Northborough Free Library
Strategic Plan
FY 2023-2026

1868 GALE·LIBRARY·BUILDING 1894

FY 2023-2026

STRATEGIC PLAN
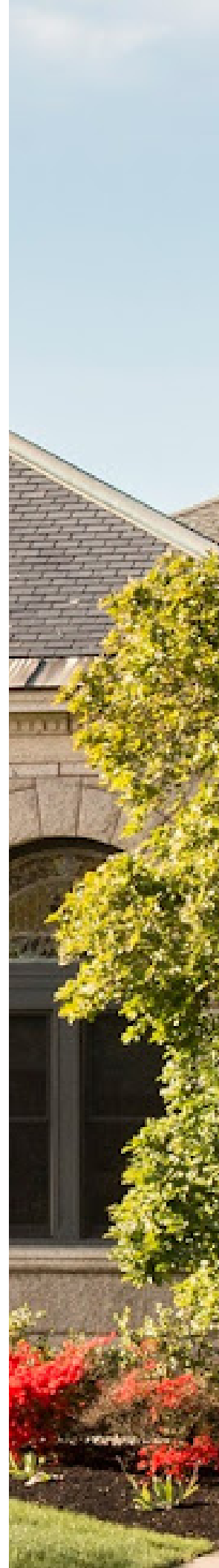
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INTRODUCTION

The Board of Trustees of the Northborough Free Library enthusiastically supports this newly crafted, three year (2023-20260) Strategic Plan. This plan, nearly three years in the making, is the result dedicated work by library staff, extensive input from the community, and constant oversight by the trustees.

This plan will not simply be submitted and then forgotten. Nor is it a regurgitation of an earlier plan. It is a newly reimagined plan, adapted to the current reality and ready to spring into action. It also aligns, we believe, with the overall goals of our Town and its many service-oriented departments. The five principal sections of the plan stress our commitment to customer service, diversity and inclusion, community, strong collections, and education. The Director and her staff fully intend to use the Plan as the road map into our collective and uncertain future.

Creating any plan during a pandemic is a challenge. It has also been an opportunity and an intense learning experience for us all. We have learned that the only permanent feature of our environment is the inevitability of change. Going forward we must ever remain nimble and flexible. Those two conditions are key elements in this plan. Indeed, the plan within a plan, is to review the Strategic Plan frequently, assess it tightly and quickly make any needed modifications. This Plan is intended to be a living organic document that will keep us both focused and alert.

We are aware that the pandemic is not over. People, even during a pandemic, have information, social, and professional needs. Our Library has risen to this challenge during this terrible time and our community has thanked us. This Plan commits us to continue, to persevere and to succeed.

We thus submit this plan with the complete support of the Board. We are prepared to support in any and all ways the efforts of the Director and her staff as they implement this Plan.

VISION

The library strengthens the community by empowering, informing, and inspiring Northborough residents.

STRATEGIC GOALS

1

Outstanding Service
Provide an excellent library experience to everyone.

2

Empower the Community
Build a strong community by connecting people, sharing ideas, and collaborating on projects.

3

Educate and Inspire
Offer materials, resources, and experts to encourage learning, empathy, and the development of new ideas.

4

Welcoming Spaces
Maintain physical and virtual spaces that are accessible, safe, and respectful to everyone.

5

Financial Stability
Have sound financial practices, a strong fundraising strategy, and thoughtfully pursue grant opportunities.

HISTORY OF THE LIBRARY

The Northborough Free Library was founded in 1868. Captain Cyrus Gale contributed $1000 to the start of a public library, which was housed in the town hall. Prior to 1868, there were "social" libraries, church libraries, and an agricultural library. Many of these libraries required an annual fee or membership. The word "free" in the library's official name indicates that no membership fee is required.

The library eventually outgrew its space in the former town hall. In 1894 Cyrus Gale Jr., the captain's son, donated the land at 34 Main St. to build a separate library where it stands today. He donated $30,000 for its construction.

Throughout the twentieth century, the library was able to expand hours and increase its collections. Children became an important part of library services, leading to the creation of a dedicated children's room in the 1950s. Major interior renovations were done in the 1960s in an effort to create more interior space and to make the building more attractive.

In 1975 the Town tripled the space of the library with an addition that cost $613,000, excluding furnishings. By the 1990s it was apparent that with growing library use and changing services, including public computing, that the Town again needed a library expansion. In 2009, an expansion and renovation was completed, adding more meeting space, program space, and study rooms, as well as various public computing stations.

The library continues to find new ways to inform and connect the community. A focus on electronic collections and virtual spaces has made collections accessible 24/7 and opened new avenues for library staff to foster relationships with community members. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced a national shutdown of public spaces, the library was able to leverage its digital resources to provide virtual story times and programs, curbside pickup service, and offer mobile hotspots for those without sufficient internet connectivity.

METHODOLOGY

The Board of Library Trustees tasked a Long Range Planning Subcommittee, consisting of three members of the Board as well as the Library Director and Adult Services Librarian, with developing a new strategic plan. Research for this plan began in 2018 with a Building and Space Planning Survey (Appendix A). Work continued with six focus groups and a needs assessment, conducted by Maxine Bleiweis & Associates. (Appendix B) The completed report was delivered in late February of 2020, roughly one month before the COVID-19 pandemic upended the lives of our patrons and the way the library provides services in the community.

The pandemic put a spotlight on both local and systemic issues facing our community, has changed people's behavior patterns, and has created new needs that must be considered. Some of the library's previous priorities and goals are no longer relevant, and have been replaced by more pressing issues. The ongoing nature of the pandemic has also rendered future planning more difficult, as it is hard to plan for the future when the present is very uncertain. This was the main factor in deciding to write a three-year plan, as opposed to our traditional five-year plan.

The library conducted a survey in July 2021 (Appendix C) that asked what services were important to members of the community. The staff at the library have spoken to patrons about their needs, priorities, and challenges and have passed on this informal feedback, which has proven valuable when trying to see how the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted trends in library usage.

When taken together with the pre-pandemic research, five core services and values emerged as important to patrons in any situation. Patrons want expert, friendly service and a good experience whenever they come to the library or use the library's online resources. Our community wants the library to help connect them to their neighbors. Patrons desire strong, diverse, updated library materials, regardless of format. It is important that the library remain a safe and accessible space for all. Finally, patrons expressed a desire for a well-funded library with a thoughtful financial strategy that would ensure its future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE:

