

DRAFT

An update from the director to our staff, supporters, and community about the library's current strategic plan:

When we set out in 2021 to draft a new strategic plan we started by gathering a lot of input from the community. The global pandemic had a significant impact and had surely shifted new priorities into focus; we knew that people were struggling in different ways, so we asked what challenges people were facing and what they were most concerned about. Answers encompassed a range of concerns about everything from lack of affordable housing to climate change, but what came through loud and clear were a lot of people expressing concerns about “polarization”, “social isolation”, “divisiveness”, “a loss of social cohesion”, or “a lack of civility”. Some said that “people can't talk to each other anymore”, and “it's hard to find ways to interact with people who are different from me”. One quote read “It's hard finding common ground, respect, and community in a divided world”. This sense of disengagement and loneliness was with us well before the pandemic but it seemed that challenges to preserving civic and community engagement really took hold during that time.

Supporting, growing, and programming our ecosystem of third spaces is one possible solution to disengagement. Public libraries have grown into ideal third spaces over the last few decades, hosting opportunities to hear, share and engage with ideas and with other people. Once spaces that nurtured silent, solo exploration and study, they are now vital, dynamic spaces that foster connected communities, staffed by creative, community-oriented workers. Library design and strategic planning has shifted toward creating flexible spaces and a wide variety of opportunities that encourage interaction. The Northfield Public Library was recognized by Library Journal in 2024 as one of the Best Small Libraries in the country thanks in large part to this work that was prioritized in the library's strategic plan. Our inclusive and expansive approach to outreach and community engagement was what set us apart from other nominees.

A successful library is a responsive library that is acutely aware of factors impacting the community and is supported well enough to be able to pivot when needed. Climate disasters, economic challenges, political and social upheaval, and public health crises will happen and while we can't anticipate exactly what will happen, we can be prepared if we learn from the past and apply what we have learned to our plans. Our hope for future planning is to not have to reinvent our strategic plan every 3-5 years for the sake of doing so, but rather develop annual work plans that support those priorities that we have established in conversation with the community. We will be setting, evaluating and tracking goals, and updating supporting initiatives annually, and will revisit the higher level priorities when it seems necessary to do so.

Annual departmental work plans, like the attached youth services framework, and the addition of ongoing, short term, and long term goals, will be helpful implementation tools as we continue to work with this plan and shape initiatives around the aspirations of the community. This strategic plan is a living document and we look forward to continuously co-creating the library with our community.

The Northfield Public Library is a vital cornerstone of a thriving and historic downtown, as well as an essential resource to people who may never set foot in the building. Some may only see staff through outreach visits, by Bookmobile service, or by home delivery. Some may only ever interact with the library online. A library is more than a building, more than books, and more than the technology it provides. A library is about people: the people who make it work and the people for whom it works. People, therefore, should be at the center of every strategic priority for a library.

Northfield Public Library provides access to a vast collection of free resources, both through our local physical and digital collections, and through our membership in Southeastern Libraries Cooperating (SELCO), as well as through access to MNLink. The library also provides a wealth of enriching programs and educational opportunities. And at a time when the digital divide persists and grows wider, today's library is key to supporting a community's resilience, the community's collective ability to recover from setbacks, overcome challenges, and to thrive, together. Libraries support workforce development, public health, and strong families. Libraries do this by providing free and equal access to information, resources, technology, space, and the time, empathy, and expertise of library staff.

A library serves its community most effectively when in a constant, open dialogue with all. This is why we engaged with the community through surveys, interviews, and community conversations to build this plan. Our planning team formed five strategic priorities with the guidance of internal and external stakeholders. We developed this plan to align with the City of Northfield's strategic plan, and looked to the benchmarks of Northfield Promise and Northfield Public Schools for alignment in our outcomes.

