

Stair District Library (Morenci, MI)

Library type: Public library (community size: <4,999)

Topic: Loss of the local newspaper

Funds used for: Hotspots, Zoom, staff time, promotion

What the reviewers liked about this proposal: Applicant provides clear description of conversation topic and planning, including how LTC training will be used and sample agendas

Community and Library Information

Describe your library and the community it serves, including demographics, dynamics and key issues or challenges it faces. What should reviewers know about your library and community in order to understand your proposed community engagement project?

Stair District Library is a small, rural library in southeast Michigan on the border of Ohio. We serve the City of Morenci (pop. 2,220) and the farming community surrounding it. Our service area consists of 4,046 residents. Since 2015 we have been our own governmental entity with a board of trustees appointed by the City of Morenci and Morenci Area Schools (a Title I public school district; nearly 65% of Morenci students receive free or reduced lunch). Demographics: White 97% Black .7% American Indian .3% Asian .2% Two or more/Other 1.8% The library is considered by many to be a jewel of the community. Programming is robust for a library our size. We strive to offer something for everyone from Baby/Toddler Time to Talk with TED @ Two discussions. We seek out opportunities to bring the world to our tiny town: highlights include the Smithsonian Institution Barn Again! An American Icon exhibit with a myriad of related programs, Picturing America grant program for Picturing New York in a tiny Midwest Town, first Living Library (now Human Library) east of the Mississippi River, Michigan Notable Book authors, International Games Week, ALSC Curiosity Creates grant for our “Sculptamania!” project, Muslim Journeys, Prime Time Family Reading Time, Pushing the Limits, Maker Camp, NASA @ My Library and many performers, storytellers, authors, crafts and activities unconnected to any grant program. [see SAMPLE PROGRAM in Additional Materials] We’re a community that voted for Obama...and then for Trump. A community with a strong volunteerism ethic that swings from the dozens of teens who help run our Summer Reading Program for 200 youths to the scores of residents who turned out 10 years ago to search for the missing Skelton brothers whose father is in prison on a kidnapping charge. We’re a community that pulls together to help those in need through food drives and Christmas present giveaways and fund raisers for those with medical bills. But, we’re also a community where the Confederate flag flies outside the front door of several homes. We’re a community that still holds Wednesday nights sacred as “church night” and a community that embraces marijuana facilities (four stores and five growing operations). And, all that we are has been captured by our local newspaper, formerly the Morenci Observer, now the State Line Observer—for 90 years by three generations of the Green family. David Green, the current owner/publisher/editor/janitor, is retiring at the end of this month, and with no buyer in sight, the newspaper, a 150-year institution in the community, will cease production.

Conversation Topic or Issue*

Describe the topic or issue that your community engagement project will focus on. Why is it important for your library or community to discuss this particular issue/topic? How did you arrive at this

particular topic/subject (e.g. did you talk with library patrons, reach out to other area organizations? Dig into data about your community)? How will your library and/or community benefit from having this/these discussion(s)?

