

# **Focus Groups Report**

**Space Needs Study**

**Mississippi Mills Public Library**

**Almonte Branch**

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## BACKGROUND and METHOD

- Christine Rowe approached BIG THINKING and asked if we would host a series of focus groups to inform the Almonte Branch Space Needs Study that is being undertaken by the Mississippi Mills Public Library
- A start-up meeting with the Expansion Committee was held on October 3, and the committee confirmed that they wanted to know, in order of priority
  - What space is needed and what do people want to do in that space?
  - How will the library reflect the needs of its users, in terms of space, collection, service?
  - How will the library help build community?
- Four focus groups were scheduled in the month of October, with participants sorted intentionally as seniors/adults, families, partners, and youth
- BIG THINKING used an interview method called “focused conversations” to facilitate the focus groups. This method calls for a series of questions beginning with simple objective questions, delving a little deeper with reflective and interpretive, and culminating in decisional type questions. Focused conversations help participants move logically towards a conclusion, and to gather all the information they need before jumping to a decision
- The Focus Groups started with a half hour familiarization tour of the library, followed by a one hour focused conversation. The exception to this was the Family group which took place immediately following the story-time program, and was an abbreviated 30-minute conversation
- The two facilitators were Jane Torrance, who led the conversations, and Jim Mountain who recorded the conversation
- All participants were invited to share in refreshments, and they all did!
- A follow-up email was sent to participants to ask if they had, upon reflection following the focus group, anything to add. Two responses were received.

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## INFORMATION GATHERED

### OBJECTIVE

- *Who are you, and why have you come today?*
- *What do you do when you come to the library? How do you currently use the space?*
- *What do you like about the Almonte branch? What are the strengths?*

Attendees were long-time residents, new residents, long-time committed users of the library and first-timers, avid readers, volunteers, teachers, historians, friends of the library, and program partners .

They were children, parents, youth, grandparents, seniors, and community members.

They come to the library to use the books, audio books, cd's, movies, children's books, to have conversations, rent space, have meetings, participate in summer programs, go to the gardens, attend classes, research, meet with the tech tutor, read newspapers and magazines, attend Almonte in Learning sessions, attend movies, attend games night, to borrow museum passes, sign out backpacks, visit the public health nurse, to hang out after-school, to study, relax, to run groups, hang out between meetings, meet people, meet partners, tutor and get tutored, and to simply be with other people

They come with their children, their babies, their aging parents, their families, their clients, and with adults with physical and intellectual disability.

They like the social aspect of the library, the local history collection, the new releases, the depth and variety of the collection, the children's summer programs, the children's collection, story time, the teacher's resources, the visiting book delivery program, interlibrary loans, the garden, the new releases, the tech support, the selection of magazines, ancestry.ca, books about Canada's North, the backpack program, snacks, the fact that you can eat in the library, the availability of coffee and tea, the children's computer, the day the new calendar comes out, the convenient way to search the catalogue and make reservations from home, physically picking out books, the location, baby time and toddler time programs, story time, meeting

other families through programming, young adult fiction, the quiet space, the archival information on microfiche, the partnership programs, the staff, the diverse collection, the art, the flexible hours, the responsiveness to collection requests and suggestions, book club sets, the physical space with the natural light and colors, the readings by authors, and the kids stamp at the front desk that used to be a date stamp!

## REFLECTIVE

- *Did anything on the tour of the library surprise you?*
- *Is there anything that happens, or doesn't happen at the library that you didn't already know about?*
- *Does the library serve your needs? What is missing?*

Participants thought they were pretty much aware of everything the library had to offer, but were surprised by some of the unique offerings. Some didn't know about the backpacks, museum passes, games night, free access to ancestry.ca, that the library offers wireless printing, that the new computer monitors can be raised or lowered.

They were sometimes disturbed by the loud voices of tutors who met students at the library, and would appreciate glass enclosures/cones of silence or designated quiet spaces. Some people would like to see expanded hours but also recognized the cost involved.

Participants were pleased with the library, but felt they could be better served with the addition of some new collection, programs, and better communication and organization, as well as accessibility.