Our goal was to develop a plan rooted in the mission and values of the library which understands that the needs of a community change over time, sometimes gradually and sometimes, as we have seen over the past two years, abruptly and without precedent, creating new and unforeseen challenges. Our strategic plan should have clear outcomes and priorities in mind, but should keep a certain degree of flexibility for those times when we have to pivot. This plan is a living document formed through continual conversations with the entire community. While it is intended to be a five year plan, the initiatives you'll see listed in this document represent new or continuing initiatives which we will evaluate after the first year.

We are inspired to use the input received from the community to envision public library services that are transformative and tailored to our community's needs. Thank you to everyone who participated. We look forward to shaping our strategic direction with your voices for the years ahead.

Invited Community: A community that feels at home in their library.

What we heard: Not everyone feels at home in the library. For some it is a matter of feeling left out of what they see, or don't see, on display in the library, for others it is a desire to find a more comfortable chair and cup of coffee. Many expressed a desire for more cozy, tucked away spaces, others indicated a strong preference for spaces of active learning, working, or interaction. Some indicated that they do not find what is relevant to their interests in the collection.

What we're doing: We're taking a look at how our spaces are used and making adjustments to improve the visitor experience. We're identifying and correcting gaps in the collection, and we're working to keep it current, relevant, and appealing. We're improving the look and feel of our indoor and outdoor spaces, lighting and furnishings, while being mindful of the need to balance the historic value and traditional uses of the library with the needs of the 21st century community.

How we will know it's working: The community reports feeling welcome and comfortable in the library. The community finds materials that are relevant to their interests and they return to the library again and again. The library is a desirable space for all of Northfield in which to spend time. The community identifies with the library, inside and out. The community sees its diversity reflected in what we provide. *Key measures: Door count, program attendance increasing, community feedback*

What we have accomplished: opened teen space; first friday coffee still going after 3 years; vinyl listening station installed; replaced faded and worn furnishings; installed upper story blinds in atrium to control light, temperature; free access to menstrual products in all restrooms; collection refresh work is ongoing; youth services staff developed Let's Imagine/Imaginemos space

How we are continuing this work: Exploring ways to increase space for programs, meetings, and collections without expanding the building (ongoing); rotating "Let's Imagine/Imaginemos" space (ongoing); planning for remodeled bathrooms to include gender neutral facilities (1-3 to plan, 3-5 for remodeling); vision plan for library grounds completed, addresses need for welcoming, active community space outside (1-3 years to plan, 5-10 to implement)

Included Community: A community in which every person is seen, heard and engaged.

What we heard: The community is looking for more opportunities to come together and interact with people of different backgrounds. Polarization is a major concern to the community and many report feeling left out of the conversation. Representation matters. The community desires a place where all people feel valued and seen.

What we're doing: We are creating meaningful opportunities for people of all backgrounds to gather, learn from one another, and share experiences. We are celebrating the stories of all in our community. We are developing a diverse slate of inclusive programs to engage and

enrich all ages throughout the year. We are committed to hiring bilingual staff because to really listen we need to understand the words being used. Accessibility is a priority in everything we do.

How we will know it's working: Northfielders of all ages report feeling connected and engaged in their community. The community sees its diversity reflected in the library's services, programs, staff, and collections. The community finds occasion to interact in mixed groups, strengthening bonds across ideological, economic and cultural groups. The community values diverse perspectives. *Key measures: people have more opportunities to interact with different cultures, people of backgrounds; staff observe more diverse groups of people attending programs*

What we have accomplished: the library's art collection is more representative with the addition of works by Rocky Casillas and Gustavo Boada; our continued work on the Hispanic Heritage Celebration inspired St. Olaf to reach out to partner with us on an annual AANHPI celebration, and Northfield Pride has grown into its own nonprofit, allowing the event to grow; the library offers more programs to more people and attendance has increased overall.

How we are continuing this work: hosting more community conversations; continuing to build upon successful Spanish language and bilingual programming; Continuing to lead, partner or support community cultural celebrations; developing social story and sensory-friendly access tools (1-3 years); installing hearing loop in Bunday Room (1-3 years); improving site accessibility through vision planning efforts (3-5 years); improving accessibility of bathroom facilities with adult compatible changing tables (5-10 years); planning for age-friendly programming and spaces inclusive of people with disabilities (ongoing).

