

# WORTH THE INVESTMENT: COMMUNITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH LIBRARY FRIENDS

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*In acknowledging the fundamental importance of community engagement as both a cause and effect of social capital, public libraries and Friends groups can develop and articulate a process for engaging with their constituent communities. This development is considered in the context of American and Australian public libraries.*

**W**hen sociologist Robert Putnam suggested in his 2000 book that people were “bowling alone” and becoming increasingly disconnected, he opened a discussion about apathy, declining social capital, waning social networks, and the need for renewed civic networks.

In a follow-up book three years later, Putnam concluded that the tide was turning, people were “better together”, and that one place they were coming together regularly was the public library. Life, according to Putnam, is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital. <sup>1</sup>

Community and civic engagement involves deliberate, consistent, and purposeful outreach to create an environment in which people of all ages and from all backgrounds feel they have a voice and a role in decisions and actions that affect their lives. However, civic engagement and democracy in action involve more than government decision-making. People come together in a variety of ways that are not government driven to solve problems, build stronger communities, address personal needs and plan for their collective future.

Public libraries are ideal community and civic engagement leaders and partners in democratic governance because they are trusted, stable, apolitical, and positive. They also bring substantial community assets to civic action, including connections to influential community groups.

Perhaps most important, libraries are already at the heart of the community, and civic engagement is at the heart of where the public library is going in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “People view their public library as this democratic place where opinions are heard, resources are universally available, everyone is welcome, and programs are offered about things that matter in the community.” says Hartford Public Library CEO. <sup>2</sup>

More than hosts for events, libraries can be conversation starters by identifying emerging issues, establishing accessible and trusted conversation tables, engaging appropriate people and organisations, and facilitating action.

## **Context for discussion**

Our framework for discussion in this paper is with American and Australian public libraries and Friends of Library (FOL) groups.

Friends groups in both countries have some similar features for our comparison. FOL groups have developed in many countries over recent years – United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, Germany, and South Korea to name some of the most successful in operation today. They have developed from a different base and structure; however they display many characteristics which are similar in context and purpose.

### **Facilitating action with Friends**

Friends of Library (FOL) groups play an important role in this facilitation by: establishing public discourse; identifying issues that will affect the community well-being; knowing all the community stakeholders; engaging local and state elected and appointed officials; challenging issues; and being active and visible in the community. The partnership between the Friends and the Library is further enhanced by building a proactive community/library relationship and culture.

In their paper on *Connected Communities*, James Svara and Janet Denhardt say it is hard to have civic engagement without a sense of community, and it is hard to fashion a sense of community without civic engagement.<sup>3</sup>

The ability to position the library at the heart of the community in which its role as a civic leader is widely communicated, understood, accepted, and valued, is what successful Friends Groups strive to achieve. They achieve this in partnership with library management and staff - they are not ‘bowling alone’.

Rachael Scott in ‘The Role of Public Libraries in Community Building’ cites five facets of community building: how libraries serve as a conduit to access information and to learn; how libraries encourage social inclusion and equity; how libraries foster civic engagement; how libraries create a bridge to resources and community involvement, and; how libraries promote economic vitality within the community.<sup>4</sup>

Libraries are important to people and sit at the heart of many communities. This was recognised in the polemic study on American culture by Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* in 1831 and 1835.<sup>5</sup> Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Carnegie’s philanthropy made libraries a common feature of American community life.

One definition of *community* relates to “communities of relationships” (Morse 2004).<sup>6</sup> Building that relationship can be the role of Friends of Libraries – the conduit between citizens and the library that builds a stronger and more valued and vibrant public library and community.

