COMMUNITY CONNECTION

A proposal to add a public computer lab at the South Side library branch.

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Abstract

The new millennium once thought of as the far-off future, is here. Technology that seemed like magic is now commonplace in today's society. It is critical that individuals and communities be connected and have access to this modern technology. Libraries play a significant role in providing free public access to computers and the internet.

Problem

The South Side library branch does not offer their local community a public computer lab only due to a lack of budget. If the South Side branch is not allowed to serve its local community to the fullest, an opportunity is lost to make an individual's life better. Families and the community at large are more prosperous because of the positive role technology can have in their lives.

Value of a Connected Library

The value of a library equipped with a computer lab is vast. The positive impact starts with individuals, weaves its way through the community, and flows into local small businesses.

Individuals and low-income families receive access to education far more affordable than a traditional institution. They can become better informed about health issues and financial management, thus making their families stronger. Job resources are plentiful. Online access to job listings and the ability to apply to several at once saves time and energy. Continuing education allows someone to increase their skills and better their employment situation.

Communities benefit from after-school programs for youth and teenagers. Pre-kindergarten children benefit from early learning programs. High school students have a safe place to study and do homework. They are also able to research colleges, and an online application process increases the chance they will apply. Many youths also take this opportunity to find volunteer opportunities in their area.

Small businesses also use the library as a valuable resource. An equipped library provides local business with industry standard software, computers, copiers, and meeting spaces. Business-focused data, like industry trends and demographics, help an entrepreneur best take advantage of their local market. Email and sophisticated mailing lists help a business to distribute their information and thrive.

Solution

The addition of a public computer lab for the South Side branch would be quick and easy. Major computer manufacturers, such as Dell and Hewlett Packard have programs for public sector purchasing. Technology prices are competitive and affordable. With a small investment, the South Side library branch can offer a full-service computer lab to their community which will help everyone who is touched to flourish.

Introduction

Remember when the year 2000 was thought of as the far-off future and was the setting for many a science-fiction story? It's incredible to think that society is now fully entrenched in the new millennium. Technology that seemed impossible and bordered on magical is now commonplace. Having access and an understanding of technology is imperative so that an individual and community can thrive. Matt Mullenweg, an entrepreneur and best known for creating the highly popular WordPress software, knows just how technology can positively impact a community when he said, "Technology is best when it brings people together."

To equip communities with the knowledge required for today's society and help bring people together many local library branches provide free access to a computer lab. Sadly, the South Side library branch does not have a computer lab, due only to a lack of budget. Libraries are not an archaic relic of the past. Today's libraries play a vibrant and vital part in a local community. If the South Side branch is not allowed to serve its local community to the fullest, an opportunity is lost to make an individual's life better.

A Library's Value

It is clear that today's society has shifted from relying on industry and manufacturing to one of providing information. It is critical that individuals connect with the technology that supplies this information. For many communities and low-income families, a library is their only means of access to computers and the internet. In 2006 the Urban Libraries Council surveyed fifty-four libraries and reported that 92% of those provide computer instruction on a daily basis (Urban Libraries Council, 3). Individuals flock to a library for their services. An American Library Association fact sheet stated that public opinion believes that libraries offer a free opportunity for education and self-help (ALA, 2002).

These offerings start with valuable resources for low-income families, which include access to education, health, and wellness information. They continue with benefits for individuals at large: employment listings, job training, literacy training, G.E.D. preparation, after-school activities, college application and more. They provide the community with enhancements, such as being able to connect with families and friends, access to the news, mentoring opportunities, and finding volunteer opportunities. Finally, a library also positively impacts local businesses by providing market research, demographic data, information on running a business, and access to computers, printers, and meeting spaces.

An informal survey conducted during the writing of this proposal ascertained the value of a library to the general population. The key findings are that:

- Every respondent said the library was a valuable resource to the community.

- Every respondent said that public computers add a high value to a library.
- 70 percent of respondents said that they would help contribute money for a public computer lab if they were asked.