JIM HOGAN, COMMITTEE CHAIR & BOARD OF TRUSTEES
MICHELLE REHILL, BOARD OF TRUSTEES CHAIR
RICHARD TUCKER, BOARD OF TRUSTEES
DEBORAH HERSH, ADULT SERVICES LIBRARIAN
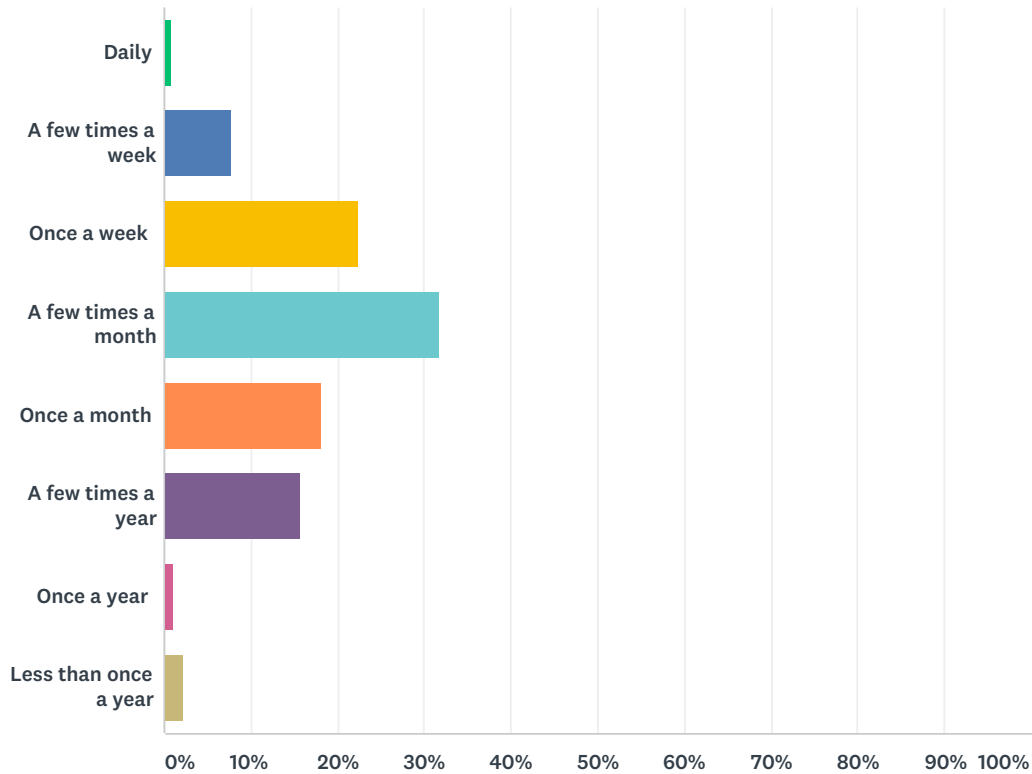**JENNIFER BRUNEAU**, LIBRARY DIRECTOR

APPROVAL

Approved by the Northborough Board of Library Trustees on September 14, 2021.

APPENDIX A

BUILDING AND SPACE PLANNING SURVEY

Q1 On average, how often do you visit the library?

Answered: 396   Skipped: 1

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Daily	0.76%	3
A few times a week	7.83%	31
Once a week	22.47%	89
A few times a month	31.82%	126
Once a month	18.18%	72
A few times a year	15.66%	62
Once a year	1.01%	4
Less than once a year	2.27%	9
TOTAL		396

# Q2 If you have visited the library in the past year, what services did you use? Please check all that apply.

Answered: 395   Skipped: 2
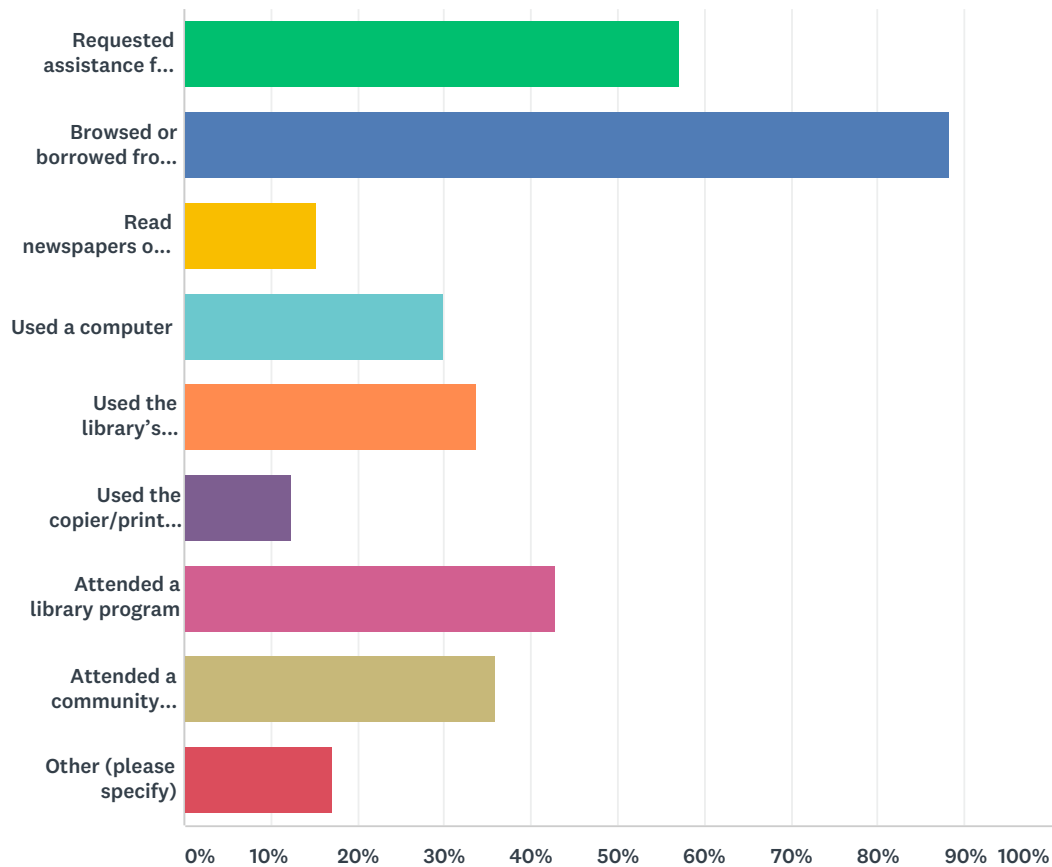
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Requested assistance from the library staff	57.22%	226
Browsed or borrowed from the collection	88.35%	349
Read newspapers or magazines	15.19%	60
Used a computer	29.87%	118
Used the library's wireless internet on my own device	33.67%	133
Used the copier/printer/scanner	12.41%	49
Attended a library program	42.78%	169
Attended a community program	35.95%	142
Other (please specify)	17.22%	68
Total Respondents: 395		

Q3 If you have visited the library in the past year, did you do any of the following? Please check all that apply.