Informed Community: A community that understands what their library offers and shapes their library with feedback.

What we heard: There is so much information that it can be difficult to sort through it all to find what is of value. It is difficult to stay aware of activities, opportunities and other information that is important to the community. Many report being unaware of library resources and programs.

What we're doing: Collecting stories and feedback, reporting data, and sharing our impact with the community. Lifting each other up and celebrating successes within the organization. Developing and implementing a marketing plan that gets the right information to the right places so that the community is aware of what they have. Using survey tools effectively.

How we will know it's working: The community is aware of what the library offers. The community uses the library and its resources. The community engages in a dialogue with the library, shaping the library with feedback. The library is a trusted resource for information. *Key measures: increasing program attendance; increasing awareness of library*

programs and services; increasing support from city, partners, legislators; increased capacity for fundraising

What we have accomplished: made significant updates and improvements to existing website; monthly morning spot on KYMN and monthly newspaper column; consistent social media presence increasing activity; Library received honorable mention for Library Journal Best Small Library in America, 2024; statewide media coverage: KARE11, KSTP appearances; staff presenting regularly at state, national conferences (MLA, ARSL)

How we are continuing this work: better and more frequent data storytelling (ongoing); Conference presentations, including national conferences (REFORMA, ARSL, PLA) (ongoing); Prioritizing grants and award nominations (ongoing); gathering stories from community for library legislative day, budget presentations, fundraising (ongoing); Annual report for community with data visualization (1-3 years)

Connected Community: A community with access to needed resources for all.

What we heard: Many in our community experience different barriers to accessing the library, including hours of operation, location, difficulty returning books, fines, and parking. Access to important services and resources is often limited by where people live, limited access to transportation, or by a lack of free time.

What we're doing: Expanding outreach efforts in cooperation with community partners. Making it more convenient to return books. Increasing Bookmobile service and eliminating overdue fines. Continuing to develop our online library to meet the growing demand for virtual content. Building in appropriate full time staff positions to support sustainable, equitable outreach and community based services.

How we will know it's working:

Patrons find it easier to use the library and more people use it more often. Patrons find it easier to return and renew books, resulting in fewer lost notices mailed and fewer library cards become inactive. Patrons report finding what they need at the library. Staff are equipped to provide the highest level of service to the community. The library is competitive in attracting and retaining staff with diverse skill sets and backgrounds. *Key measures: electronic and physical collections meet demand; unreturned material is reduced; staffing is adequate to meet increasing demand for programs, services*

What we have accomplished: created full time library assistants for outreach team, created adult programming and outreach librarian; fines on overdue materials eliminated; successful fundraising for Oasis in NCRC (opened in 2024); added bookmobile service year-round to Dundas parks and city hall, older adult communities in Northfield; full-time staff increased to add bilingual circulation and bilingual library assistant; book return added to NCEC; increased digital checkout options; initiated passport services

How we are continuing this work: Developing services, programs, collections at Oasis (ongoing); passport services generate revenue sufficient to fund full-time bilingual clerk and shift outreach librarian to full-time (1-3 years); electronic collections are evaluated for value and use every year (ongoing); increase awareness of, access to, home delivery service (1-3 years)

Empowered Community: A community that is equipped for a changing world.

What we heard: People need access to tools and the space to use them, as well as access to an expert staff to help navigate it all. People need to stay up to date on new technology for their personal and professional lives. People need coworking, meeting, and study space, as well as the freedom to learn new skills and try new things without spending a lot of money. People are concerned about the environment, climate change, lack of affordable housing, access to caregiver resources, and healthcare.