It is clear that we cannot underestimate a library's value to a community. To do so would be to deprive its citizens of an essential tool needed to function in this modern age. Author Joseph Wood Krutch described it best when he said, "Technology made large populations possible; large populations now make technology indispensable."

Benefits

The influence of today's technology in modern society cannot be dismissed or ignored. When transportation made the evolution from the horse and buggy to automobiles, it quickly became clear that individuals would have to be able to adapt and move forward. This same advancement is happening with computers and the internet. To deny a segment of the population access to every-day technology would be to leave them behind as the rest of society leaps past.

The Global Public Inclusive Infrastructure or GPII is a consortium of organizations whose goal is to remove barriers to technology and information and build an infrastructure that would make technology less expensive, more effective, and easier to use. The GPII recognizes the vital part that technology plays in life and also how libraries can be one of the most valuable ways to reach across a technology gap.

> "Libraries … are part of the dramatic expansion of information technology in daily life. For the many people who do not have their own computers or Internet access, these institutions provide a portal into that world.

> An accessible, inclusive society is a strong society. Technologies that welcome everyone, everywhere, send a powerful message to each individual that we are all connected, and that our contributions are more valuable when they are more widely harvested and shared" (gpii.net).

With the leadership potential libraries can take in the digital age, let's take a closer look at the specific benefits a public computer lab would provide at the South Side branch.

Resources for Low-Income Families

A personal computer and internet access is ubiquitous in a majority of households today. However, for many, the cost of such a system is out of reach and not affordable. That seems strange, but it is an undeniable fact. In 2017, the Wireless Broadband Alliance determined that 78.4 million individuals in the United States, or 24 percent of the population, are still unconnected. This "digital divide" is a critical rift in society because:

> "Connectivity shapes the life of the individual: being connected shapes the life of the individual on multiple levels. Digital inclusion is a means for generating savings and for

self-improvement as connected individuals can benefit from online courses and can look and apply for jobs…connecting individuals generates new opportunities for civic participation, for economic development, and for personal growth" (WBA, 14).

The WBA determined the breakdown of the unconnected population in urban and rural areas shown in the following table:

Urban and Rural Populations Unconnected (WBA, 5)

Urban Population	Percent of U.S. Urban Population	Rural Population	Percent of U.S. Rural Population
62.1 Million	23 percent	16.2 Million	28 percent

Two ways internet connectivity shapes the lives of a low-income family are education and health needs.

Education
With so many learning resources now available through online access, the upfront cost is significantly lower than traditional learning institutions and the range of topics is more extensive than what a single location can offer. The ability to enroll in educational opportunities with such ease provides the chance to break out of the cycle of poverty.

Health and Wellness
Along with providing for the mind, taking care of the body is just as necessary. Without any effort, a low-income individual can research affordable health care providers and insurance plans, make appointments with doctors, and learn about proper nutrition and fitness, all of which will change and enrich a person's life for the better.

Provide for the Community at Large
Just as an individual can benefit from public computer access, so does the local community. A full range of educational assistance becomes available along with employment resources and community enhancements.

Comprehensive Educational Resources
Pre-kindergarten children benefit from early learning which increases their chance for a successful education. Teenagers in high school have valuable resources to help with their homework, not to mention a quiet and safe place where they may study. The time spent on researching colleges is reduced, along with the application process thereby increasing the chance a student will apply. The educational benefits continue as computer access provides preparatory studies for obtaining a G.E.D. which will help improve an individual or families standard of

living. There are activities for Science Technology Engineering Arts and Math (S.T.E.A.M.). Moreover, anyone can raise their digital literacy which is a requirement for most jobs. When the school year is over, students participate in summer reading programs to help them avoid the "summer slump." These summer reading programs are particularly effective as the School Library Journal found out. They conducted a study of summer reading sessions, and their conclusions were exciting.