Answered: 299   Skipped: 98
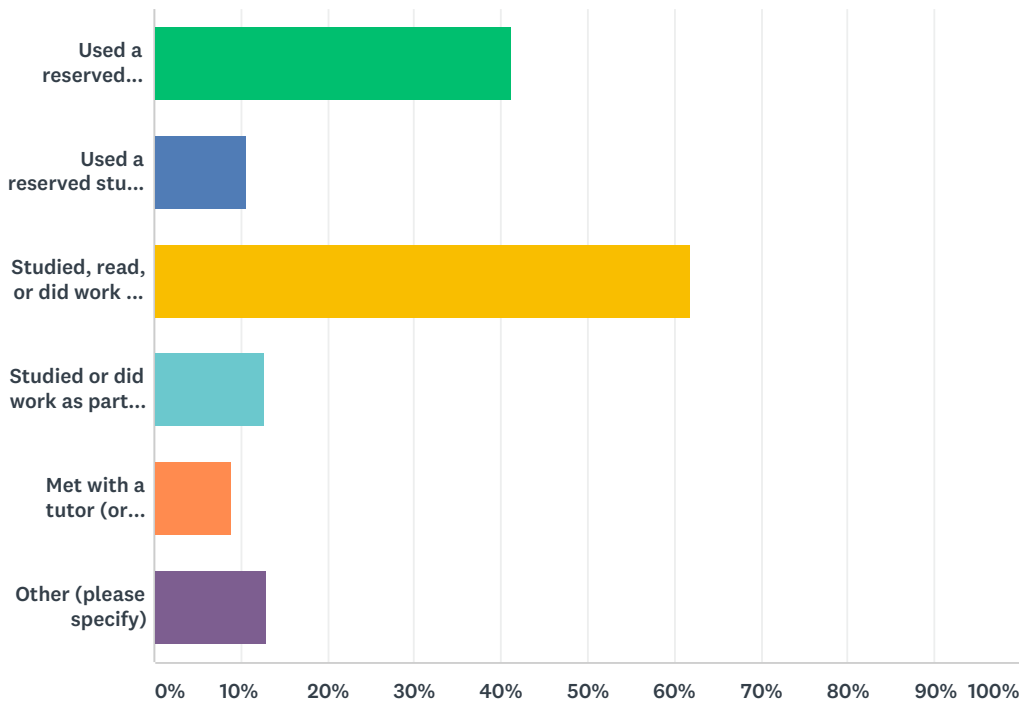
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Used a reserved meeting room	41.14%	123
Used a reserved study room	10.70%	32
Studied, read, or did work by myself	61.87%	185
Studied or did work as part of a group	12.71%	38
Met with a tutor (or brought my child to meet with a tutor)	9.03%	27
Other (please specify)	13.04%	39
Total Respondents: 299		

# Q4 What parts of the library do you visit most frequently? Please select all that apply.

Answered: 389   Skipped: 8
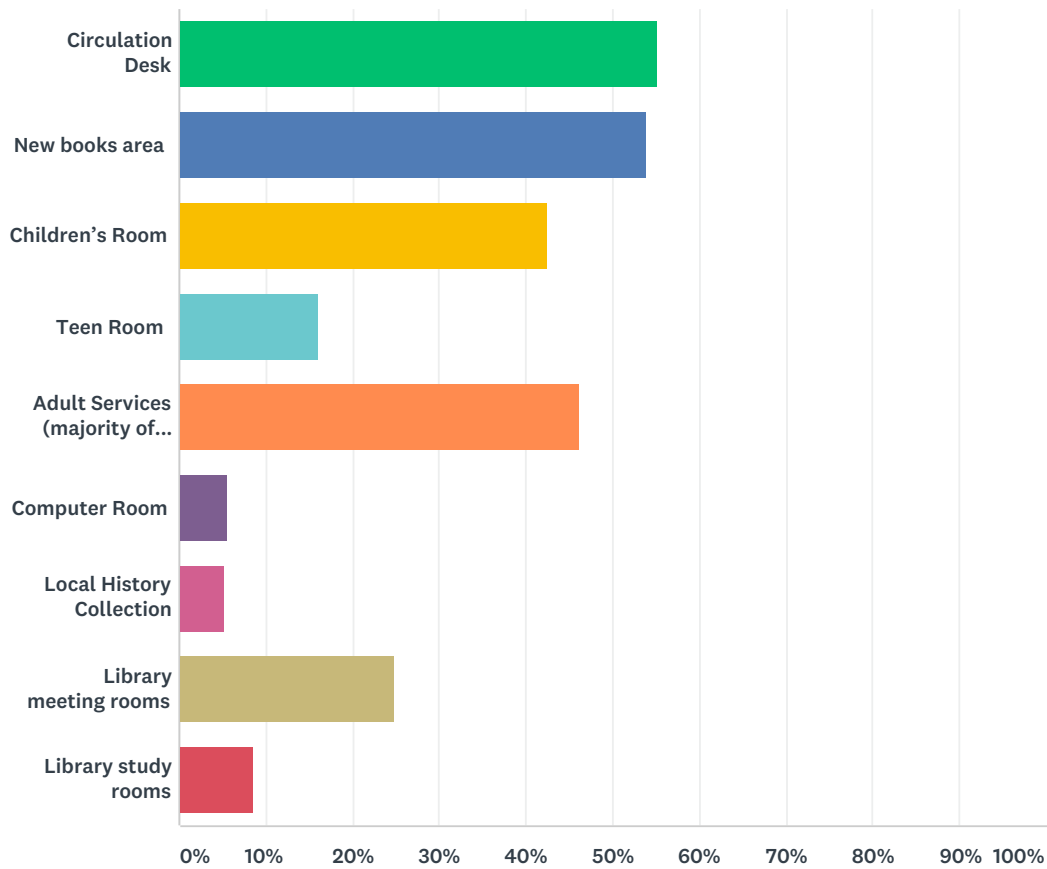
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Circulation Desk	55.27%	215
New books area	53.98%	210
Children's Room	42.42%	165
Teen Room	16.20%	63
Adult Services (majority of second floor except for Teen Room)	46.27%	180
Computer Room	5.66%	22
Local History Collection	5.14%	20
Library meeting rooms	24.94%	97
Library study rooms	8.48%	33
Total Respondents: 389		

Q5 Do you usually spend your time at the library alone or with others?

Answered: 394   Skipped: 3
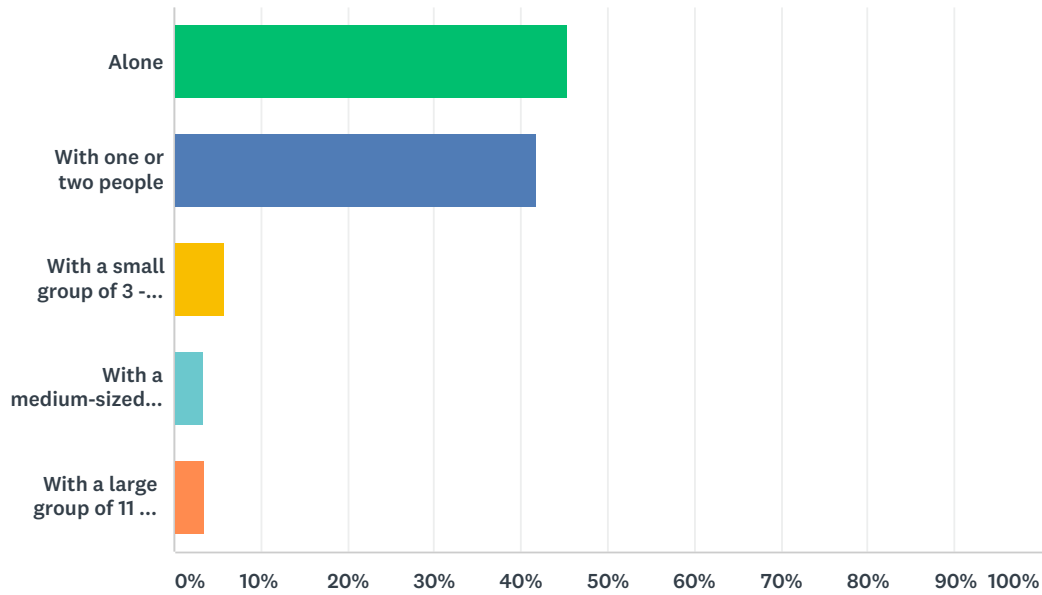
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Alone	45.43%	179
With one or two people	41.88%	165
With a small group of 3 - 5 people	5.84%	23
With a medium-sized group of 6 - 10 people	3.30%	13
With a large group of 11 or more people	3.55%	14
TOTAL		394

