

Plenty Of Ideas Are Fermenting In Town's Planning 'Silos'

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Many perspectives on Snow Library have been shared this month in community engagement sessions as part of a strategic planning process. ED MARONEY PHOTO

ORLEANS — Modern management theory warns against “siloeing” of an organization’s work, a situation in which one group labors away without meaningful interaction with others that may be working on the same issues. Yet, in the agricultural sense, silos can be active places where materials – or shall we say ideas – can ferment and transform. This week, we visited three “silos” in Orleans where residents, officials and volunteers are actively working to improve the community.

A Library At The Center Of The Community

Aspiration and pragmatism mingled last week as citizens met to consider the future of Snow Library. At a Feb. 22 community engagement session, held to help create a new five-year strategic plan, 10 people shared their ideas about what the library represents and what it should become – and the challenges involved.

“Realistically, we’re probably not going to get a new library within 10 years,” said Susanne Strenz-Thibault, a retired educator who served on the library’s building committee a decade ago. “We really need to look at this library from the inside out... We’ve got to do something working with the inside, then perhaps maybe thinking outside the box of combining it with other things in town.”

“I agree that the current facility could be upgraded inside,” said Tim Counihan, a technology professional, town finance committee member and a “very active” participant in the library’s Lifetime Learning program. “Long-term, we need a better, bigger space... (We could) put the (proposed) community center and the library together and make the old library housing... We have invested in protection and maintenance properties – the DPW, police, town hall – but not in those things important to community: a community center, the library, the council on aging.”

A report of the session, one of four facilitated online by consultant Abby Straus of Maverick & Boutique, will be posted on the library’s website. Straus asked participants to talk about what in the community, region, and world was affecting Orleans and its library, to imagine a time five years hence “when we have addressed all those challenges,” and then to describe what is happening at the library today “that we should keep, what no longer serves us that we should abandon, and what we might invent or re-invent.”

Counihan led off by noting “a strong move toward digital media. A lot of the materials we use to learn are changing over from being books and magazines to becoming electronic media that would stream into the library.” He said, however, his preference for reading fiction is hardcover editions. “I don’t know that we’re not going to have books in the future,” said Pam Ritchie, a past president of the Friends of Snow Library who also served on the facilities committee. “My generation likes them, the little kids like them. I don’t know what’s happening with all the people in the middle.” Straus said that a statewide survey of children in New Jersey about “what would make your library more awesome” drew three top responses: “a really cool place to hang out, food, and more books.”

That resonated with Majka Kendall, a mother of two, who suggested ways to involve children through after-school programs at the library. "It's up to us to create a nice environment, especially at this time of year," she said.

Nancy James, a Snow volunteer with a career in library and information services, said her thoughts have turned to "the idea that democracy is under attack. I think of libraries as being one of the core pillars of democracy... Anybody can go there and find whatever they are interested in... The strengthening of the individual is part of what keeps democracy strong."

Strenz-Thibault was concerned about "what we can do to get all ages, all people comfortably back in the library. It is a point of connection. A lot of anger going on out there (in society) is due to the lack of connection... We have to start talking to each other again." Mary Reuland, a former director of the library, said it was important "to keep up with technology, but at the same time offer a place for human, personal connections."

Asked to imagine Snow five years into the future, Counihan envisioned "bringing the library to the people, allowing them to access a lot of the materials remotely" and a building with fewer books but more "open space, meeting rooms, and...much more opportunity to collaborate and be loud in a library." Strenz-Thibault saw more open hours and days, with a lot of collaboration with nearby schools, and an in-house child care program. Steve Bornemeier, who served recently on the facilities development committee, imagined the library as part of a cultural campus connected by driverless cars. Reuland foresaw a library with meeting space for all ages, including "a place for people who want to sit quietly."

"I'm envisioning something in the center of town that is sort of a library, a community center, and the (Hot Chocolate) Sparrow, with a lot of open space, flexible space," James said. "You can't go anywhere in town without going through it."

Ritchie said there's room for more computer stations, now and in the future. "The one thing to keep is our staff," she said. "I have heard people from Eastham say they come to Orleans because they like the staff better." Mary Mador, a former president of the Friends, would be happy to "toss out the current staff employee lounge and put in a beautiful new one, preferably above ground."

