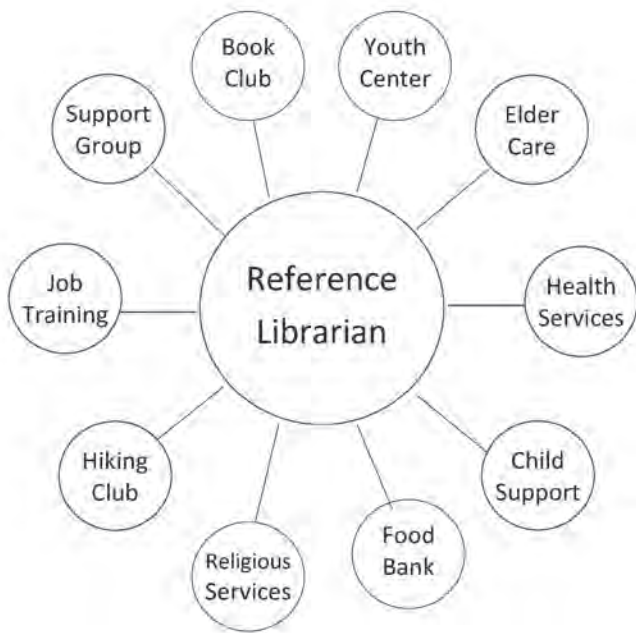
This need to adjust can be an opportunity to create ways of bringing people closer together in supportive ways. Within this environment, it's how we share material resources (which may become increasingly scarce), how we make a living (relying on fewer employee benefits), how we can maintain a home (in a changing climate), and how we can help each other (including the aged and those with health challenges or fewer financial resources) that will represent critical challenges.

Group Effort

There are people and programs working on these kinds of community-related issues. TransitionNetwork.org, a British invention, and TransitionUS.org, the American version, are designed to assist communities in adopting ways of managing large-scale changes that can impact people's lives. These are program ideas that suggest ways in which people can come together so they can share ideas that may be useful.

Several communities in the US have taken advantage of this process and have produced some interesting results, for example: a local food conference in Boulder; a self-sufficiency skills program in Oklahoma City; a water conservation project in Tucson; a waste management program in Minneapolis. These programs function by creating a core local group of concerned citizens who then get together to work on whatever they think is important for their community. They often do this in a social way, sometimes using a block party or a pop-up store in order to raise spirits and funds; Transition simply offers ideas and a structure.





It's a great idea, and there are other organizations offering a range of programs designed to assist local communities in addressing change. But like many great ideas, keeping a dedicated group going for the long run can be a difficult task. Individuals may be attracted to group efforts for many reasons, but if the sense of urgency wanes, or involvement becomes too tedious, other more personal priorities can pull people away. Group efforts can fade over time.

A Community Development Plan

Library Community Network (LCN) is a plan that places the local public library at the center of an effort to network and promote nonprofit resources that serve the community. The plan begins with the library creating a directory listing of nonprofit organizations, and proceeds by taking actions that encourage collaboration and community involvement.

Having the library do this is critically important for several reasons:

- The library is an existing resource, central to the fabric of a community.
- It has the expertise to effectively manage information and networking.
- The library can engage on a personal level with those running nonprofit organizations, and can open the door to enhanced relationships and closer working ties with those resources.
- The library can encourage closer ties between nonprofit organizations, the library, and the community.

The idea of networking the local community and nonprofit resources by using the public library as a facilitator did not come to me quickly—well, actually it did, but in several

quickly realized steps that occurred over a period of a few years. The first of these steps was realizing that change was likely to hit local communities in unknown ways over an unknown period of time. Communities would need to adapt, and that would impact how resources are used. One flash-realization centered on making better use of the resource providers that are already operational.

My first view on how this plan would look placed the local library at the center of social as well as intellectual activity—providing a range of activities that could be used to draw people in and enable networking. In this version, the resources were the people who walked into the library.

A second flash-realization hit me: if it's resources that are needed, and networking that brings them together, why not use the reference librarian function to network the services and activities already in place—provided by nonprofit organizations? This eventually led to the current iteration.