Q6 How important is it to you for the library to provide spaces for groups to meet, socialize, and/or work together?
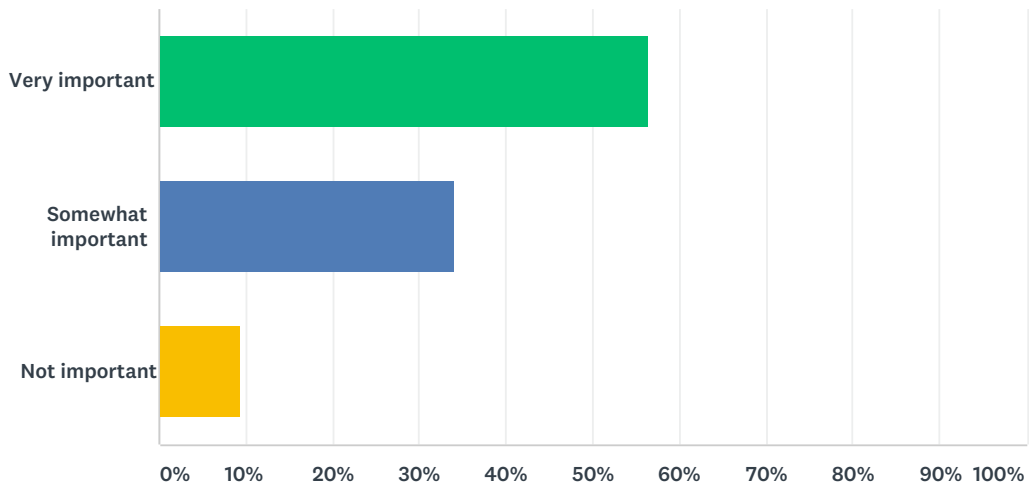
Answered: 394   Skipped: 3
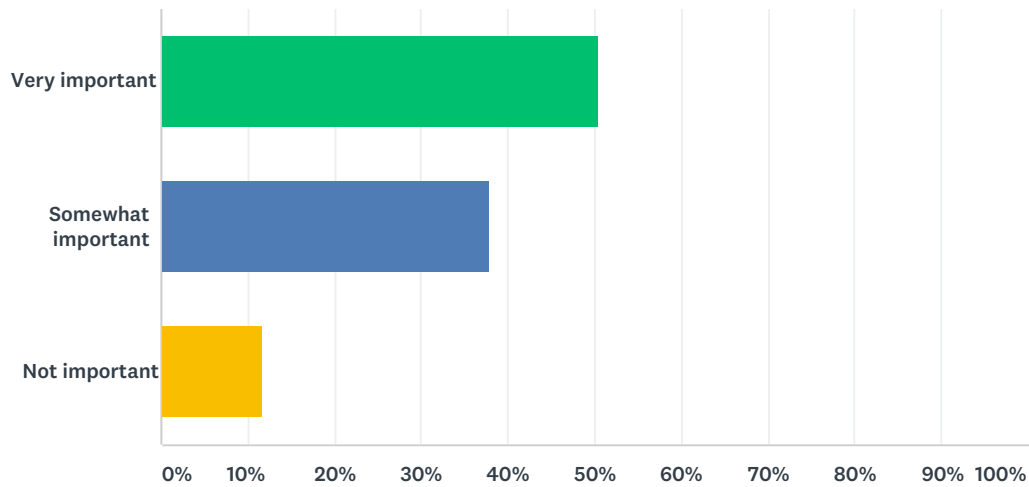
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very important	50.51%	199
Somewhat important	37.82%	149
Not important	11.68%	46
TOTAL		394

Q7 How important is it to you for the library to provide quiet spaces where you can work or read individually?
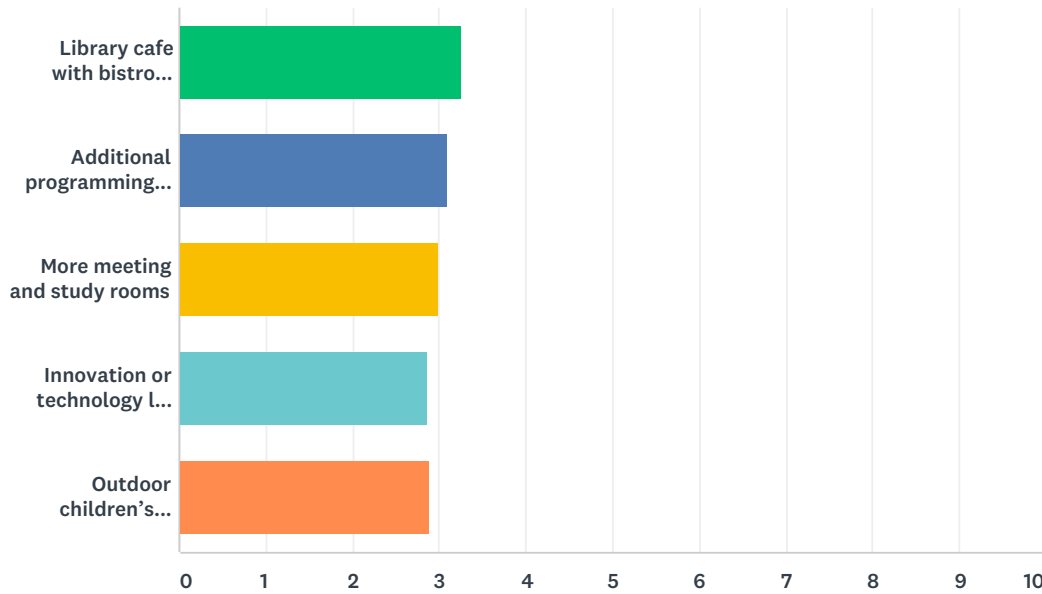
Answered: 393   Skipped: 4

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very important	56.49%	222
Somewhat important	34.10%	134
Not important	9.41%	37
TOTAL		393

Q8 Please rank in order of importance (with 5=most important and 1=least important) the following amenities or possible repurposing of current space:

Answered: 391　　Skipped: 6

	1	2	3	4	5	TOTAL	SCORE
Library cafe with bistro tables and self-service coffee and tea	29.94% 103	17.73% 61	17.44% 60	18.31% 63	16.57% 57	344	3.26
Additional programming space for programs like yoga, meditation, nutrition, health & wellness, arts and crafts, etc.	15.91% 56	25.28% 89	25.28% 89	19.89% 70	13.64% 48	352	3.10
More meeting and study rooms	21.43% 75	20.00% 70	18.86% 66	15.43% 54	24.29% 85	350	2.99
Innovation or technology lab with programs on how to use technology and software programs	14.05% 51	19.01% 69	23.14% 84	26.72% 97	17.08% 62	363	2.86
Outdoor children's activity space for storytimes and other children's programs	22.19% 83	16.84% 63	16.58% 62	16.58% 62	27.81% 104	374	2.89

Q9 What changes would you like to see in the library's interior layout?