Public libraries have the ability and capacity to promote civic engagement. Goulding (2008) notes: “Voluntary and community activity is fundamental to the development of a democratic, socially inclusive society ... (And) third sector organisations (like the public library) enable individuals to contribute to public life and develop their communities.”<sup>7</sup> Willingham (2008) notes that libraries engage “the public in civic discourse ... and develop the capacity for their communities to solve problems.” An essential part in this process, particularly in the American context, has been the role and function of the Library Friends group. The ‘Friends’ serve as a conduit, a bridge between the library management and the community, structuring a relationship and building ‘civic engagement’ as a process and outcome.<sup>8</sup>

Nowhere is this relationship between civil society and the community stronger, than in the United States. American public libraries have for the past 100 years developed, structured and refined this relationship, where today, some outstanding examples of Friends of Library groups, the public library and the community join together to build the fabric of a nation. This was identified by Alexis de Tocqueville more than 200 years ago. It was Andrew Carnegie and philanthropy which helped develop the next 100 years, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and today is seen through the work of United for Libraries, the umbrella body for Friends of Library groups, Trustees, Foundations and Advocates throughout America.

More than 2,500 Friends of Library groups operate today in the United States. They are an established foundation to the growth and success of many leading libraries in that country. A few of the most well recognised libraries have developed strong links with civic leaders, the community and donors with the aid of FOL groups.

## **Friends and engagement in the United States**

### **Seattle Public Library**

In Seattle, the Friends see themselves as ‘community ambassadors’. Founded in 1941, it is one of the oldest and most active in the United States. The Friends have been strong advocates of bond levies for the library along with campaigning for adequate library funding. Since 1983 the Friends have researched and published city council candidates’ positions on library support. Most significantly, in recent times they were key supporters for the successful “Libraries for All” campaign which allowed for a new Central Library. In their advocacy efforts the Friends worked with many community, professional and neighbourhood groups.

In these ways, sponsoring programs, supporting adequate facilities and funding for the Library, and collaborating with civic groups, the Friends have helped Seattle maintain a world class library system. Eric Liu, president, Seattle Public Library Board of Trustees has stated, “In the end *Libraries for All* means just that: keeping faith with all the people of our city, and reminding us that we are the owners of our democracy.”

In 1998 Seattle voters said “yes” to the largest and most comprehensive library initiative in the country’s history, launching a \$290.7 million project to rebuild The Seattle Public Library.<sup>9</sup>

After opening the new building in 2004, the visitation to the library rose 211 per cent from 659,364 to 2,054,631.<sup>10</sup> And after one year of operations, the new Central Library was associated with \$16 million in net new spending in Seattle, thanks to the number of out-of-town visitors who came to see the building.<sup>11</sup>

The community's investment in *Libraries for All* continues for generations. The data in the *Libraries for All* report emphasizes the incredible contribution libraries make to improve the educational, cultural and economic health of the city.

#### Hennepin County Library (HCL)

In 2012 the Friends of HCL raised more than \$1.2 million in support of cultural and educational programs, public awareness, literacy initiatives, technology and collections. More than 5,700 members of the community helped achieve this goal. Friend's president, Lynn Schell concluded in her annual report: "Great libraries need great friends and we are thrilled to count you as one!"<sup>12</sup>

Another Friends member stated: "A community without a vibrant library system isn't a community."<sup>13</sup> In the past ten years more than \$41 million in direct programmatic and cash support has been given to HCL. In addition, Friends advocacy efforts, in partnership with the library and civic leaders, have secured hundreds of millions of dollars in increased public support for libraries.

#### San Francisco Public Library

Citizens gathered to form the first Friends of the San Francisco Library in 1949. The group has been active leaders in the context of American Friends of Library groups ever since. However, during the ensuing years, the issue of a library building has always raised itself as a priority. In 1986 the Friends inaugurated a private fund-raising campaign for a new Main Library. In 1988 a Library bond for \$109.5 million and construction of a new 376,000 square foot Main Library was passed.<sup>14</sup> Finally in 1995, the New Main Library building was completed with the Friends and Library Foundation raising \$35 million towards the project. It was a twenty-two year effort, achieved with community support from the citizens of San Francisco, assisted substantially by the lobbying, campaigning and fundraising of the Friends of San Francisco Library.

