

Public Libraries Briefcase

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Trends in Librarianship and City Government Combine to Create New Business Research Initiative

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In High Point, North Carolina, new trends in librarianship and within city government have combined to create a new business research initiative. First, in 2016, the City of High Point announced new plans to transform and revitalize the downtown area. City Council created three planning goals to guide this development:

1. Increase the population of active, engaged, entrepreneurial and working millennials living in High Point by 25%
2. 100% proactive enforcement of codes
3. Create a downtown catalyst project that produces:
 - 500 private sector jobs
 - 15 to 20 new restaurants and shops
 - 250 additional residential housing units
 - A centralized gathering place[1]

At the same time, the library was seeking ways to increase its services to patrons. We had already been offering business and nonprofit research assistance for many years and were well positioned to help with goals one and three. Inspired by these goals and the “embedded librarianship” mindset, the library created a dedicated business center space and expanded the business research team.

Indeed, embedded librarianship and partnerships have led to much success for the business center, citizens, and city government. It is important to meet with as many different business organizations as possible in order to publicize what libraries can do for the community. My first steps were to meet with local SCORE branches, City departments, community college business centers, membership organizations, and more. Our goal was to be a spider in the center of a web by directing business patrons to organizations, departments, and individuals that will best meet their needs. Thus, when the City announced that they would be closing three blocks of Main Street for several months for a major infrastructure upgrade, we were well positioned to support the businesses affected.

The Main Street Project consisted of replacing underground utility pipes that were over one hundred years old while simultaneously burying above-ground wires. Originally, the City planned to close one lane of Main Street at a time while they did this project, but a last-minute change required closing the entire street while the work was being completed. Understandably, the business owners on the

street were not pleased by this development. The library's business center, also situated on the closed portion of Main Street, was in a prime position to help.

Over the course of the following months, our partnerships with the City's Public Information Office, Planning Department, and the Chamber of Commerce were vital. I was present at the initial informational meetings held at the library and managed to connect with most of the businesses before the road closure began. I explained that the library could help them, and even though they were frustrated with the City, it helped that City departments like ours were willing to help.

With representatives from the Public Information Office and the Chamber of Commerce, we held biweekly meetings to keep business owners informed of what was happening. I called, emailed, or met with almost every business owner several times. My coworkers and I provided business assistance and I listened to their complaints about how the project was progressing. I relayed these complaints to the City, and when possible, we were able to affect change. For example, the road closure meant other parallel roads were too clogged for the current traffic light timers, so the City's transportation department adjusted the lights' timers. Additionally, sign regulations were relaxed for the duration of the project so that businesses could still attract attention to themselves.

The benefits for the library were twofold. First, we created a lot of goodwill towards ourselves and towards the city in general. By being proactive and reaching out to these businesses, we demonstrated to the owners that they were important and valued. Because of the library's location next to these businesses, we increased a feeling of community as well, since we were experiencing the same inconvenience. Second, the Main Street Project provided us with great publicity. We showed that the library is more than just a 'warehouse for books.' Many of the businesses did not know that we could help them with business related research, but our actions proved otherwise. We directly helped some of these places stay in business, such as when we fixed a Facebook problem for one restaurant owner who was having trouble accessing her page. By reestablishing her Facebook page, she regained the ability to communicate with customers and retain their business. We also helped a business owner locate his ideal clients within the city so that he could send targeted mailings and counter the decline in drive-by publicity caused by the construction. For many businesses, we conveyed their thoughts and concerns about the project to the correct city departments. For example, closing the street increased traffic on nearby side streets and interfered with the stoplight timers, causing traffic backups. We conveyed their concerns to the transportation department, who adjusted the timers to create better traffic flow. Less congestion on the streets made it easier for customers to access the businesses.

As a business outreach librarian, it is important to look for situations in your community where you can step in and provide services. Our involvement in this project was a great way to publicize the library's resources. Our business customers and partners have shared our contact information and provided good recommendations to their contacts who may need research help. Further, the success with this project has led to more development as the City builds a baseball stadium complex downtown. City officials, impressed with how we helped with the Main Street Project, now come to us regularly for assistance. With a little creativity, any library can capitalize on outside developments, help patrons, and show their worth to the community.

[1] <https://www.highpointnc.gov/1603/High-Point-Strategic-Plan-2017>