Answered: 238   Skipped: 159

Q10 What changes would make the library a more inviting or practical space for you to use?

Answered: 234   Skipped: 163

Q11 Some libraries are reducing the size of their book and media collections in order to create more community spaces for meeting, studying, reading, flexible programming, and/or exhibits and displays. Would you like the Northborough Free Library to make these kinds of changes?

Answered: 387　　　Skipped: 10
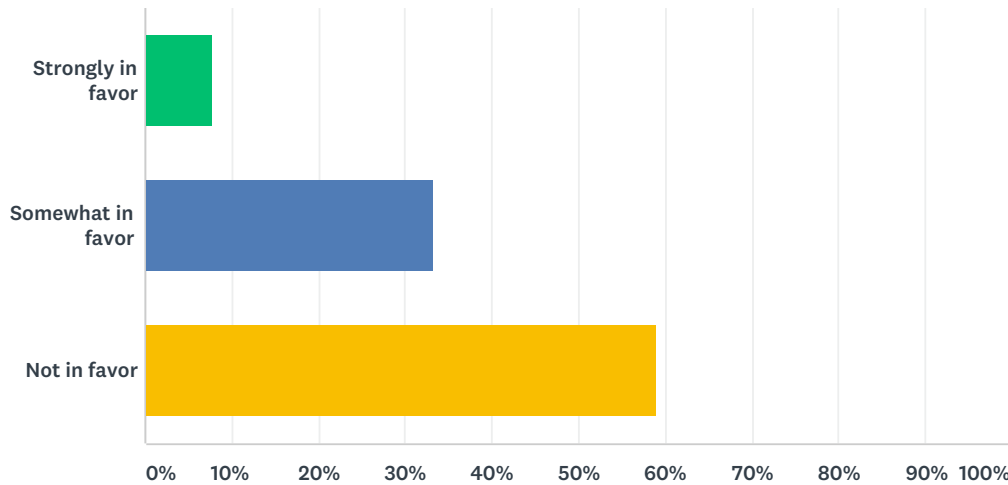
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly in favor	7.75%	30
Somewhat in favor	33.33%	129
Not in favor	58.91%	228
TOTAL		387

Q12 How old are you?

Answered: 392   Skipped: 5
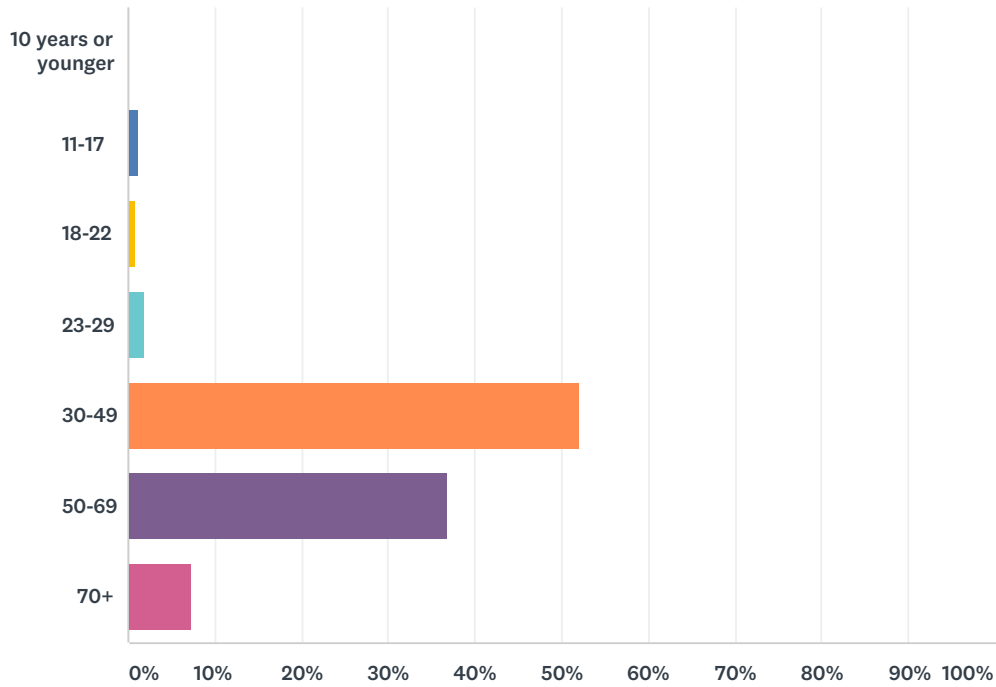
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
10 years or younger	0.00%	0
11-17	1.28%	5
18-22	0.77%	3
23-29	1.79%	7
30-49	52.04%	204
50-69	36.73%	144
70+	7.40%	29
TOTAL		392

Q13 How many children under the age of 18 are living in your home?

Answered: 388   Skipped: 9

Q14 What is your employment status? Please select all that apply.

Answered: 395   Skipped: 2
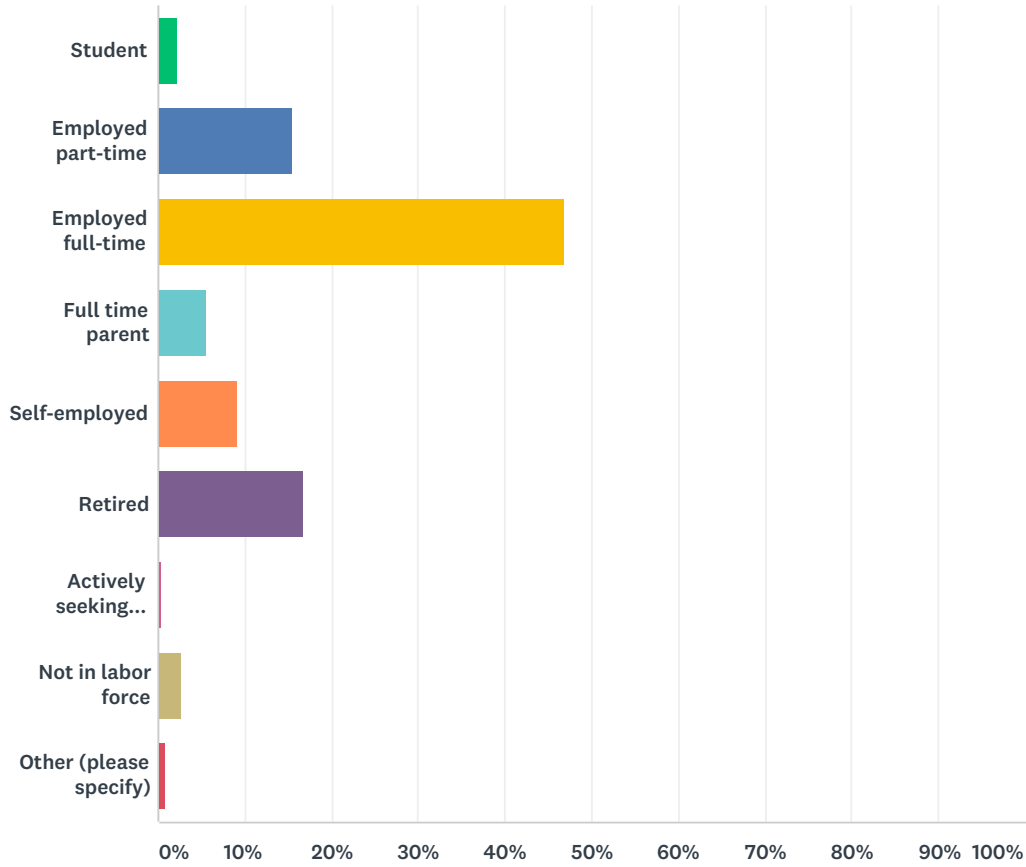
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Student	2.28%	9
Employed part-time	15.44%	61
Employed full-time	46.84%	185
Full time parent	5.57%	22
Self-employed	9.11%	36
Retired	16.71%	66
Actively seeking employment	0.51%	2
Not in labor force	2.78%	11
Other (please specify)	0.76%	3
TOTAL		395