#### New York Public Library

The Beaux-Arts landmark building on Fifth Avenue and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, New York, houses one of the outstanding collections in the world, with 15 million items. It is the New York Public Library. It is also significant in that it is supported by probably, the most successful and wealthiest Friends of Library group in the country. Building, collection, status and individuals have made this a landmark institution for these reasons, but also for the financial support provided by the Friends. Six levels of Friends membership give an opportunity to a wide section of the community, from \$25 to a Sustaining Friend at \$1,499.<sup>15</sup>

The word 'engagement' is highly significant when discussing the impact the Friends have made on this institution in recent years. Links into the community, business and elites, have combined to deliver some outstanding examples in philanthropy. But also engagement, in witnessing a vital and active program of community provision into the wider community.

The Library is supported by a complex set of funding sources. The Friends offer to fund special initiatives that improve the lives of countless New Yorkers, such as grants for major new projects and special initiatives such as education-related activities. In 2011 they provided funds for essential materials and programmes like Summer Reading for 88,000 children and teenagers. These programmes at Branch level, reach the community in a very real and direct way. Adding value at the most ‘localised’ level of the community.<sup>16</sup>

### **Investing with Friends in Australia**

Community engagement with library Friends in Australia over recent years has seen some outstanding achievements and is well displayed in the FOLA publication, *NewsUpdate*, found at <http://www.fola.org.au>. Our larger institutional Friends groups, such as the National Library of Australia, State Library of New South Wales, State Library of South Australia, have a record of success over many years. Here, we see a clear ‘investment winner’ in Friends delivering to the community and the institution.

At the local community level, some notable examples are visible: Echuca (Vic), Toowoomba (Qld), Stirling (SA), Barossa (SA), Port Macquarie (NSW), and Balmain (NSW). These libraries have invested in new building projects. Why is this so important? Well, a paper by Bryson, Usherwood and Procter (2003) ‘Libraries must also be buildings’ states

*The library is at any one time a meeting places, a learning resource, and a comfortable and relaxing public space. The buildings that are well designed and managed offer an array of resources that enable people and groups to establish relationships, carry on conversations, exchange ideas, and engage the life of the mind.*<sup>17</sup>

These Friends of Library groups have been leaders in community and civic engagement and can be regarded as an accepted model to anyone in Australia.

As Willingham (2008) noted “it’s about weaving organisations, bridging divisions and developing capacity for their communities to solve problems.”<sup>18</sup>

In these particular libraries, we also witness the success in understanding about building a firm foundation – planting, growing and deepening the links between Friends, library management and the community – engaged, connected and empowered.

There are now some useful tools to assist library management and FOL groups engage in persuasive argument about the benefits of the public library. One such tool is *The library’s contribution to your community: a resource manual for libraries to document their social and economic contribution to the local community.*<sup>19</sup>

#### **Echuca (Victoria)**

The Friends of Echuca Library operate under the Campaspe Regional Library in Victoria. They have witnessed a long and protracted history to achieve a new library building.

In 1988 the Friends of the Echuca Library was formed, with the goals to: Broaden general awareness of the library in the community; to promote and publicise the library's services and facilities; to help acquire books and other materials for the library's collection through fund-raising activities.<sup>20</sup>

In 1991, significant action by the Friends put the issue of a new building on the agenda. And it was for the next twenty years that the Friends were leaders in a campaign for a new building. Over the following years, numerous options, plans and proposals were put forward and almost agreed upon.

In 2003, the Friends decided to appeal to the wider community and form a stronger group that would apply pressure on all levels of government to fund and build a new library. Finally, on 28 September 2011 the Mayor, Cr Pankhurst and Friends president, Stella Moore turned the first sod for the new \$5.1 million building. The new library opened on 24 August 2012.

Library Manager, Jenny Mustey comments on the project with the Friends "It was an incredible experience for me to feel their support and encouragement all along."<sup>21</sup>

#### Stirling (SA)

In South Australia, within the Adelaide Hills Council, Friends of the Library Stirling (FOLS), based on the Coventry Library, have achieved a similar successful outcome. Stirling Friends have a remarkable membership – 800 members. This makes them one of the strongest groups in Australia. A position they have gained from strong leadership, both of the Friends and from library management. They have developed a true partnership for success and stand as an exemplary model for Friends groups around the country.