Project Title: Extra! Extra! Read All About It!...But Where? We will focus on the loss of the newspaper and its impact on the community. It is important to have a conversation with the community to discuss new and innovative ways for information to be recorded and disseminated. How will public notices be shared with the public? How will community members be notified of obituaries? How will democracy be maintained without reliable information? The loss of the newspaper will be a profound loss to the community, and especially to the library. Our activities and events are promoted and showcased in the paper. In a recent survey of the community conducted as part of the library board's strategic planning process, nearly 60% of respondents named the Observer as their source of finding out about the library's programs and services. Facebook accounted for only about 30% and our website only 22%. [See SURVEY RESULT in Additional Materials] But for the community at large, the loss will reverberate among those who count on the Observer to keep them connected with what's happening—local information offered nowhere else—trusted factual information in well-edited news stories, several interesting features with excellent photos in every issue, humorous columns, well-reasoned editorials, letters to the editor, obituaries, lunch menus, births, school news, sports stories and photos, etc. It's more than what your average community newspaper offers—as evidenced by the accolade of being named Newspaper of the Year in its class 21 times by the Michigan Press Association. This loss is what will be explored in our community conversations. In our rural community there are still many people who are not connected to the internet or who have spotty coverage. They don't look to Facebook for their local news and the county newspaper doesn't offer the in-depth level of coverage the Observer has provided. They will be adrift. How will we address this loss for the unconnected? At its strategic planning session, the library board addressed this topic at length. One member suggested that maybe the library could fill the hole created by the Observer ceasing publication. As the wife of the Observer owner, I resisted this suggestion. I know firsthand the work involved in reporting the news accurately and in an unbiased fashion. As library director, I resisted when my outreach assistant suggested the newspaper closure as the topic for this grant. I don't want to appear biased and I don't want to guide discussion toward a topic that some might find inevitable. It's happening everywhere, obviously; many municipalities are losing their newspapers. But as I considered my staff member's suggestion, and as I helped work on a special section being created (in secret to surprise the Observer owner, David Green) by a former reporter [See SPECIAL OBSERVER SECTION in Additional Materials], I realized that this isn't just the loss of a well-loved weekly newspaper, this is the loss of one of the bastions of democracy. This is the loss of a mechanism that holds elected officials accountable, the loss of a forum that allows citizens to speak their mind, the loss of a tangible, reputable vehicle that connects citizens together. And, I became energized to take on this topic and apply for this grant...especially since, if we were to be awarded the grant in this round, it would allow us to announce this project in the very last issue of the Observer.

Our community will benefit from these conversations because participants will be aware of alternative means of sharing information, including library programming, which will in turn, help the library thrive.

Conversation Goals*

Describe the library's goal or purpose of your project plan. What are you aiming to accomplish? (e.g. enhance library resources based on community input; explore a topic and/or build understanding of

others' experiences; generate ideas, explore options, and make a decision; discuss an issue and collaboratively determine next steps, etc.)

First, this project would allow the community to mourn together. It would allow participants to voice what they miss most about the loss of the Observer and connect with each other over shared memories of stories. But more importantly, perhaps, we can glean from that sharing and discussion some ideas of what needs to be replaced, what is most important to community members. For example, is it city council news? How can we replicate what the Observer offered us in that capacity? We want to be a community partner in discovering solutions for innovative news sources. In particular, we also want to promote literacy activities that take place at the library and make sure the community is aware of such programming. It's a tall order to fill. As Jeff Johnston, former Observer reporter, posed (in a guest column he coincidentally wrote for the Observer's 12.2.2020 issue in which he highlighted bits of information the Observer provided each week of this past year): "Can something emerge to take the Observer's place in binding the community together and telling its stories? To measure up, it will need to be smart, funny, accurate, honest, trustworthy, thorough, skilled, caring, clever, tough, complete, connected, careful, fearless." [See JOHNSTON COLUMN in Additional Materials] We can't possibly recreate the award-winning Observer week after week in the manner Jeff proposes, but I hope, as a community, we can come up with ways to fill the void. And, if we can't be funny and clever, may we at least find a way to be accurate, honest, and trustworthy. In addition, I see this project as a stepping stone for the library to lead even weightier discussions in the future. Can we talk about that Confederate flag flying on Congress Street? Furthermore, if this project comes up with workable solutions, maybe it could be a model for other communities to follow.

Conversation Planning*

How do you envision your conversation taking place? (e.g. virtual book club discussion, socially-distanced conversation outdoors at the library using the National Issues Forum Model, etc.) Do you feel you are able to describe how you envision your conversation(s) will take place? Or are you new to this and planning to learn these skills through the online course? What kind of marketing/outreach do you plan to do for the conversation? How are you planning to share the content/outcomes of the conversation? (e.g. writing an article for the local newspaper, creating a video about what was discussed for the library's social media, etc.)