Q15 What is the name of the town where you live? (Your primary residence)

Answered: 394   Skipped: 3

Q16 How many years have you or your family been coming to the Northborough Free Library?

Answered: 380   Skipped: 17

Q17 Would you like to participate in a focus group meeting to help the library plan for the future? If so, please include your name and contact info. here.

Answered: 68   Skipped: 329

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
NAME	100.00%	68
PHONE	86.76%	59
EMAIL	97.06%	66

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP REPORT FOR THE NORTHBOROUGH FREE LIBRARY
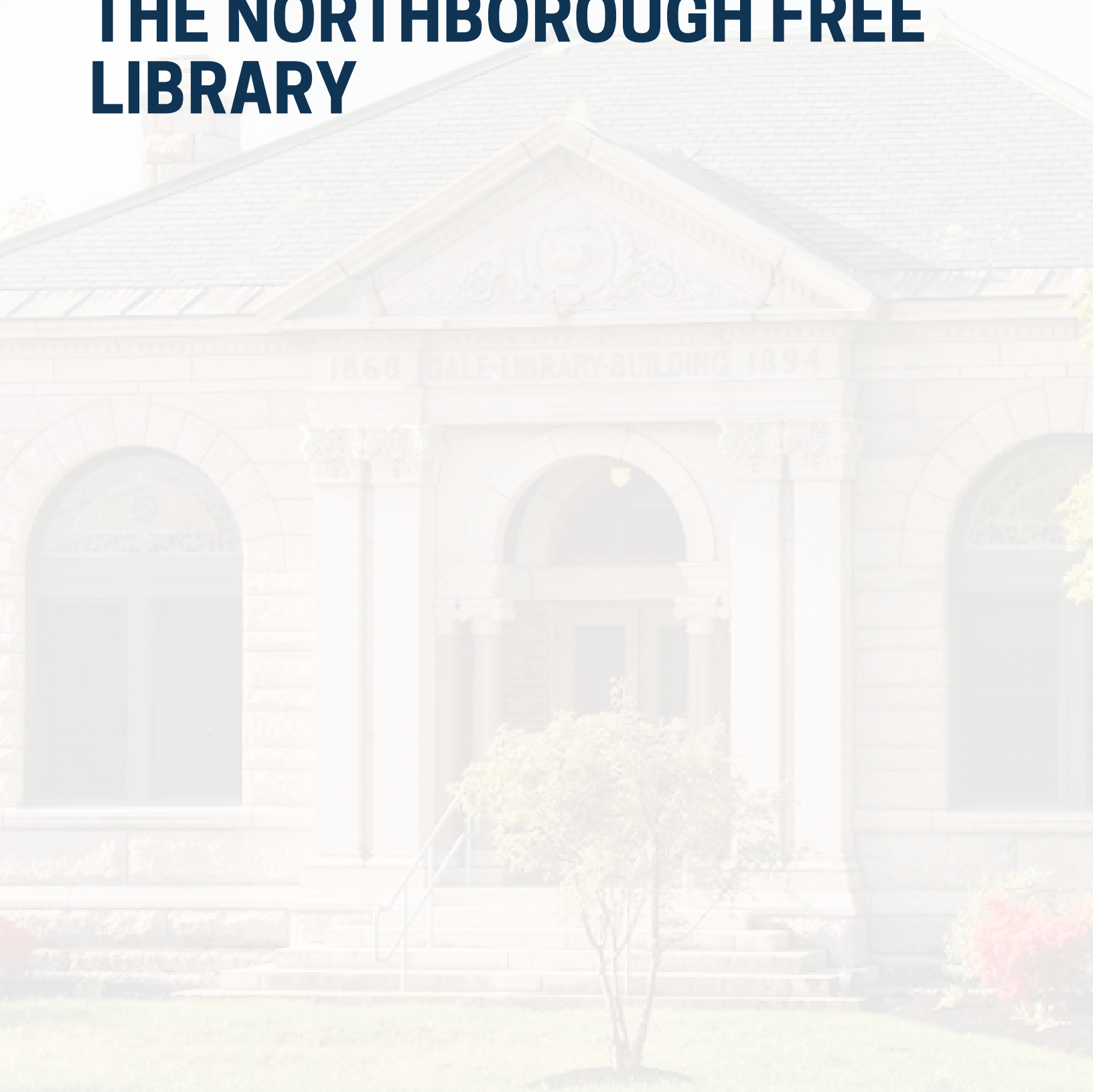
Focus Group Report for Northborough Free Library

February 20, 2020

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1. Background

2. Process

3. Approach taken

4. General outcome

5. Long term space/service recommendations

6. Interim recommendations

7. Recommendation for additional information

8. 7th grade focus group outcomes

Background

Maxine Bleiweis & Associates (MB&A) was hired to conduct a needs assessment for the Northborough Free Public Library (NFPL) as a precursor to a more detailed space planning process. As part of what was termed "Phase One," MB&A was asked to: develop questions for focus groups, conduct six (6) focus groups, conduct one workshop for staff and one session for trustees on trends in library services as they relate to space planning, analyze collected data, and write a report on the findings. The report follows.

Process

Six focus groups were conducted January 30 and 31, 2020, with a total of 61 individuals. With the exception of the participants in the 7th grade focus group, the groups were populated primarily by individuals who had responded to a library survey taken in the last quarter of 2019 indicating their willingness to attend a focus group. Each of the focus groups for adults was held at the Northborough Free Library. Those focus groups took place at 11 a.m. (2 on sequential days), 1:30, 4:30, and 6:30 p.m.   Focus groups were held in the small conference room to the left of the entrance, with the exception of the first group which convened in the large meeting room to the right of the entrance. The middle school group convened at the Melican Middle School during school hours at 1 p.m. and was coordinated by media specialist Janice Bisset who was present. Maxine Bleiweis of MB&A facilitated the groups with library staff assigned as note takers.

In addition to being asked to respond to eight questions, each group—with the exception of the middle school—was shown slides with examples of trends in services and space in libraries. The slides were shown after the majority of the responses were given and before the aspirational segment.

All adults attending the focus groups were invited to indicate interest in participating with the potential renovation process.