During local government elections in South Australia in November 2010, the FOLS succeeded in ensuring the election of councillors in favour of its much needed new library and re-election of mayor, Bill Cooksley, a strong library supporter. Questions were asked of all candidates. In his response, Bill Cooksley, standing for mayor, stated:

*My role is to be the Library Service's champion, to resist budget cuts ... argue and convince others at all levels that is one of the most important functions of Council. It was this personal commitment that supported my casting vote to progress the new Coventry (Library) and to fight and win the last mayoral election on the question of the new library.*<sup>22</sup>

In a recent Coventry Library survey, 89 per cent of respondents identified the Library as a valuable asset to the community. The Adelaide Hills Council encourages Community Forums and Engagement on its web site and states "Well planned community engagement activities and processes enhance a vibrant local democracy and support the development of ongoing relationships with our community."<sup>23</sup>

Through these processes, a partnership is established which has aided considerably the development of the library. And, respect for a process that engages and listens to the community and to Friends.

Balmain (NSW)

In the inner Sydney suburb of Balmain-Rozelle, the Friends of Balmain Library (FOBL) have established a successful community partnership with the local Community Bank. This has enabled a focus on youth work with projects between local schools, library and the Friends.

FOBL have organised a Library School Writing and Poetry Competition for primary and secondary school students of the area. The project has gained support from local business, library management and Council, a partnership that extends itself into the wider community.

Success for FOBL is in part, due to a very dynamic committee, which, similar to Stirling, has seen resourceful, dedicated and skilled leadership of the Friends group over many years. Its achievements in library re-development, funding, program and collection development, speaks volumes for the hard work, but importantly, strategic planning which sees building partnerships with the community as vital. The return on 'investment' for the library rebounds.

Hildreth (2010) refers to "civic engagement as about individuals learning about networking with each other through the neutral ground of the library."<sup>24</sup> Balmain is this 'neutral ground' which enables the partnership with the community and the investment to be multiplied.

## **Conclusion**

In 2005, Dr Alan Bundy, in his paper 'Twelve Million Australian Public Library Friends: Worth An Investment' stated "Australia's public libraries produce by far the best return on investment of any agency in Australia."<sup>25</sup> This is supported by the work of McEntyre (2010)<sup>26</sup> and Victorian government research such as, *Dollars, Sense and Public Libraries: The landmark study of the social-economic value of Victorian public libraries*<sup>27</sup> and *Victorian Public Libraries 2030 Strategic Framework, Summary report*.<sup>28</sup>

In the United States, numerous organisations, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Pew Charitable Trusts, have concluded similar findings as to the societal benefits of institutions in the community, such as public libraries.

There is much supporting evidence, both in Australia and the United States to confirm the role Friends of Library groups play in community and civic engagement.

The evidence is accumulating that FOL groups can achieve outcomes for their communities beyond their actual numbers, because they are often recognised as the voice of the community about the library.<sup>29</sup>

If we use Scott's (2011) analysis, we can observe her five facets of 'community building' at work in the libraries we have studied. In the United States: Seattle, Hennepin, San Francisco and New York, and in Australia: Echuca, Stirling and Balmain. While these libraries may have afforded some of the facets of community building without a Friends group, what our research indicates is that, with a FOL group, acting as a conduit between citizen and library management, a more valued, vibrant public library and community can be achieved.

And, in the United States in particular, this nexus linking Community-Friends-Library, is supported by peak institutional bodies giving assistance to this development. FOLA in Australia attempts to perform this role, despite limited resources.

As Alexis de Tocqueville observed:

*They get together in large numbers, they converse, they listen to one another, and they are mutually stimulated to all sorts of undertaking. They afterwards transfer to civil life the notions they have thus acquired and make them subservient to a thousand purposes.*<sup>30</sup>

### **Learning outcomes**

- A partnership between Community-Friends-Library can deliver positive outcomes for the library
- Key to success is building both leadership and trust between stakeholders
- The return on 'investment' delivers significant outcomes for both the library and the community

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