



VAPLD Strategic Framework 2024–2027

As the Vernon Area Public Library District approached its 50th anniversary in 2024, the Board of Trustees charged the Library Director and leadership team to recommend a strategic plan that would ensure the library’s continued success.

Throughout 2023 and early 2024, the Director and Management Team worked to reassess library facilities, collections, and services, along with community needs and desires. From that information, the team identified actions required in order for the library to continue meeting community needs and expectations, and to reinforce the library’s position for long-term excellence.

The Strategic Framework presented here represents the fruits of that labor. With Board adoption, this framework will be used to guide and focus library activities to the greatest benefit of our patrons as we head into the second half of a century of operational excellence.

Approach

To efficiently ply a course for the future, the Management Team first looked to the past: What needs and desires have already been identified by our patrons, staff, and community? Management conducted a comprehensive review of existing documentation related to previous strategic planning processes, including:

- Community Stakeholders Focus Group (2017)
- Visioning and Needs Assessment for Vernon Area Public Library District (June 2018)
- Community Stakeholders Focus Group (2019)
- 2017-2020 Strategic Priorities
- 2021-2022 Areas of Focus

Community Data & Contemporary Insights

To round out that learning, management drew upon updated studies to confirm or adjust understanding for today’s operating environment. Because many community partners were seeking the same types of information as the library, we were able to benefit from the results of their studies, including:

- Mount Prospect Public Library Consortium Recommendation (Nov. 2022)
- Indian Trails Public Library Adult Programming Survey (Fall 2022)
- Village of Lincolnshire Comprehensive Planning draft documents, meetings and open houses (2023)
- Village of Buffalo Grove re-branding conversations (2023)
- Vernon Area Public Library District demographic data and maps

Finally, the Management Team aimed to ensure a thorough understanding of staff observations and staff needs. This was conducted over a period of months and was the focus of the library’s Spring In-Service Day in 2023. Information gathered included:

- Staff feedback about Mission and Vision statements
- A matrix exercise to identify urgent and important issues at the library
- Articulating actionable steps at the department level
- Ongoing feedback loops, including recurring staff prompts to ensure concerns were clearly understood

Throughout this process, regular updates were provided to the Planning Committee and full Board of Trustees at regular meetings, with opportunity for Board feedback and ideas.

This document's supplemental "Findings Appendix" provides a comprehensive overview of the input utilized during the strategic planning process.

Identified Areas of Concern

Data analysis surfaced the following areas of concern, noted in multiple documents and that are still in need of resolution:

- Operational inefficiencies and risks associated with the Annex building
- Lack of small group meeting room space and study room space
- Opportunities for greater utilization of outdoor spaces
- An ongoing need for greater connection across our richly diverse community

Mission, Vision & Values

The Strategic Framework is grounded in the library's Mission, Vision, and Values statements, most recently revised in 2023:

MISSION

- The mission of the Vernon Area Public Library District is to provide users with open access to information and ideas covering a broad spectrum of human thought and experience, and to foster the understanding and development of cultures, communities, and individuals.
- The Library will work to protect intellectual freedom, promote literacy, and encourage lifelong learning.
- The Library will maintain a diverse collection of materials, and provide access to information resources and materials outside its collection.

VISION

As we seek to fulfill our mission, our efforts and resources will be directed towards making our vision a reality in the following ways:

- Our Library staff will set the standard for customer service among public libraries. Hallmarks of our staff will be teamwork, collaboration, creativity, flexibility in responding to patron needs, and pride in our achievements.
- Our Board of Library Trustees will enthusiastically advocate for Library services in the community. The Board will be fully devoted to the mission, vision, and values of the Library.
- Our collections will be forward-looking and diverse in breadth and form. Our Library's physical and virtual spaces will respond to the changing needs of our users.
- Our patrons will be proud of their Library and consider it as the first and best source to meet their informational needs.
- Our clear vision, strong values, and the way we execute our mission will make our Library one that our peers will want to emulate.