Approach taken

MB&A takes the outside/in approach to planning and first focuses its questions on the community's aspirations on the premise that the public library should reflect the hopes and visions of its residents. Once that is determined, the library can then proceed with services and programs that match and move the community toward that vision. Space planning is then based on service and programs outlined.

The public library has grown from having an emphasis on the storage and distribution of items on shelves to becoming a community space where learning takes place in active and passive forms. In the past, space planning was primarily based on the number of volumes owned by the library and the amount of people expected to populate the library at given times during the week. The public library has now shifted to accommodate a variety of forms of learning, collaborating, and gathering. Many of the aforementioned physical items have become digital in format, freeing up space for learning activities.

Therefore, the challenge of the focus group facilitator is to determine the ways the community members would use a facility that is best suited to a variety of learning styles.

General outcome

The groups expressed the need for a true community center in Northborough. They were looking for a space where everyone was welcome, that accommodated different types of learning, and that told them they were part of a wider community. They wanted space for quiet contemplation and for observing and thinking, in addition to convening, connecting, and collaboration. Most had not made the connection that the place they were describing could be the Library. However, the opinions expressed gave a vision for the Northborough Free Library to strive to meet.

Long-term space and service recommendations

Determine the **overall goals** for designing new space. [Based on the outcomes of focus groups and your previous survey, one of the primary goals expressed by the community was to have a gathering space for formal group meetings, spontaneous group meetings, and use by business people, students, and individuals. Another was for people to intersect in a space that was welcoming and that facilitated learning in a variety of forms.]

Reconsider the **definition of meeting** and the possible spaces beyond the type that take place in a reserved room. For example, for some purposes it is possible to work collaboratively in a shared space. For other meetings, privacy from interruption is needed.

Monitor the ebb and flow of use in each space and **map out** possible times when spaces might be used for other than their original intent.

Ask if your **policies and procedures** support or hinder the use of your space for those groups. Many focus group responses indicate that they are a hindrance.

Determine the opportunities for **interaction between staff and user**. Focus groups indicated the value of those interactions and wanted more.

Examine **how work is getting done** by staff and consider how to eliminate and streamline for the benefit of the user.

Do the mental exercise of **taking everything out of the space**, including non-loadbearing walls, before mentally placing items back. Ask why something is needed and where else it might work better. Try out different scenarios by taking on the persona of different users and non-users. Start with no assumptions.

Pay **attention** to creating space for community gathering and space for collections with an emphasis on gathering. There are many options for acquiring content but fewer options for learning in a community such as a public library offers.

Continue to **vigorously weed** the physical book/media collection for little-used items to make space for collaborative space. Those items that are retained should be **attractively displayed** to the extent possible to maximize their use.

Add radio frequency identification (RFID) to the physical collection to maximize possibilities for express services for checking items in and out and inventory control.

Position staff members in and among the building for the maximum interaction.

Position staff members **within a few feet of the entrance** point(s) to welcome, assist, and act as passive security.

Place optional **engagement opportunities** near the entrance to build community, set the tone, and get people ready for what is next. Examples may be questions where people can add responses such as favorite place to go in the community, names of community heroes, hopes and dreams for the community, etc.

Zone the spaces for quiet and contemplation away from noisy areas. Create buffer zones in between for transition time while moving from one space to another. Clearly sign the spaces so the user knows and can make decisions based on activity level.

Include an area for **experiential, hands-on learning** for all ages.

Add food and drink as a matter of course. This can be done in a variety of ways from a self-service kitchen for preparation of drinks and warming food to café-type service to vending machines.

Consider honoring the unique design of the original building and the **possible original entrance** opportunities. The entrance could be designed to be used at special times during the week or month.

Plan "back-of-house" activities so that they flow better with the public space. Separate staff work activities from public activities. Make it easy for people bringing items into the meeting room to load and unload with minor conflict with library users.

Incorporate set-up of meeting spaces into the staff workflow as opportunities for interaction and assistance with information gathering and conversation about community needs.

Plan for "express services" that includes holds pick up (not everyone expressed interest in interaction, "My best interaction is when there is none". Versus "My best interaction is when I can chat with a staff member or another library user." (Sometimes that's the same person under different circumstances.) Depending on the placement of express terminals, staff can be relieved of 85% of transactional work and interact in a manner that enhances the experience in ways not currently possible.

Remove barriers between staff and users such as large, high service desks and computer screens while maintaining a fixed central service point.

Plan for **casual conversation space** to allow users to "continue the conversation" when encounter people they would like to chat with. Avoid having to leave the library in order to accomplish this.

An often-requested service was **Sunday hours**. By examining the space and the processes that staff are required to do and streamlining, it is sometimes possible to reposition work and add hours. The major investment is already made in the infrastructure. Adding hours is the most cost-effective enhancement to the investment

the community has already made in the building, the library materials, the training, and the relationships.

Interim recommendations

Maximize programs and services that are offered by examining the various modes of **communication**. Focus groups pointed to the communication they receive from the Town of Northborough's Parks & Recreation Department and Barnes & Noble as ones they read. They stated that it took "too long" to scroll down to the library offering they were interested in the eNewletter that was sent by the library.

Many people stated they did not receive an email. Consider surveying people as to their **preferred method of communication** during active times such as summer reading and large programs.

Based on focus group responses, the greatest asset in **the staff**. With that in mind, place staff in the entrance area at busy times/meeting times for short periods to welcome and assist.

Survey before and after experiences to determine benchmarks of service satisfaction before making changes.

The time before renovation is opportune to experiment and note successes and failures. Consider each change a **"beta" test** rather than a permanent change.

Begin to remove barriers (automatic toilet flushing for children, methods for meeting requests and interactions, having coffee and tea at busy morning times, fees for replacement cards, ease in renewing a card).

Consider **replacing** heavy tables and chairs with lighter ones for ease in use and flexibility.

Install **signage** that indicates whether the library is open when they are at the intersection of Route 20 and Patty Lane

Designate the same public workspace for a variety of uses such as morning for home-based businesses, afternoon for tutors, evening for groups. Consider taking orders for coffee and tea or setting up self-serve options. The ability to have a beverage was mentioned in almost every conversation.

Create **senior conversation space** with topics at certain times.

Consider book talks/information exchanges for **parents** during children's programs.

Include a **sampling of library offerings in the big meeting space** for people who dash into meetings and leave without exploring the rest of the library.

Carve out a **small creation space**: green screen (business in morning/kids in afternoon/both in evening).

Specify a time for **device assistance** in lobby between tweens and seniors.
Place signage in the stacks that is understandable to the average person.

7th grade responses

[MB&A specifically requested to hold a focus group with 7th graders. This age is attuned to the space they inhabit in a way that is unique. They have formed strong opinions about what they like and dislike, they observe possibilities and they want to be included in the community they live in.]

If they were designing the Northborough Free Library, this is what it would offer and feel like:

The space should also have a variety of active and quiet areas. It should be bright and colorful with different kinds of furniture including bean bags chairs, pillows, comfortable furniture, and hammocks. It should have plants. It should have shelves that aren't too tall. It should have a lot of natural light. It should have cozy nooks to be alone and open spaces to work together.