Due to COVID issues, we anticipate scheduling virtual conversations on Zoom, but would be ready to pivot to in-person if deemed safe. We have been using Zoom throughout the pandemic for book discussions, author presentations, storytimes, and other library events. We plan to have all staff take the online course and be present for all the discussions to assist as timekeepers, recorders, and to act as facilitator if needed. One staff member is well-versed in leading effective discussions in small groups; we are looking forward to expanding on this knowledge and want all staff to have some experience with the process. We plan to stage at least three Community Conversations on Zoom and one conversation with high school students in partnership with Morenci High School English teacher Heather Walker. • General community conversation to explore these topics: What has the paper meant to you? What will you miss? What components of the Observer must be replaced? It may take more than one meeting to accommodate everyone who wants to attend and to allow everyone an opportunity to speak. Possibly, we would use breakout rooms on Zoom instead of additional meetings. • An action meeting: A session in which we talk about the nitty gritty of what we can actually do to replace what the newspaper does in the community, and who will do it. • A book discussion (drawing on resources from the "Let's Talk About

It” and One Book One Community models) of “When Truth Mattered” by Robert Giles to explore the greater issues surrounding the importance of journalism...of truth and accuracy, of checking sources, of getting it right...in maintaining a thriving democracy. If possible, we would have Mr. Giles attend the Zoom meeting to talk about the importance of trust and truth, of being fair and honest, and other aspects important in conveying any information. • Through our partnership with our school district, we will work with high school English teacher Heather Walker to involve students in this process through education and discussion of media literacy, but also to discuss how they are impacted by the closure (school news is a vital component of Observer coverage and fills many students’ scrapbooks). We will engage Jeff Johnston as a consultant and resource person in exploring all the issues related to coping with the loss of a community newspaper. Jeff is now the managing editor of CMU News at Central Michigan University. We will publicize through our website, social media, the county newspaper, local radio station, in-house promotional materials to be developed on canva.com, community partners including sending flyers home with students through the school, word-of-mouth, phone calls, an outdoor banner, and inserts with water bills. We plan to share the content and outcomes in whatever way our participants deem the most helpful and relevant for them, but would likely include these components: • Stream the conversations on Facebook Live from Zoom if all attending are amenable to that. • If in-person, and acceptable to all present, we would record the meeting, edit and upload to the library’s new YouTube channel. • Take notes and give a summary in short snippets in Facebook posts, coupled with a relevant Observer file photo. • Create a summary report to insert in City of Morenci water bills and anticipate a similar method to inform township residents. • Create online and paper surveys through Survey Monkey to ascertain which methods of reaching residents will be most effective going forward. Draft agendas (following the format on page 15 of the “Leading Conversations...” facilitation guide) are attached, but will be reworked as organizers delve more deeply into the issues raised by the loss of the newspaper. [See DRAFT AGENDAS in Additional Materials]

Budget*

Describe your plans for the grant funds. What will you use the funding to purchase or support? Please be specific (e.g. \$1,000 will be spent on staff time to support the development and implementation of the project, \$200 will be used to purchase a Zoom Business license in order for us to virtually host our conversation). The total amount of your proposed budget plan should add up to \$3,000. Note: If you are unable to spend the entire grant down by July 31, 2021, you may accrue funds to spend through February 28, 2022. If you anticipate needing to accrue funds, please note this in your response and include your plans for spending it down.

\$1,800.00 for Hotspots/service plan: to purchase Wi-Fi hotspots (5 @ \$30/12 months) so that community members can participate in the Zoom discussions. \$ 400.00 for Promotion: Banner on outside of library to promote the program and make it more visible to the community; advertising in the last issue of the Observer to promote the program \$ 400.00 for Stipends: Author Zoom visit for book discussion; resource/consultant for community meetings and action steps \$ 200.00 for Zoom Business license: to upgrade our Zoom capability and allow for greater capacity when hosting our discussions \$ 200.00 for Staff training time: to allow for all staff to participate in the LTC: Facilitation Skills for Small and Rural Libraries e-course training Any changes in the budget that would result in remaining funds (e.g. less expensive hotspots, reduction in promotion costs) would be used for any solutions, content or outcomes from the community conversations that require financial support, e.g. software, premium

services, or licenses for information-sharing, etc. or to conduct a follow-up conversation to ensure that community members have determined workable solutions to life without a local newspaper.