- Collection
  - a local authors section
  - more books for 8-12 year olds
  - more French books for children and adults
  - faith-based books
  - I-Spy books
  - Japanese anime
  - STEM-focused collection for youth

- games manual for Dungeons and Dragons
  - pedometers
  - scavenger hunt/geocaching activities
  - backpacks for grown-ups
  - musical instruments
  - gardening tools
  - home renovation tools
  - meteorological equipment
  - lap loom loan (MVTM)
  - bike loans
  - book section on LGBTQ awareness
  - more literature, information on inclusive cross cultural indigenous knowledge
  - game manuals
  - Indigenous literature section
  - backpacks for toys
  - Manga – anime light novels
  - sharing accounts like Netflix
- Programs
    - a continuation of story time in the summer
    - specific programming for 5-10 year olds
    - a French storytime
    - coding camp
    - dungeons and dragons weekly campaign
    - art club
    - video game tutoring
    - more experiential activities
    - conversations with newcomers
- Communication
    - information about the status of interlibrary loans
    - signage
    - better advertising of programs,
- Organization
    - cataloguing of TV series to make them sequential and easier to find
    - space dedicated to graphic novels
    - DVD's organized alphabetically instead of catalogue number
    - replace the carousel for movies with shelving
    - themed sections
    - realign into square – more organized space
    - bookstore design concept rather than catalogue

- Accessibility
  - if you wear bifocals the bottom shelf is not accessible because you can't read the titles – you would have to get on the floor to read them. Could shelf be tilted?
  - Bottom shelves are difficult to access if you have bad knees
  - New shelves are going to be lower which may be a problem.
  - Tall shelves may also be a problem

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## **INTERPRETIVE**

- *What would you like to see in the branch? Would you visit the library more if these needs were met?*
- *What role do you see that the library plays, or could play in the community?*

These questions generated the most discussion, and are the heart of the space needs analysis. I have separated the responses into service expansion and physical space expansion. Many of the service expansion ideas could proceed without a physical expansion.

### **Service Expansion**

- evening hours expanded
- Sunday openings
- transportation issues improved to provide more rural residents access to activities – partner with Lanark Community Transportation
- collaboration with other venues – e.g. museum – TIFF films
- library of venues – e.g. collaboration with other spaces
- programming and space requirements should be tailored to demographics – eg seniors
- library could bring partners together and be a coordinator of spaces for meetings, workshops, performances
- a toy lending library
- public-private business spaces collaboration
- volunteer coordination
- 3D printer/ maker space section
- more artwork displayed – local artists as well as kid's art
- a section to offer recycle used books/sale
- Men's Shed project – little library box placements around the community
- Arnprior library -local book store and families make decisions about what books to acquire, and books are purchase at the book store
- crow events
- bicycle repair
- language programming – conversations in different languages

- creative mornings – creative people come and give presentations
- roster of mentors

## Physical Space Expansion

- Think about the connection to community OVRT/oven/garden/market/
  - washrooms on north side of library to serve trail system and public, with exterior access available after hours
  - separated space for tourism and community partners
  - connections to hydro, water
  - catering space
  - bike repair station
- technology room/Zoom Room with smart board, screens, will enable workshops, outreach, bookings by local businesses, workspace, videoconferencing, programming out to folks outside of library
- workstation space like Impact Hub
- community kitchen/commercial kitchen to support programming, rentals
- Youth Centre to co-locate to the library
- additional space for expanded collections
- a larger space for storytime (it is too cramped presently and sometimes discourages attendance)
- more interactive hands-on space in children's section (eg puppet theatre, felt board, craft supplies, a light table)
- games room and variety of games and puzzles,
- video and computer games room with consoles and multi-player games
- covered outdoor space
- dedicated Zipcar (or similar) parking
- larger meeting room – multi-use purpose room
- space for teens and preteens to go e.g. computer usage
- quiet reading room with comfortable seating
- room for interactive stuff
- maker space
- evening learning space
- gaming room with projector (noise-cancelling)
- bigger children's library inside the main library with dress-up / puppets space
- more comfy seating– beanbag, couches etc.
- lockers /storage
- LAN network for gaming
- overall improved air quality
- reading room and more private, less open spaces

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## DECISIONS – PRIORITIES

- *What types of space(s) or collections would you like to see? What are the future requirements?*
- *How would you prioritize these changes?*
- *Who are the future partners?*

The library already plays a substantial role in the community but it could increase the profile by partnering with charities to offer a venue for fundraising; with private business like the bookstore, Curious and Kind, or a coffee shop; with community organizations like the Youth Centre, The Hub, schools, home-schoolers, MVFN, Lanark County Support Services, YMCA. The library could co-locate with MMYC, ask for teen input as the planning proceeds, partner with the schools since their libraries are declining.