It would have a space to read surrounded by hardcover books in the genres of realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, graphic novels, thrillers, poetry, and a variety of non-fiction, especially about animals.

It would have a space to eat and drink they have brought or purchased. Favorite foods and drinks that would be available are mac and cheeses, lo mein, pizza, Buffalo wings, and pasta accompanied by smoothies, lemonade, root beer, bubble tea, water, and fruit punch.

It would have space to be able to play, create, and listen to music from pop to indie to alterative to classical to techno to rap for a variety of instruments.

It would have space to do arts and crafts and draw and paint. It would have space to watch videos, create videos and animation, and play collaborative video games. They'd like green screens and 3D printers. It should have options to play foosball and air hockey.

It would have charging stations for their phones.

They'd like to be able to share what they know while inside the library with members of the community. This includes music, animation and video technology.

They'd like the ability to be locked in the library after hours at special times.

In the summer, they would like to be able to be outside while using the library. They mentioned having telescopes. They'd like a rooftop garden.

They'd like the outside to be painted in a more appealing way that beckons them inside.

They'd like to have a space separated from the younger children starting in 6th grade. They'd like to have a suggestion box.

In other words, they want an awesome library. They uniformly appreciated how "nice" the library staff is. That is the best outcome a community could ask for from its 7th graders.

MB&A recommends that you continue the dialog with 7th graders and take them up on their offer to be engaged. Some cannot get to the library due to transportation. Some have caregivers who do not speak English. NFPL should work with the Melican Middle School Media Specialist Jon Bisset to seek out responses from a variety of 7th graders in addition to finding new ways to engage those who are volunteers and active in the library.

Recommendations for additional information.

Participation: With the exception of the 7th grade group, the majority of participants indicated a desire to attend a focus group through the community survey. In future groups, it would be instructional to invite participants who have not self-selected and to meet at a neutral location.

Demographics: the majority of the adults participating were white, college-educated, and settled in the community. A couple of the participants indicated that they were not born in the United States. One individual noted a hearing loss which required equipment to participate. In contrast, the majority of the 7th graders were non-white and a few indicated parents/grandparents for whom English was not the first language.

Time available: the majority of participants were not required to work elsewhere during the day.

While the results of the focus groups are typical of communities similar to Northborough, It is recommended that as the next phase is planned, the Northborough Free Library includes responses by representatives of the following groups: 1) non-white individuals, 2) those who work during the day and are unable to physically frequent the library, 3) individuals who were not born in the United States, 4) individuals with handicaps, and 5) people less familiar with library offerings.

APPENDIX C

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES SURVEY
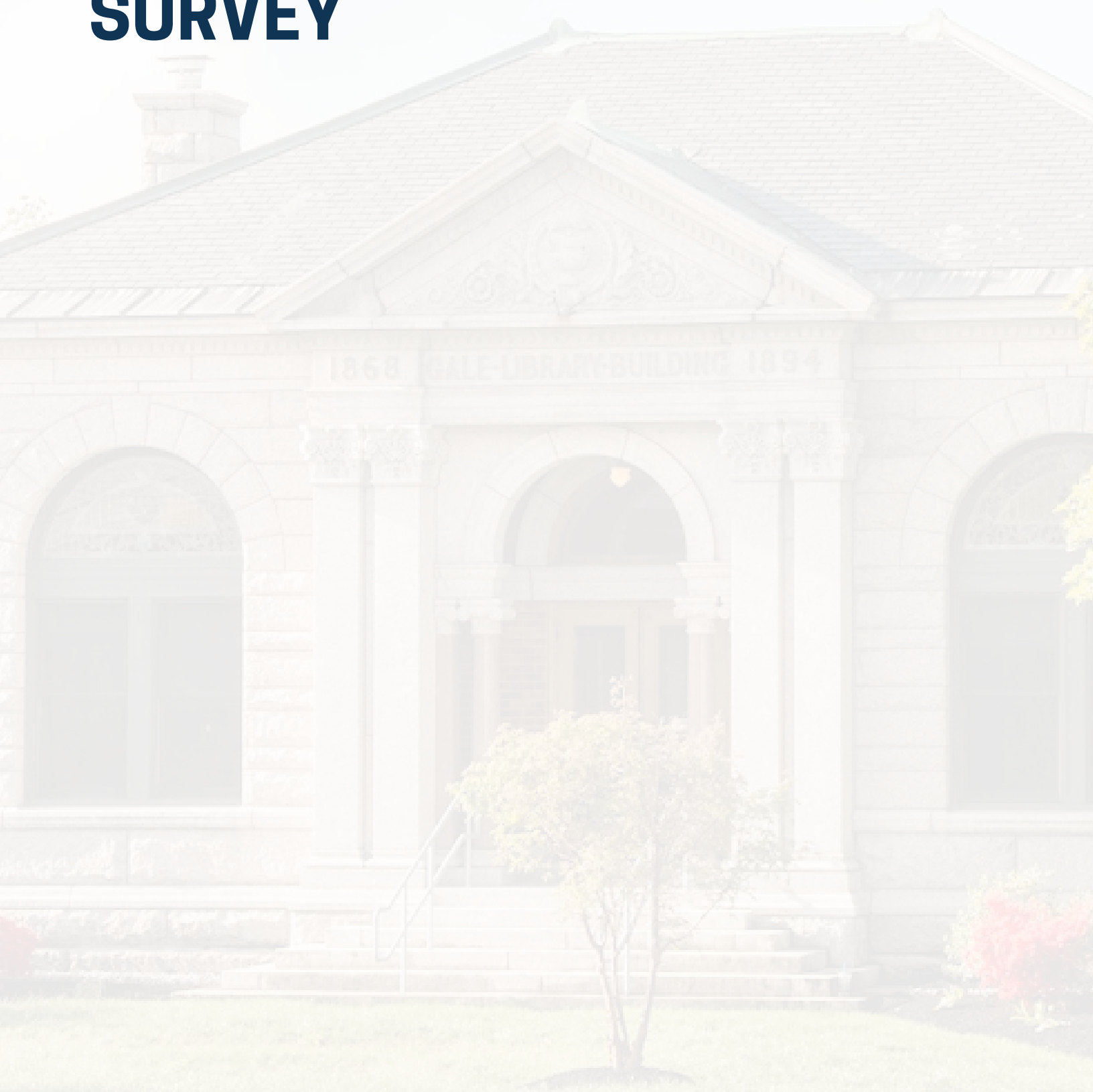
Programs & Services

Do you like the new self-checkout stations at the library?
Yes-71
No-0
Haven't Used-31

Do you prefer to pick up your holds:
From the self-service holds pick up shelf-51
From the checkout desk- 12
No preference- 25
I don't use the holds service-2

Would you like to see the library make the curbside pickup service offered during the pandemic a permanent service?
Yes- 27
No - 16
I might use this service, but it isn't a priority- 40

What should the library prioritize in the next year? Select up to three.

Events: 48
Physical Collections: 34
Technology: 20
Virtual events: 5

Digital Content: 46
Improve Web Site: 26
Laptops: 12

Of the three services you selected in Question 4, which ONE is the most important to you or your family?

Events: 28
Digital Content: 23
Physical collections: 15
Web Site: 10
Laptop Lending: 6