Mador said that folks who love the library "have no idea of the problems caused by the inadequate structure and some of the inadequate systems. It's to the glory of the staff they never find this stuff out, (but) it would be very hard for them to get behind a push for a new library if they don't understand why it's necessary. If you're just coming in to get a book or read something, you're not getting the whole picture of the library. Somehow, that has to be brought out."

"We need to start politicking our library," Ritchie said, "(but) there's a timing issue. If you start getting everybody all excited and it doesn't happen for five years, it's hard to maintain enthusiasm... (We could) start small and work ourselves up to a five-year total engagement of our community." Given the long waiting time for state library building funds, Bornemeier noted the option of private funding. "All we require is deep-pocketed, passionate believers who live in Orleans," he said. "There's a whole cadre of them." Mador agreed. "We need the community and we need some deep pockets," she said. "We can't depend on the town."

Options Sought For Beleaguered Senior Center

Flooding is not uncommon around the town's low-lying senior center, but an overhead flood?

That's what happened on Jan. 17, when water in what should have been a dry sprinkler pipe froze and burst above the meeting room vestibule. A gasket popped in the sprinkler room, which sent a geyser of water up into the ceilings and down onto the floors of the council on aging's office wing.

"The flood was caused by water that was trapped in a portion of the sprinkler system that is normally dry," town facilities manager Ron Collins wrote in an email. "Most likely, the water was residue from a test that was conducted last spring." He noted that the company that did the work terminated a person involved with the test and that the owner of the business "was very much involved with getting the system back into proper working order."

Program schedules were altered and staff relocated within the building, but there was more excitement ahead. On Jan. 31, two furnaces shut down and left sections of the center without heat and hot water. One was back in service in a few days, but the other will require a rebuild. For now, high-quality space heaters are helping out.

And there's still more. During a recent storm, the center lost power as well as the contents of its freezer and refrigerators. Hundreds of dollars' worth of food was thrown away, and the town's information technology staff had to restore the site's computer network.

"Our building loses power very often," Council on Aging and Senior Center Director Judi Wilson said at the COA's Feb. 23 meeting. "I'm not even talking major storm outages... In the last five years, it's a bit of a joke. If it rains, we lose power. If it's windy, we lose power." In the next few weeks, a surplus generator once used by the police department will be tested at the senior center. "No generator is big enough to give power to the whole building," Wilson said, "but that generator would provide for the public meeting room at the end of the building and the kitchen, prevent the spoil issue, and allow us to have a charging and warming station."

"The senior center is really being tested," COA chair Anita Rogers said as she opened last week's meeting. She quoted member Sandy Chernick, who said the building "should be renamed Job's Hall, because of all the calamities."

"The pandemic prepared us for this," Wilson said later. "We knew what our essential services were. Staff has been very flexible; they really rallied."

Keith Campbell, a resident since 1963, is the COA's representative to the town's community center feasibility task force. "The senior center needs to be included in that new space," he said. "How much longer can our building be accessible? I won't live to see all this take place, but it's up to us to plan ahead."

COA member Robert Singer, a former president of the Friends of Snow Library, said he was reminded of similar discussions about that facility. "One of the things that came up a few times," he said, "was, 'What are we going to do about this library, 'cause it's falling apart – air conditioning, water supply. They didn't even have a fountain to drink from; the end of last year, they finally put it in.'" He said the Friends talked about how "the library and the community center should be linked together as one building or two that were close to one another. There was never a discussion about the senior center being part of that."

"I think the library, senior center, and recreation building should all be incorporated into one big complex," Campbell said. Several board members called for supporters of the senior center to be more vocal about its needs, both present and future.

"If this is truly to be a community center," Wilson said, "it's important to make sure all of those components become part of the discussion and plan moving forward. We have not been included in discussions in the past; it's our job to make sure we are in the future."

Sites In The Sights Of Community Center Task Force

Some have set their sights on Orleans having a community center with room for all ages and all interests. The community center feasibility task force heard last week that creating such a facility is easier if supporters have some ideas about sites where it could be located.

Meeting with consultants David Eisen and David Pollak of Abacus Architects Feb. 24, the task force reviewed plans to reach out to the public to assess interests, to investigate programming options, and to think about locations.

"This community center has to be someplace in Orleans," Eisen said. "In the RFQ (request for qualifications from the town), it talked overwhelmingly about programming, and that's fine. We believe it's helpful for everybody if in parallel we talk about places in Orleans where this could go." Once "we have a sense where it might go," he said later, "we can do much more detailed programming."

