🔍 CASE STUDY

Owls Head Village Library

Location
Owls Head, Maine

Staff Size
1 FTE

Service Area
1600

With funding from the American Library Association's *Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries* initiative, Owls Head Village Library in Maine planned a community conversation on the controversial interlocal agreement between the village and the local airport.

APPROACHING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Diane Nelson is the Vice President and Secretary at the Owls Head Village Library Association in Owls Head, Maine. The library serves a population of around 1,600 and is run completely on a volunteer basis, with minimal financial support from local government. Nelson became involved with the library in 2020, when the previous board resigned and new volunteers were needed for the library to continue operation.

Owls Head Village Public Library operates on a shoestring budget, which the town select board reduced from $2,500 to only $1,000 for 2020–2021. It is typically open for very limited hours, during which community members can borrow and return books. Before Nelson joined the board and applied for LTC funding, the library had no computer and had never hosted a community event. This grant was the first she has ever applied for. Ultimately, she felt that participating in LTC helped change people's perspective of the library, saying, *"the grant really made the community aware that there is a library and we can*

function to help the community, [its] not just a place to come in and get a book."

The community conversation Nelson hosted through the LTC grant focused on a highly controversial local topic: the interlocal agreement between Owls Head and the Knox County Regional Airport. The town had attempted to hold a meeting in November 2020 to vote on the proposed changes to the agreement, which would significantly diffuse the involvement and input of Owls Head residents into any expansion plans developed for the airport. However, due to COVID restrictions not everyone who wanted to attend the meeting could be accommodated

in the space, and the vote was postponed. There was misinformation being spread and a lack of knowledge on how decisions are made and who makes them relative to the airport. In response to the situation, Nelson and the library board chose to use the LTC grant to host a webinar in which stakeholders (from the town, the county, the airport, and advisory committees) responded to community members' questions about the proposed agreement. The vote was deliberately held off until after the library's webinar, to which people responded by saying, *"Thank you so much. Now we have the information."*

The library used the grant funding to purchase a computer

and Zoom license for the library to hold the event, to advertise via flyers, the local newspaper, and Facebook, and to hire a professional moderator. Nelson explained that "We felt if it had been any other topic, we wouldn't need a moderator," but that the controversy of the topic and the importance of presenting the library as objective made it important to bring in a third party. Although she had completed the ALA e-course on facilitating conversations, she felt it did not provide sufficient guidance on how to deal with controversial topics that might affect the library's reputation. However, after hosting the webinar, Nelson felt empowered to moderate potential future conversations herself. While she noted that

"The grant really made the community aware that there is a library and we can function to help the community; it's not just a place to come in and get a book."

Diane Nelson, Vice President and Secretary, Owls Head Village (Maine) Library Association

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leading a conversation on such a controversial topic had been stressful, she said that having the experience behind her led to feeling more confident with community engagement work moving forward. *"I'd feel more comfortable now. Because I've done it and nothing terrible happened."*

The event was held in March, using a computer and Zoom license Nelson had been able to purchase with grant funding. Attendance was very high at around 140 people, a significant portion of the town's residents, especially given that the town's population of roughly 1800 includes people who own summer homes in Owls Head but do not live there year-round. Nelson reported that everyone who asked a question was able to have it answered, and that feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with people on both sides of the issue grateful to the library for providing information without feeling like the library was taking sides. Said Nelson, *"Not one person gave any indication that they thought the library was behind one party or the other. So that was great."* The local newspaper also covered the event in detail.

Nelson identified confidence and ability to speak with authority in front of a group as key skills for leading community engagement efforts, and the success of the webinar built the library board's confidence in their ability to engage in future outreach. She explained that hosting the event helped establish the library as being in service to the community and has been active in reinforcing this role. So far, the library has hosted three outdoor talks, with around 50 people attending each, and Nelson has established a web presence for the library. Owls Head Village Library has not hosted more community conversations to date, but Nelson is open to applying for further grants and in pursuing further professional development for the library board, as none of the members had prior library experience. Through participation in LTC, she says, she gained *"a better idea of what we want to do and what we're capable of doing."* ■

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