> "As hoped, our findings showed that third-grade students who participated in summer reading programs scored higher on reading tests at the beginning of fourth grade and didn't experience summer learning loss. They also scored higher on the post-tests than students who did not participate. Although students who didn't participate in summer reading programs made gains, they didn't reach the level of students who did participate" (slj.com).

The teachers were also pleased with the students who participated in the program because they exhibited more confidence in the classroom along with a positive attitude about reading.

After-School Activities
Possibly the most important benefit a computer equipped library can offer is after-school programs, which keep students off the streets and away from potential drug and gang activity. A fact sheet produced by the Afterschool Alliance confirmed the beneficial effects an after-school program has on children. The Alliance states that such students "exhibited significant improvement in their feelings and attitudes and indicators of behavioral adjustment. Students in programs also saw reductions in drug use and problem behavior, such as aggression, noncompliance, and conduct problems (Afterschool Alliance, 4)." Can the city council afford to ignore such a wise investment in the future of our children's lives?

Job Resources
The benefits to a community do not stop with the children. Adults are also positively affected by open access to computers and the internet. Just like students, adults have the opportunity to enroll in online training to gain a new skill or increase their knowledge and open up new paths at their current places of employment. Almost exclusively, job listings are available online, and that provides a job seeker with the ability to apply for multiple jobs in a fraction of the time it would take to apply in person.

Civic Enhancements
Bridging the technological gap in communities empowers the individual and allows them to take more significant ownership in their families, neighborhoods, and their own lives. These people become better informed about local and state issues, gain knowledge which strengthens their day-to-day living and provides them the opportunity to pass that experience to the younger generation.

Connection with Family
One does not have to look far to see the influence social media has gained in society. However, social connection extends much farther than a video about a cute puppy or a picture of a

hamburger. Now someone can immediately contact a family member in the case of an emergency with an instant message. Email reduces the wait time for back-and-forth correspondence. Even the simple task of arranging a family get together or contacting a prodigal friend has intangible value that positively affects the morale of an individual.

Regular Commitments

Personal activities involve long lines and wait time which online access significantly reduces. Adults can access their bank accounts and manage their money with greater ease and visibility. Money managing advice is readily available, allowing parents to make better choices with their finances. Using this knowledge provides them with the confidence and ability to save for their future. Many municipal services are available online such as applying for various permits or renewing a driver's license. No longer does someone have to plan for hours of waiting at the Department of Motor Vehicles as online submission removes the burden of a necessary activity and the time saved can be passed on to family or friends. Governmental forms are instantly available along with information about local laws and regulations. Even the ability to contact an official is now at the fingertips of a connected community. With knowledge in hand, civic engagement increases and individuals take pride and ownership in their area.

Helping Others

Perhaps the most important benefit of having a computer lab available to the public is the opportunity for people to help each other. An impact study conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services in 2010 found that 63 percent of library users surveyed said that "they had used a library computer or internet connection to help friends, family members, coworkers, and even strangers" (IMLS, 46). Examples from this study included buying essential items online on other people's behalf, looking up prices of medical supplies for aging family members, and providing employment information to friends and family. Also, in concert with after-school activities, the opportunities exist for adults to mentor youth and provide active involvement with their interests. This connection also allows people and youth, in particular, the ability to find volunteer opportunities in their immediate area.

The Pew Research Center conducted an extensive survey of library users in 2016. Users who had used the library in the past twelve months were more likely to have had positive outcomes from their time. Many library-goers stated that "their personal learning experience helped them feel more capable; opened up new perspectives about their lives; helped them make new friends; made them feel more connected to their local community; and got them more involved in volunteer activities" (Pew Research, 14-15).

Focusing on others strengthens a community in ways that carry on through the generations.

Impact on Small Businesses

Not initially seen is the help and services a public computer lab provides to local businesses.

Foundational Resources

Many small businesses, when they are first starting out, leverage the technology and information a library has to enter the market. A technologically connected library provides a young company

with databases that contain market research and demographic analysis to help them better understand their customer base and make smarter decisions. A young entrepreneur can receive training on setting up a business strategy or plan. Once they have a solid foundation, the advantages of the library as a partner do not stop there. A library can provide critical documents such as employee policies and tax forms.