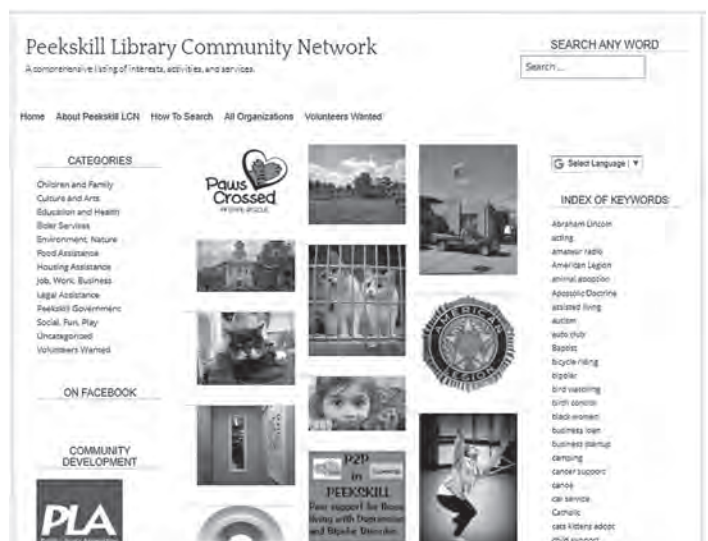
Why Libraries and Nonprofits?

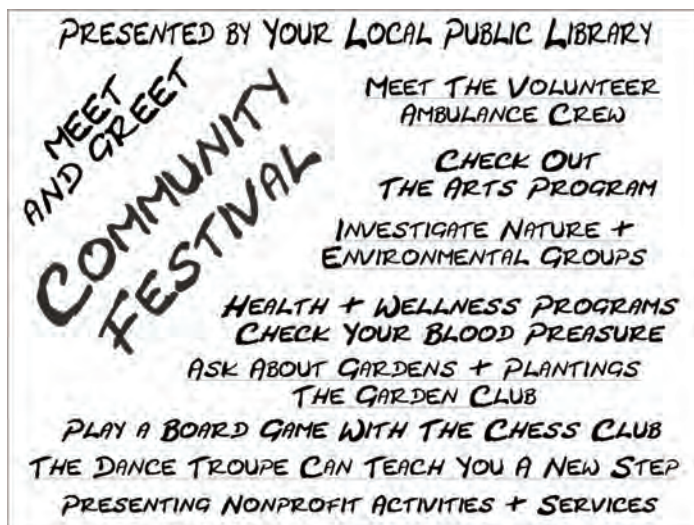
Libraries are valued for their skills in information gathering and dissemination, and organizations are valued for the content and services they provide. Both are valued for the active concern they have for local community. Pairing these two is both useful and practical: one for having the potential to make culture and services more visible, and the other for enabling individuals to better satisfy their needs and desires.

A working example of a community network directory was put into use in 2017 in the city of Peekskill, New York. The public library director at that time embraced this idea enthusiastically, and we created a website directory showing most of the nonprofit services and activities serving this city of 24,000 (peekskillcn.net).

The Annual Nonprofit Festival

One example of an interactive activity is an annual nonprofit festival at the library that showcases unique programs or even provides healthcare or other needed services on the spot.





There's nothing new about having a community festival, or setting up tables, or an information booth: outreach for services. Like a music or crafts fair, or an Earth Day festival, this festival would exhibit the nonprofit organizations that serve a community, presented by the local public library.

Other collaborative efforts may evolve just from everyone being able to see what everyone is doing: the library can better understand the nonprofit world, citizens can better see these services and activities, and the nonprofits can

better appreciate what is wanted and better see what other organizations are doing. It's a win-win-win situation. In its implementation, this program is a bit sneaky: create a library directory, and new relationships can form that help the public library and nonprofit organizations to become more relevant and responsive to evolving community needs.

The human reflex is to know how to plan for how we know change will happen. But this kind of thinking misses something important: it is not what we will plan that we're first faced with, but deciding if we really need to think about it. And accepting that some kind of change is inevitable is the big first step to take.

As the future approaches, the responsibility for managing resources may fall harder on local communities. People working collaboratively to manage local resources effectively—or *resilience* if you prefer—offers a path that can direct us toward healthier outcomes.

All it takes is a shift in how information is managed.

You can read more about this idea here: librarycommunitynetwork.org. △

Alan Pakaln is a retired clinical engineer who worked in New York City hospitals. Alan writes about clinical safety issues (jointcommissionaccreditation.org), community risk management (<https://communityriskmanagement.org>), and has published works in graphic art including photography (<https://alanpakaln.com>).