The town of Lincoln hired the company to look at six sites described by Pollak as "underutilized town properties." At a town meeting there, voters were given two blue dots and invited to place them on their preferred properties. At meeting's end, "There was one board where you could barely see the picture," Pollak recalled, "so we had a consensus decision."

Thinking now about possible sites in Orleans was a new perspective for some task force members who had been considering how to inventory existing programs and conceive new ones. "One of the big challenges I don't think we've shared," said planning board's representative Alice Van Oot, "is the land and siting. Sadly, Cape Cod is not creating new land... Should we be thinking more openly about this site constraint?"

George Meservey, the town's director of planning and community development, said he had "seven ideas" about private properties as sites and suggested that task force member Keith Campbell, representing the council on aging, "has another seven. People getting ready to pay a betterment for sewer (could be a) driver for sales if not development... I'm more interested in a sizable property with a smaller start (for a community center). Then you show it and grow it."

Campbell said his "number one location is right across from town hall... There's a lot of land there; some needs to be cleared. The town has right of first refusal on the VFW property right next door. It's right across the street from the baseball field." Task force chair Fritz Luft noted the site abuts the Centers for Culture and History in Orleans properties, suggesting the area "would turn into a kind of campus." Campbell also expressed interest in the Governor Prentice property, which the town bought for affordable housing and other municipal uses.

Meservey said that "town zoning allows all municipal zoning in all municipal districts. We're not tied to the downtown business area for this study. In my mind, there's enormous potential public benefit to putting a significant anchor in the right place in our community to create mutual benefit. There are some sites downtown, all private. I'd like to figure out how to have conversations about private properties." The appropriate time for that, said Meservey, "is when we've defined the basic parameters this committee is looking for, and translate that into a land need. Then we can talk about properties."

"The more possible properties and programming go hand in hand," Eisen said later, "the less likely we are to design this wonderful building but have nowhere to put it."

For the task force, the first step is completing an inventory of existing services and resources. With that in hand, Eisen will come to town to visit facilities and have follow-up chats with contacts. He will also look at some potential sites so "we get to know the lay of the land."

Other tasks ahead include establishing core and broader-range user groups, ensuring that no needs are overlooked, and conducting a public outreach process, including meetings and surveys. Funding sources, both public and private, are another area of interest.

At last week's meeting, task force members were quick to respond to Eisen's invitation to share their expertise. "There are things we will never know about Orleans unless you tell us," he said.

Tracy Murphy, representing Orleans Elementary School parents, told the consultants that "people come at (a community center) from a lot of different angles. Some think of a big recreation building with gyms, some think something like Wellfleet Preservation Hall. (We need to) figure out what a community center looks like in Orleans. We're neither Harwich or Wellfleet."

At-large member Jamie Balliett, the father of two young boys, said the town "is very fortunate to have an excellent library" but "needs to take a step in the direction of helping families and our year-round residents and seniors have something else to connect with. I do not think Orleans needs to build a gigantic facility. It needs to be the right size. We need to get a lot of input."

Recreation advisory committee representative Kyle Wibby, the father of three girls ages 5 and under, wants to "find some additional recreational space for all of Orleans... We're a seasonal town but with a population of diverse young families and a senior population. Meeting everybody's needs will be a challenge."

The cultural district committee's representative, Bonny Campbell-Runyon, recalled teaching a preschool class located in a nursing home. "I really highly value the combining of ages and abilities, and the knowledge that comes with interacting with different age groups," she said. Given the existing community spaces in town, she asked, "Do we need a big building or a bunch of smaller community center-type places?"

Keith Campbell, the COA's representative and a resident since 1963, reminded everyone that more than 50 percent of the population is over 60. He spoke of the challenges faced by the current senior center, which is located in a flood plain. "Maybe we should be incorporating the senior center in (a community center) plan," he said.

At-large member Luft said there had been "a lot of discussion, rightfully so, of young people and the needs of seniors, but there are a lot of people in between. I would like to represent them."

"I think the biggest challenge is what people noted," Eisen said. "What do you really need? When we put together the plans and turn them toward the community, we want to see your community reflected in that mirror."

During the meeting, Eisen revealed another reason for his upcoming visit to Orleans. "I want to stop at The Red Balloon," he said. "I have a teensy granddaughter."