

From Awareness to Funding

An insider shares lessons learned when public awareness fell short in Minneapolis

by Anita S. Duckor

Minneapolis Public Library and the suburban Hennepin County Library made history last January when they merged, creating a single system serving 1.1 million with a collection of more than 5 million items. The unprecedented measure, which required the approval of three elected bodies plus the state legislature and governor, was precipitated by a financial crisis that crippled MPL, and an outpouring of support wasn't enough to save it. Shortcomings in the Minneapolis experience demonstrate that public awareness can only lead to funding when that leap is made with robust advocacy tactics based on strategic alliances and political pressure points and by empowering supporters with more than awareness.

Largely stable funding since MPL's foundation in 1885 created an excellent library system renowned for a historic collection, high circulation, and strong public support. Tides began to turn in the 1990s when public funds floundered. The final blow came in 2003 when the state of Minnesota made drastic cuts in aid to cities. The funding formula for MPL depended more on local government aid than on the ever-increasing property tax base of the same period. Thus, we underfunded collections, building maintenance, and technology—a sadly common scenario across the country.

The rigid city funding formula meant that MPL suffered more than other city departments; city revenues increased by 3.6% between 2003 and 2007, while the library's revenues essentially remained stagnant, falling by 0.4%. Like

**For almost a decade,
the library was asked
to do more with less.**

all libraries, ours experienced a time of rising staff, collection-development, and subscription expenses. To meet the budget limitations, the MPL trustees were forced to cut 30% of staff members in 2004, reduce hours, and close three community libraries in 2007. Further cuts were on the horizon.

Action was needed. City and state government needed to restore funding and correct several structural problems contributing to the crisis. An outpouring of community support was easily found at library board and city council meetings. Media attention was at times significant. Ultimately, the efforts of library supporters in Minneapolis, some of whom were interviewed in OCLC's *From Awareness to Funding* report, failed to win enough votes on the city council to save MPL.

Libraries are the most local form of local government—each library’s unique circumstances reflect this. Yet the broader lessons learned in the battle for MPL call for an advocacy strategy beyond awareness to be imported by any library community:

Lesson 1: Filling the room is not enough. Library advocates must show their support in quality as well as quantity. They should be aware of the stakes at hand yet also understand the background, counter-arguments, and the political allegiances of each policymaker. Impressive numbers of library supporters in Minneapolis frequently filled public hearings, but it wasn’t enough because MPL hadn’t made a solid case for a long-term financial solution.

Lesson 2: Active advocacy is never out of season. Libraries can’t wait to mobilize direct advocacy efforts until funds are threatened. Effective advocacy must be built on a solid business case articulating the community’s investment in addressing community issues such as graduation rates, unemployment, homelessness, immigrant integration, school readiness, a skilled workforce, juvenile crime, and library funding. In Minneapolis, an insular mentality held on too long, and subsequent ef-

forts to mobilize were hindered by other demands on staff time and a business case built too late.

Lesson 3: Turn competing priorities into common causes. When justifying a decision, politicians too often use the classic either/or argument. It’s often a false choice. Building ongoing outside-the-box alliances strengthens community relations and makes nearly every vote a vote pertinent to the library’s wider societal roles. One Minneapolis city council member justified his vote against library funding by saying, “Books don’t stop bullets.” The truth is, libraries prevent bullets. Establishing that with community partners and this council member may have prevented the closing of libraries.

Lesson 4: Constantly communicate value and consequences. Libraries sell themselves short when they only promote circulation, cardholders, and other traditional measures of output. The ways libraries truly improve lives, although difficult to quantify, are critical when competing for public dollars. It is important for libraries to articulate their contribution in making a community a vibrant place to live, work, and own a business. MPL failed to market its intrinsic value soon enough or broadly enough with all key stakeholders.

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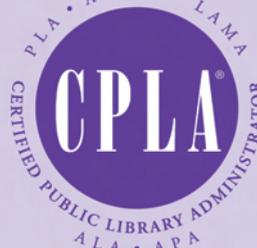
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Lesson 5: Demand transparency. Minneapolis's confusing arrangement of library governance and funding structures handicapped our ability to understand the problem before it hit us. Multilayered library governance is a problem across the country; part of library advocacy must include the insistence on the greatest possible transparency. Transparency leads to political accountability. Advocates must enlist any help they need to develop a list of factors likely to affect both short- and long-term funding, and must monitor these factors with vigilance.

Lesson 6: Call out your supporters and the opposition by name. Successful campaigns at capitols across the country share a common tactic: organizers publicly thank, by name, those officials supporting their cause and broadly publicize their gratitude. Equally, successful campaigns name their opposition. Too often, libraries think they need to play it safe through blanket messaging. This is politically ineffective and risks alienating allies. So instead of "Ask the county board to fund libraries," messaging should feel like: "Thank Commissioners X and Y for their support and tell Commissioner Z to vote yes on resolution 42." And never mention political affiliations—support for libraries is a nonpartisan issue and so too must be our advocates.

Lesson 7: Make use of your Friends. Policymakers expect to hear from library directors and trustees. Hearing from constituents makes more of an impact. A strong library Friends organization must be encouraged. As community members, they can lobby with much greater political latitude than library professionals. In Minneapolis, our impressive Friends organization wasn't able to maximize its advocacy effectiveness—in part because of a concurrent capital campaign.

Lesson 8: Invest in advocacy. The library administration must have a solid stakeholder-relations plan and work closely with the Friends in developing long-term advocacy. Library staff and supporters must join community and business groups, such as the chamber of commerce, neighborhood organizations, arts council, or service club. It requires an investment of time and money.

MPL didn't survive as a standalone institution, but the outpouring of support did create the political will to merge the two library systems in Hennepin County—with the successful outcome of libraries staying open and with more hours. But had we been aware of the true impact of the long-term underfunding and made a better business case with elected officials, we might have remained independent. ■

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