The following results are the top 5 priorities of each of the focus groups

Words of wisdom that should not be ignored

- if expanding, go up, not out. Build up...so not to lose property space
- consider existing architecture both in terms of structural capability as well as the current heritage design to reference a train station

### **From the Parents Group**

1. Bigger meeting room
2. Space for kids ages 5 – 10
3. Programming for 5 – 10 year olds evening/after school programs, lego nights, coding, STEM
4. Enhancing, adding to the toy/games library collection, puzzles space
5. Craft centre for kids – table with crayons, hands on toys, felt boards, light table



### **From the Partners Group**

1. Youth Centre co-located
2. Commercial Kitchen
3. Zoom Room – videoconferencing – co-working space, programming out, Smart Board
4. Community/OVRT connection
5. Covered outdoor space

### **From the Youth Group**

1. More organized space
2. Gaming room with projector – noise cancelling, consoles, couches
3. Kid’s space separate from reading space with Dress-up/puppets, activities, kids computer
4. Lockers
5. Reading room

### **From the Seniors/Adults**

1. Multi-use space/performance space/meeting room
2. Quiet reading room
3. OVRT link/community use
4. Work-space available
5. Interactive children’s space

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## Conclusions

It has been our pleasure to work with the Mississippi Mills Public Library on this portion of the Space Needs Study. The participants at the focus groups were extremely engaged and willing, which is a testament to the library and staff. They truly love the library, and want it to succeed.

There are numerous “quick wins” that have been identified, and could be actioned over the next year as decisions are made about possible physical expansion, specifically found on pages 4, 5 and 6 of this report. Many of these programs and services were priorities of the focus groups, including

- Programming for 5 – 10 year olds Lego nights, coding, STEM
- Enhancing, adding to the toy/games library collection, puzzles space
- More (differently) organized space using youth specifically to help in this!

With minor changes and re-organization of existing space, more of the priorities could be addresses, including

- Space carved out for kids ages 5 – 10
- A small Zoom Room could be set up in the board room with videoconferencing capability, co-working space, ability to programming out, to install a smart Board
- An Interactive children’s space separate from reading space with Dress-up/puppets, activities, kids computer, and craft centre
- Lockers (lockable cubbies for laptops and valuables) could be installed in the cloak room

Major changes would be needed to accommodate the remaining priorities

- Multi-use space/performance space/bigger meeting room
- Space for Youth Centre to co-locate
- Commercial Kitchen
- Community/OVRT connection
- Covered outdoor space
- Quiet reading room
- A proper technology hub – a Zoom Room with a smart board, videoconferencing capability, co-working space, with ability to program out, that could serve dual purpose as a Gaming room after school

We would be happy to work with the Mississippi Mills Public Library as you try to work your way forward. I have outlined below the strengths of BIG THINKING

Jane Torrance, BA, MA, is a Professional Facilitator (certification pending), Community Coordinator, Social Media Manager, and former 3-term Councillor with professional training in Professional Facilitation, Advanced Facilitation, Facilitative Leadership, Collaborative Leadership, Community Change, ASIST certification, Liberating Structures Facilitation Lead, Network Weaving, Asset Based Community Development, Developmental Assets, Accessible Customer Service, Anti-Racism Anti-Oppression, Indigenous Culture to Context, Community Engagement, and Collective Impact. Ms. Torrance is the Principal of Big Thinking.

Mr. Mountain, BA, is an experienced Community Engagement Specialist, Community Planner, and Economic Development Manager and Downtown Revitalization Specialist. Mr. Mountain is also an Adjunct Professor and Sessional Lecturer, Carleton University, Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism, Former Director of Regeneration Initiatives at the National Trust for Canada and he is the Principle of J. Mountain and Associates.

Please feel free to call on us if needed.

Best Regards,

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