With funding from the American Library Association’s Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries initiative, Waimea Public Library in Hawaii invited community members to discuss the “Waimea 400”, a 417-acre parcel of land in the library’s service area whose development plan will be based on community input.

Located on the island of Kauai, Waimea Public Library is the westernmost public library in the U.S. and the second-smallest branch in the Hawaii State Public Library system. Two public service staff members—Branch Manager Michelle Young and Library Assistant Casey Agena—serve a population of around 5,500 in the towns of Waimea and Kekaha. Young describes the area as a “book desert”; the library and a small used bookstore are the only places to go for reading material, and the local schools have no librarians on staff.

Due to these challenges, Young sees community outreach as an essential part of her work. In ALA’s Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Focus on Small and Rural Libraries grant, she saw an opportunity to continue the library’s engagement work and to try new strategies for gathering input.
supporting libraries that serve small and rural communities. She described the sense of solidarity that being part of the LTC cohort has provided, saying, “I feel like we’re in the same boat. … communicating with kindred spirit or like-minded librarians who understand the context and know that there’s value in small crowds is reassuring.”

“I didn’t want to just apply for the grant [and] try to force a topic, I wanted it to be organic,” Young explains. Soon after learning about the grant, a relevant topic did emerge organically, prompting her to apply. The County of Kauai had purchased a 417-acre parcel of land in the library’s service area and was gathering feedback from the community to guide development plans, a project they called “Waimea 400.” Young had initially reached out to the project leaders to ask if the library could host one of the comment boxes being placed around town, but saw the opportunity to bring community members together to discuss their thoughts and come to a consensus on how they wanted the land to be used. As it turned out, the county had planned to hold outreach sessions but had been unable to arrange in-person events due to pandemic restrictions, and eagerly took the library up on the offer. The library planned two discussions, which they called “Talk Stories,” where participants could learn about the potential development plans and identify what they wanted to prioritize. There were a wide range of possibilities—broad categories such as agriculture, recreation, and housing could be broken down into multiple options (e.g. affordable housing, single- versus multi-family homes, housing designated for agricultural workers). There was also the option to restore part of the area to the wetlands it had been long ago, rather than building on it.

Young prepared for the conversations through the LTC Basic Facilitation Skills e-Course, a free asynchronous six-module course, which she felt was effective and well structured. She especially appreciated the testimonials from library staff who had already participated in the

“Quickly I think it’s important to have these kinds of conversations that matter. And if the risk is that there’s going to be discomfort or challenges, I want to be courageous about it and still do it.”

Quotes have been edited slightly for grammatical clarity.
grant ("we’re able to learn from their experiences, both mistakes and successes") and the tips on setting expectations to avoid conflict.

While she did not expect Waimea 400 to be a contentious topic, she learned a few days before the first Talk Story that some of the people who had registered were deeply distrusting of the County after previous community planning processes. Young describes herself as "conflict-averse" and was nervous about disagreements that might arise, but felt the conversation was worth having even if conflict arose: "I think it’s important to have these kinds of conversations that matter. And if the risk is that there’s going to be discomfort or challenges, I want to be courageous about it and still do it."

Young contacted ALA for additional resources on handling potential conflict and moved forward with the events. There was some tension during the first Talk Story, in part due to a misunderstanding that the County Planning Department was leading the events, rather than the library providing a forum for community members to communicate with the County and each other. However, attendees were grateful for the opportunity to express their concerns in person and get a response from the County representatives who were present.

**THE LIBRARY IS NOT JUST A PLACE FOR BOOKS**

Young believes that participating in LTC has changed her community’s perception of the library. One of her goals for the grant was to shift people’s thinking of the library as a "book warehouse" into one where hosting and facilitating important conversations seems like a natural fit. Her dream is that one day, patrons will suggest ideas for programs and be willing to partner to make them happen. In addition to providing books and other resources, Young says, "we want to connect people with each other too. And let them know that we value people’s input, and we care about what they think and are eager to listen."

Young believes this work extends to the way the library is seen by community partners as well, who enjoy an evolving relationship with the library. She felt the county appreciated the position of the library as a community-based institution, rather than the county sponsoring the discussions.

Young reflected on her experience of partnering: "It’s the first time I experienced what a real solid partnership can look like and feel like. It felt really good to be equally invested and respectful partners, contributing and learning from each other and just expanding the network, strengthening community bonds."

The second Talk Story went very smoothly. The County Planning Department had significantly revised the conceptual plan options presented at the first event, and community members reacted positively to the changes made.
Young had also learned more about facilitation, taking a tip from Priya Parker’s “The Art of Gathering” to be intentional about hosting even before the event begins. She did this by asking registered participants to think of one thing they loved about living in West Kauai, and share it as an icebreaker at the beginning of the event. The conversation developed in a constructive and hopeful tone rather than one of mistrust, and resulted in enough consensus that the County is able to move forward with feasibility and environmental impact studies to inform final decisions.

The Talk Stories were held outdoors for safety—the library was able to purchase canopy tents and audio equipment with grant funding to make this possible. The library will continue to use this equipment to host outdoor events such as movie nights, perhaps even after COVID is no longer an issue, Young says. The library was also able to use grant funding to provide catered meals from a local restaurant, which had lost income when tourism decreased during the pandemic, for both events. “I thought it was really important to provide dinner plates for all participants to get people to warm up and feel welcome,” Young explains. Event promotion was done through the library’s monthly newsletter and through the local newspaper.

**PREPARED FOR FUTURE CONVERSATIONS AND POTENTIAL CONFLICT**

Young plans to host further community discussions at the library and has already applied for and received another LTC grant for a conversation series around early learning and homeschooling. Homeschool families are heavy users of the library, and Young hopes to help these families connect with each other and to learn how the library can best support them. Young believes that homeschooling is a timely and relevant topic in her community, since the local news reported that enrollment in Hawaii public schools declined for the second year in a row, presumably due to the pandemic. She is relieved to be taking on a less controversial issue—although she feels more equipped to handle conflict than before the grant, she points out the difficulty of “discerning whether there’s the opportunity for better understanding and community building, versus people airing grievances and grandstanding.” However, she believes (and has seen!) that if people have not closed themselves off to other perspectives, bringing them together for community discussion can lead to positive change.

Young felt relieved to hear about other libraries—with the support of ALA—re-thinking what makes community engagement worthwhile. In particular, not measuring the success of events in terms of how many people attend.

“It’s been such a relief and encouragement to see or hear about other libraries having a hard time reaching out to people, or hoping for maybe a little bigger crowd than they get but then also valuing the people that do show up, even if it’s just a handful. Staff at small libraries celebrate the people that show up and appreciate the input, the feedback they get from the more intimate conversations. And having the ALA staff affirming that even if you have one or two people, the program can still be considered a success because you’re engaging your community is reassuring! And these small successes can lead to more opportunities down the road. And so having that attitude has been so encouraging.”

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Written by Knology. Knology is a nonprofit research organization that produces practical social science for a better world. The organization pursues this goal to help professionals in a variety of sectors build inclusive, informed, and cooperative societies that can thrive together with the natural systems on which we all depend. As a transdisciplinary collective of over 30 social scientists, writers, and educators, the organization’s work process is built on equity, transparency, and deliberation.