VALUES

In all our efforts to achieve our Library's vision and to fulfill its mission, we will operate according to these values:

- Respect for the individual rights and values of all people. Every patron will be given service without discrimination.
- Commitment to excellence in providing services. We recognize that excellent service comes from a committed, supported, and respected staff. Our actions will show our personal honesty and integrity, our teamwork and collaboration, and our efficiency and effectiveness in using our resources.
- Forward-looking development of collections, programs, policies, and procedures.
- All of these will allow every individual open access to the Library's resources.

Strategic Initiatives and Component Parts

The following strategic initiatives, goals, outcomes, actions and activities are the result of the data-gathering process and comprise the core of the strategic framework. They answer the questions, “What are our priorities over the next four years, and how are we going to address them?”

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

The strategic initiatives guide our actions in allocating financial resources and staff time. They do not eliminate efforts in other areas, but they receive the most focused attention of all the activities we undertake for the next four years. Vernon Area Public Library’s strategic initiatives for 2024-2027 are to:



Inspire curiosity through access to information and exploration of ideas



Foster a sense of belonging and community



Create spaces that are desirable and sustainable

The following sections detail each of these Strategic Initiatives, along with the goals, outcomes, actions, and activities that support each.

Goals and Outcomes reflect the impact of our initiatives to our patrons and to our community.

Actions are broad statements of how we can work to achieve a goal and outcome of the strategic initiative. Actions are commitment statements to the community. There are a variety of activities we can undertake to achieve each action.

Activities are meant to illustrate possible tasks the library will complete in order to meet the goals of the plan. As the community and our world shifts, and as more information is discovered, changes are possible. Activities support the action commitment and meet the identified goal and outcome.

Some goals and actions intersect with one another; therefore there may be recurring themes in multiple sections. This intersectionality is a good thing and increases the likelihood of success on the goals.

Lenses: Throughout all activities, the library will focus our efforts using these three lenses:

1. Staff safety and wellness
2. Equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging
3. Environmental sustainability

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE #1

Inspire Curiosity through Access to Information and Exploration of Ideas



Curiosity is the first step in the journey toward making the world a better place. All good things begin with a moment of wonder.

Curiosity leads to empathy. When we are curious about others and consider the perspectives of people outside our usual social circle, we become better able to understand those with lives, experiences, and worldviews different from our own.

Curiosity and imagination are required for innovation. Every new idea springs from the question “What if ... ?”

To create a better future, whether for a person’s own life or the world at large, one needs to be able to imagine that future can exist. People do not pursue ideas that they cannot imagine. Libraries help add to the menu of possibilities both by introducing people to new ideas and providing resources to continue to invent new possibilities. Fiction helps give form to other possibilities. Nonfiction testifies to what has already been and provides tools to turn ideas into reality. The circulation of non-traditional materials cultivates curiosity in a host of ways as broad as the materials offered at the library. The expertise offered by library staff regarding all of our collections encourages the community to explore fully, so that patrons are both aware of the variety of services and materials available at the library.



Inspire Curiosity through Access to Information and Exploration of Ideas

Goal: Patrons efficiently obtain the resources they desire and are aware of the the variety of services, expertise and materials available at the library

Outcome: Increase Patron satisfaction with services, materials and programs

Action A. Explore opportunities to expand resource availability through consortial sharing

Activities:

1. Evaluate joining a resource-sharing consortium or group for our physical materials and make a formal recommendation to the Board that includes an implementation timeline and budget.
2. Execute the 9-month undertaking to migrate the ILS and system if directed by the Board.
3. Evaluate joining electronic resource-sharing consortia and budget accordingly.

B. Expand experiences for patrons through content creation and creative offerings

1. Work with patrons of all ages to understand needs and desires for content creation and creative offerings, documenting trends, observations, and assessing survey results to create a Content Creation Plan/makerspace plan in the library.
2. Work with architects to assess space needs for a dedicated maker space.
3. Work with staff to develop offerings that reflect the community's interests in imagination and creation at all age levels.