Reducing the Initial Investment

Any small business owner will tell you that the cost of industry standard software can be overwhelming, not to mention the costs associated with advertising and marketing. Once again the library can step in and ease the burden of start-up costs. Graphic design programs like Adobe Photoshop or InDesign have become the standard, but these programs can also be cost-prohibitive to own, especially if the business owner is not familiar with the program. Not only can they receive training at a library, but they also have use of the software to create professional marketing materials. A fledgling business needs a professional letterhead, business card, and logo. In addition to the computers, fax machines and copiers are available to lessen the initial cost of starting a business. The library can also help them "hit the ground running" by providing them with business-focused data like industry trends or the ability to electronically distribute promotional material with sophisticated mailing lists, thus saving money on postage. The small business flourishes and positively impacts the local economy.

Kent Palmer is a business librarian in Naperville, IL who supports entrepreneurs, start-ups, and other small businesses. In an interview conducted by the American Libraries Magazine, he provided insight on how his library meets the needs of these individuals. They come to his library for "assistance with developing market information, demographics, and writing a business plan."

The most exciting information he provided was the main benefits of his libraries help. His services were created "with the intent of democratizing the process for business start-ups to access funding by giving smaller enterprises the same top-quality, professional approach to business planning that larger enterprises develop through expensive advisors and consultants" (ALM).

Reciprocated Training

Some small business owners, in exchange for these free services, are happy to hold evening workshops in their area of expertise with other interested people. Many like-minded individuals can meet and share knowledge with one another, thereby enriching or inspiring others to get involved and better their community.
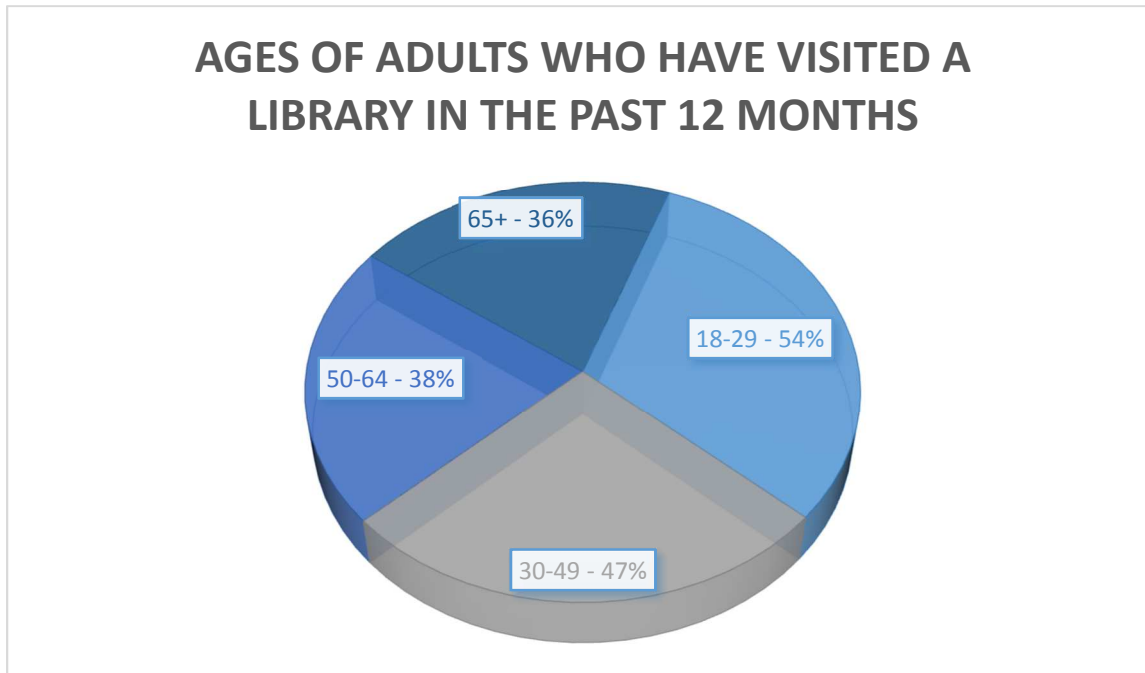
Raise the Profile of the Library

In fact, increasing the value of a library raises the profile of the library, which has a profound effect on the community. Libraries are a trusted place for the public. The Urban Libraries Council study came to an important conclusion.