What we're doing: Integrating new technology that is responsive to the changing needs of the community. Making sure that staff development is a top priority. Creating space for local entrepreneurs and remote workers to engage, work, and develop their skills. An empowered community is sustainable and resilient, practicing good stewardship of our resources so we are minimizing our environmental impact by recycling, reusing, and reducing our dependence on single use plastics.

How we will know it's working: The library is a trusted resource for access to technology. The community uses library spaces and technology for their work and educational needs. The community has access to the emerging and essential technologies they need, when they need it and where they need it. The community is empowered to learn new skills. *Key measures: achieve sustainable library certification; reduced energy costs; community uses exterior spaces; circulation on technology, kits*

What we have accomplished: wireless printing added; grant for laptops and hotspots available for checkout; full-time emerging technology librarian added; drop-in bilingual tutoring offered on weekends, supported by student workers; TELL kits circulating; library of things expanded past LSTA-funded kits, circulating well; eliminated plastic bags, replaced with boomerang bags; added composting and switched receipt vendor to plastic free, compostable paper; completed energy audit; more staff at all levels attend conferences

How we are continuing this work: investigate cost and energy savings (1-3 years); Certified Sustainable Library (1-3 years); Vision planning for grounds completed (1-3 years); address stormwater, heat island, erosion, excess chloride use/excess hardscape (5-10 years); plan to address workforce space needs for virtual meetings, telehealth, court appointments (1-3 years); Adequate staffing to open on Sundays year-round to operate as cooling shelter and provide refuge and support to community during, climate emergencies such as smoke, flood, power outage, after severe weather, heat, etc.) (3-5 years)

How was this plan built?

Community Conversations: Our Community Conversations are based on tools developed by the American Library Association and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. This approach is being used by libraries around the country to better understand their communities, be more proactive to community needs and issues, and put community aspirations first. Using the Community Conversations model, libraries authentically engage members of the community and generate “public knowledge” to inform decision-making of all kinds.

Some may wonder why the library concerns itself with what the community considers to be the greatest challenges facing them and what kind of community they aspire to have. Through these conversations we learned a lot about your hopes and values, and the role we play in realizing a vision for a community in which everyone thrives. We spoke with 30 people in 5 different meetings: two conversations were held in Spanish at the library; three were in English, one of which was conducted with youth participants at the Northfield Union of Youth (The Key); two meetings were held at the Depot and were facilitated by Northfield Shares.

The survey: The survey was developed by a 6 person staff committee and circulated in English and Spanish to a broad audience. The committee developed questions which addressed key focus areas for the library, such as how people use the library, what they use it for, and what difficulties they may face in doing so, but also included questions intended to ask people to think outside of the library.

Internal and external stakeholder Workshops: The best strategic plan in the world can't be carried out without the expertise and support of our dedicated staff and stakeholders. With the help of leadership from our consortium, Southeastern Libraries Cooperating (SELCO), we held a workshop with library staff, and one with Library Board members, Friends of the Library, and community partners present. SELCO Executive Director, Krista Ross, led these conversations.

Data analysis: The St. Olaf College Math Practicum is a January course in which teams of 5 mathematics/statistics students attack problems posed by outside organizations by analyzing their data. Students Catie Rhodes, Abby Halverson, Dominic Bledsoe, and Andrew Noecker, supervised by David Walmsley and Paul Roback, worked with a tremendous amount of our data and our survey results to compile a report on past and projected future use of the Library and its resources.

Community partners: This plan and its successful implementation would not be possible without the support, wisdom, and collaborative spirit of our community partners. The library would like to acknowledge the Friends and Foundation of the Northfield Public Library, St. Olaf College, Northfield Promise, Northfield Public Schools, Fifty North, Community Action Center, Healthy Communities Initiative, Northfield Arts Guild, KYMN Radio, El Super Barrio Latino, Rice County Neighbors United, Northfield News, YMCA, Northfield Shares, Age Friendly Northfield, Carleton College, the Northfield Chamber of Commerce, Northfield Historical Society, and many others too numerous to list. Northfield truly is a team effort.