C: Anticipate and adjust for community desire for format shifts to electronic, streaming services and a growing "Library of Things" collection

1. Refocus staff attention to data analysis to anticipate and to respond to patron behavior.
2. Adjust collection budget to reflect behavioral shifts.
3. Plan for space changes with architects as a result of shifting trends in patron borrowing behavior and shifts in community interest.

D: Highlight services and resources through new marketing strategies

1. Create a Marketing Plan that supports the Strategic Framework.
2. Create materials that focus on library services and library value in the community, a "library-lifestyle", in addition to our programming materials.
3. Initiate a rebranding to refresh the library's identity and create an opportunity for non-users to notice and engage.
4. Increase staff merchandising knowledge and efforts to pique patron interest in our collection.
5. Implement wayfinding strategies with architects; utilize signage in spaces where wayfinding is not feasible.

E: Provide staff expertise that is current and responsive to the community.

1. Assess community needs and desires through surveys and other data-gathering metrics and provide specific training to staff as it is identified.
2. Encourage professional development that could help the library run more efficiently and productively for the good of the district.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE #2

Foster a Sense of Belonging and Community



Our library is a hub in our community, welcoming all and providing resources and services that meet the varying needs of our broad, diverse community. As stated in the ALA Library Bill of Rights, “library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves.”

Every person in our community should see themselves reflected in the resources, programs, and displays the library offers. The library is the community’s space for a rich exchange of ideas and experiences, and we learn from each other as well as from our collection.

At the entry to our library, signage says “All are welcome here.” We also believe that everyone in our District should feel a sense of belonging at the Vernon Area Public Library. This space is your space! We achieve this sense of belonging by intentionally building relationships with each other and with all who come to the library.



Foster a Sense of Belonging and Community

Goal: Patrons have a positive and meaningful experience at VAPLD

Outcome: Patrons see the library as a welcoming space that is relevant and valuable in the community. Community members feel they belong at VAPLD.

Action A. Refresh staffs' patron experience training and introduce regular EDIB training, focusing on relationship building in services and programming

Activities:

1. Customer service training is provided and expectations are clear to all staff for exceptional and consistent patron and staff experiences.
2. Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging training is provided and expectations are clear to all staff for exceptional and consistent patron and staff experiences.
3. Relationship building training is provided and staff use these skills to build community both in the library and throughout the District.

B. Expand services and programming that respond to interests and needs of our diverse community, that explore community cultures and that facilitate community conversations on issues that impact the community

1. Assess community needs and desires through surveys and other data-gathering metrics.
2. Respond with expanded services with specific training to staff, or hiring for different skills, knowledge, and ability as is identified.
3. Foster a sense of belonging and community by creating a safe space for district dialogue to occur on issues that hold meaning for and have impact on those living in the area.

C. Review and adapt all policies and procedures with an inclusive lens to ensure all patrons experience the library positively and with a sense of belonging

1. Create an ongoing three-year schedule for policy review, bringing policy updates to the Board of Trustees for review and adoption, focused with an equity lens, as well as additional updates as needed.
2. Create an ongoing five-year schedule for procedure review, updating procedures with an equity lens, and including all updates as needed. Share and educate all-staff on rationale for changes.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE #3

Create Spaces That Are Desirable and Sustainable



Vernon Area Public Library District spaces and buildings have evolved to serve the community over its first 50 years. As we look to the next 50 years of serving our community, now is the time to reimagine space on our campus.

Responding to community input, the library will work to create desirable spaces, including designated spaces for meetings, study, collaboration, content creation and play.

The library will create spaces that are also sustainable. As a public institution, we are charged with operating in the best long-term interest of the people we serve. Because of this, a building expansion's impact on the environment requires careful consideration. Developments in engineering and environmental sustainability, combined with Federal and State grants, provide Vernon Area Public Library with the opportunity to build in order to meet a net-zero carbon footprint. An environmentally sustainable infrastructure is an investment, and also is the most cost-effective solution in the long term, which demonstrates responsible use of public resources.