"…public libraries are positioned to fuel not only new, but next economies because of their roles in building technology skills, entrepreneurial activity, and vibrant, livable places" (ULC, 3).

The Next Generation

Libraries are not relics of the past or on the decline. The chart, below, shows that the younger "millennial" generation is using the library just as much as older adults according to the Pew Research survey.

AGES OF ADULTS WHO HAVE VISITED A LIBRARY IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

- 65+ - 36%
- 18-29 - 54%
- 50-64 - 38%
- 30-49 - 47%

SirsiDynix is a leading provider of technology solutions for libraries for over thirty years, and they recognize the importance of providing up-to-date services for the younger generation. In fact, they compare it with securing a customer for a business. "Smart marketers know that if you can establish a pattern, especially at a major life-transition—like say, graduation—then you'll have a customer for life."

With so many benefits, both tangible and intangible, that reach far throughout the community, can we say that the South Side branch should not provide the same opportunity to impact our local neighborhoods and citizens?

Bridge the Technology Gap

The city council can provide a public computer lab for the South Side branch quickly and efficiently. Major computer manufacturers, such as Dell and Hewlett Packard have programs for public sector purchasing. They offer desktop computers which feature the latest Windows 10 operating system. Each unit is tested rigorously for dependability and conform with Energy Star

specifications. For example, the HP Pro Desk 400 G3 mini does not require much space and is built for processing speed with a 2.76Ghz chip. 4-gigabytes of memory ensure that the system runs without any delays and a 500-gigabyte hard drive means that there is plenty of space for years to come. Included in the system is wireless networking, along with the latest in security, the Trusted Platform Module (TPM) 2.0, for peace of mind against any outside threats. The price for this desktop computer is $642.00, along with a bright, clear 15-inch monitor for $118.

A long lasting and efficient printer is $70. A single printer is enough to cover the needs of the lab in the beginning, and the paper and ink supplies will not be a budgetary hardship.

If the South Side branch does not have extra desks to accommodate these computers, a functional desk can be purchased at an office supply store like Staples for $60.00 each along with a comfortable chair, also for $60.00. Included in this purchase are surge protectors for $20 each.

A five-year technical support contract from H.P. for each computer is $174.00. This contract provides four hours of onsite support to provide peace of mind for the continued running of the lab, as well as setting up the computers.

Below is the cost of a lab consisting of either three, four, or five computers. The recommended starting amount is four systems.

	Cost of Computer Systems for South Side Branch		
	Three Systems	Four Systems	Five Systems
Computers	$2,280	$3,040	$3,800
Printers	$70	$70	$70
Desks + Surge Protectors	$240	$320	$400
Chairs	$180	$240	$300
Paper + Ink (ongoing)	$125	$125	$125
Technical Support	$522	$696	$870
TOTALS	**$3,417**	**$4,491**	**$5,565**

Conclusion

In the 1980's society entered the "computer age" and the way individuals consumed information changed. Today is the "internet age," and the wealth of information available is higher than we have seen before. Now, more than ever, it is vital that our local communities have full access to current technology. Libraries are the best resource for computer access and a critical contributor to the well-being of a community. The South Side library branch does not offer a public computer lab due to a lack of budget, but the investment of less than $5,000 could provide that service.

Stewart Brand author of "The Whole Earth Catalog" said, "Once a new technology rolls over you, if you're not part of the steamroller, you're part of the road." Let's not allow the South Side community to be a casualty of new technology, but rather a community that flourishes.

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