Notes from Langlois: Epilogue to Thoughts on Sustainability

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Notes from Langlois — Epilogue to Thoughts on Sustainability

Earlier this year I contributed two columns musing about the future of this small, rural public library located on the south Oregon coast. (See ATG v.25#6, p.8 and ATG v.26#1, p.76.) As director, I have been wrestling with the question of how this inadequately property tax funded district can survive, and thrive, moving forward. I have described the challenging political climate within which we operate, and some of the obstacles to be overcome in crafting a more sustainable structure for this library, as well as the other libraries in the county.

In my last column I outlined the current arrangement of the Curry County libraries — each is a separate, independent district. Each district performs a myriad of redundant administrative and operational tasks which would be far better addressed were we a consolidated system. Each district elects its own board of directors, to whom the library executives report. Most of us share a common integrated library system, but that is the extent of formal, organized cooperation among the county’s libraries.

Curry County is not unique in Oregon. Some counties have similar structures; some have county-wide systems with a main library and branch libraries, others have municipal libraries, or various hybrid organizations. This mix can be found in other states; many library systems throughout the country are struggling to redefine their organizational structures, programs, and place in their communities.

To my mind a consolidated county system for Curry is but a step towards a larger, more enduring solution. Achieving that initial goal will be a process. We must demonstrate the value of consolidation to our voters. That process will begin here.

Curry is the southwesternmost county in the state, and most communities are located along Highway 101 (the Pacific Coast highway). The two largest libraries are the Chetco Community Public Library in Brookings (almost on the California border) and the Curry Public Library located in Gold Beach, the county seat. There is a very small library in the town of Agness, thirty-five miles east of 101 (Agness makes Langlois look downright cosmopolitan), and there are school libraries in several communities. There are no academic or special libraries in the county.

The first step in what will very likely be a long and bracing political process will be the dissolution of the Langlois and Port Orford districts, and the creation of a new, North Curry library district — with one library functioning as the main district library, and the other as a branch. Port Orford is the obvious candidate to serve as the main library — it has a larger building (and collection), it houses the servers that host our ILS, and it has more staff.

To accomplish such a merger, voters in Langlois must be persuaded that to do so is in their best interest, and does not diminish the local character of their library. Port Orford voters must also be convinced that this change represents greater return on investment and better service levels. There are tax millage implications for both current districts. Whether this proves to be an uphill battle or not, the process will in the very least be somewhat daunting.

Larger metropolitan public libraries and academic libraries face these issues as well, albeit framed in different ways. The methods whereby they address these questions vary, but many of the fundamental considerations are quite similar.

Beyond forming a single county district, the next steps might consist of a series of incremental, evolutionary projects. One opportunity Curry might pursue concerns automation. The current ILS used by most county libraries is outdated. Coos County, our neighbor to the north, has just migrated from Millennium to Koho. A loose confederation of a Coos-Curry network would afford patrons enhanced, and simplified, library service.

Eventually a statewide public library network, utilizing a common automated system, could be a possibility (the academic libraries throughout Oregon, Washington, and a bit of Idaho already have such a structure in the Orbis Cascade Alliance, not unlike OhioLINK).

But the process should not — cannot — end there. All of the aforementioned issues are still, in the lingua franca of the moment, inside the box. The larger questions of advocacy, marketing, redefinition, re-shaping of libraries hover outside this elusive boundary, inviting us to imagine that as-yet-unseen landscape of what might be. All that goes before merely positions us to be ready to take those next steps — be they bold, tentative, reckless, or courageous — which will deliver models that shape and define our future.

By the time this column appears I expect the initial stage of our process to be underway. I will report on what may prove to be an unexpected development in my next column.