Create spaces that are desirable and sustainable

Goal: Patrons space needs will be met when they come to VAPLD and the library's built in modularity will provide the community with flexibility for future space needs

Outcome: Patrons look to the library to accommodate their space needs for work, school, recreation and family time, knowing that environmental values are embedded in the space

Action A. Work with an architectural firm and ancillary expertise to create a campus wide plan for the Annex, existing space in the Main building and a building expansion plan

Activities:

1. Hire and utilize an architectural firm to help the library define a comprehensive plan for the library campus with input from the community.
2. Hire and utilize a financial expert to advise on the District's options for financing the campus plan.
3. Budget, plan and prepare for change, communicating to the community at large as well as staff and patrons.
4. Hire a team of construction professionals to ensure quality construction and oversight.
5. Incorporate high environmental standards to meet future community needs and in response to ethical obligations.

B. Focus attention and resources towards environmental sustainability

1. Create a Sustainability Plan for Board Approval that maps the library's business strategies to meet the needs of the organization and the community while protecting natural resources.
2. Work with architects to develop a building plan that adheres to sustainable practices.
3. Commit to certification and standards of environmental sustainability that place the library campus nearer to net-zero by 2027 and at net-zero by 2035.
4. Join, participate and commit to initiatives that support library efforts to respond ethically to climate change.
5. Offer the library's efforts towards environmental sustainability as a showcase for the community, and a place for sustainability resources, education and learning through programming, collections and highlighting our space.
6. Share our leadership and commitment on sustainability to the local community and to libraries across the country.

C. Flex space to meet the needs of patrons

1. Construct spaces with modularity at top-of-mind, knowing that what is useful and desirable in 2024 may not be in 2034.
2. Purchase furniture that is attractive, fully functional, lightweight and easily moveable so that patrons may create space in the library that suits their needs.
3. Experiment with space uses for programming, services and collections to best meet the needs of our community.

D. Increase capacity for patrons to enjoy in the library's campus

1. Continue the expansion of interactive programming, passive programming and features in the Library Learning Garden.
2. Explore architectural concepts to transform the Annex area of campus for community utilization.

Additional Operational Strategies

While the three strategies outlined above focus on an immediate positive end result for our patrons, there is additional effort on the back-end of the library's efforts to provide the community with exceptional service.

These efforts include:

- Exploring ways to create more opportunities for staff growth and promotion
- Structuring business and HR operations and processes to meet current needs
- Promoting a culture of safety and wellness in our diverse community
- Committing to individuals' right to privacy in an age of artificial intelligence

Evaluation

Elements of this Strategic Framework are already underway, including the recent hiring of RATIO Architectural Firm. Implementation of certain initiatives will be influenced by the timing of any building project work, which has been highlighted as a top priority for the Board of Trustees.

Evaluation of the plan will be ongoing. Monthly Board Reports will shift in format to highlight progress towards the Strategic Plan. This includes the departmental reports, which management will now share as a collated effort highlighting the collective teams' efforts by Strategic Initiative. Explanation and meaning through statistics provided in monthly board meetings will also enhance Trustees' and Community's understanding of library methodology. Measurements for each goal will vary, and some activities will be best evaluated by collecting data through patron and community surveys. Other activities will be evaluated based on quantitative data such as circulation and usage statistics, program participation, and social media data. Some goals will be met by creating deliverables, like the creation of a Sustainability Plan, building improvements and changes to the campus. A semiannual review, or progress report, will be delivered each year at a Winter and a Summer Regular Board meeting to provide evidence of progress, to discuss any challenges to the plan, and to provide general transparency.

The library commits to a comprehensive review of this plan at its completion, via a Board Report. Inspiring curiosity through access to information, creating a sense of belonging and community, and creating space that is desirable and sustainable over the next several years will move Vernon Area Public Library forward in fulfilling the library's mission. This plan is an investment in the future of the library and demonstrates VAPLD's commitment to serving the community.