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# Community Engagement Report

Prepared for Anderson Public Library  
by the Midwest Collaborative for  
Library Services

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# Summary of Community Conversations and Interviews

The Anderson Public Library embarked on a new strategic planning process in August 2020, which included engaging members of the community. This report summarizes the engagement process and resulting themes that were identified. “Community” has been defined as the library service area of the Anderson Public Library. The library used a combination of both virtual community conversations and one-on-one interviews with a wide variety of community residents and community leaders. The conversations and interviews were based on The Harwood Institute’s model of community engagement, which seeks to “Turn Outward” to the community to determine their aspirations, and in turn, prioritize services that are in alignment with the true needs of the community.

Five community conversations were held between September 14 and September 17, 2020. The conversations took place virtually, using the Zoom meeting platform. The conversations were facilitated by Jan Davidson and Lissa Krull of the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services. These were opportunities for residents to discuss their aspirations for the community, the concerns they have about reaching those aspirations, and to identify areas where the library might help. Thirteen community members participated in the 90-minute conversations. Additionally, the members of the library’s strategic planning committee conducted one-on-one interviews with various community leaders, seeking similar information to the community conversations. Thirty-two community leaders were interviewed.

The notes from the conversations and interviews have been summarized in a blended community narrative and public knowledge summary. The community aspirations and community concerns have also been organized in word cloud illustrations with words that community members used to describe their aspirations and concerns. Additionally, information on how the conversation participants and interviewees believe the library can help the community to reach its aspirations are organized, themed, and aligned with specific aspirations or concerns that they might address.

# Community Narrative

Community members openly shared their aspirations and concerns. The following is a narrative of the information, summarized in a blended form of The Harwood Institute models of the “Community Narrative” and “Public Knowledge Summary”. The themes are listed in the order most mentioned.

## **Anderson Public Library Community Narrative/Public Knowledge Summary**

*The Anderson Public Library community aspires to be a community that takes care of its own. This would mean meeting the needs of all residents, including its children. They aspire to be a community that is prosperous, financially and in well-being, so that they can sustain and grow with future generations. They want to live in a community that both is safe and feels safe, one that is aesthetically pleasing and clean. They want to see support and development of the arts and culture in their town, and to see diversity within the arts. They want a community that offers many options of activities, events, and entertainment for all ages, as well as a variety of restaurants and strong local businesses. They wish for a sense of pride in the community from all residents that will lead to not only awareness, but involvement, ownership, and citizens taking action to improve from within. They want a community that is connected – where people know each other and care about each other. They desire a community that embraces diversity and does the necessary work to ensure equity among all, a community where every resident feels welcome and has a place at the table. Education is important to those who participated, and they long for a community that highly values life-long learning and provides excellent educational opportunities for their children. They also desire a partnership of community members and local government that will support a strong vision for Anderson’s future. One resident summarized this with the wish that the community would be one that, “entertains, educates, and involves.”*

## **Community Awareness**

Throughout the conversations and interviews, individuals mentioned that they want to live in a community that is aware of the issues facing its residents, and one that makes an effort to meet the needs of its members. This means a community that knows the issues it faces, admits to those realities even when it is frustrating or embarrassing, and takes action together. Several participants work for local nonprofits, and acknowledged that until they did, they didn’t see the incredible need in their community. They desire to live in a place where people step up to help

solve problems. They spoke of a wish for more community members to be aware of needs and see themselves as part of the solution.

Participants want to live in a community that makes sure all needs of its children are met, from basic human needs, to educational opportunities, to activities and extracurricular programs. They want to be sure there is good public transit. They spoke of having enough quality and affordable housing that is well-kept and looks nice yet doesn't price people out of the community. More than one person brought up that a good community is not just one that has many social services and charities, but rather one that has the RIGHT services for those who live and work in that specific community.

Anderson has a population that is starting to age, which brings demand for new services. Participants see a lack of programming options for the aging population. They expressed a desire for expanded senior transit options that are affordable, convenient, accessible, and safe: "We need cheap Uber for old people," as one participant, a senior herself, said with a laugh. They feel that public transit options for the general community need to be expanded as well, including longer hours, additional routes, and options other than buses. There is a sense that more jobs are needed, and specifically jobs that pay a living wage. Several mentioned that a lack of quality, affordable housing is a problem. They mentioned feeling sad to see all the empty homes while knowing so many are homeless and wished something could be done to solve both problems. Individuals noted that the statistics on their town are not something to be proud of: that drug issues, juvenile offenses, poverty rates, and food insecurity are on the rise, that Anderson has a high ranking in the state in regards to child abuse, and that much disparity exists within the community. They feel that the community is not very handicap accessible, and that even when jobs are available, there is a lack of training in order to have people equipped to fill them. They mentioned limited access to technology and technology training for many. In every conversation and many interviews, the issue of a large homeless population in Anderson came up. There were different opinions about whether it is primarily a problem to be solved because people facing homelessness need help, or whether it is primarily a problem because their presence causes other people to feel unsafe, but all acknowledged there is an issue to address.

There was an overall sense that Anderson has a lot to offer in meeting the needs of its residents, but that there is still more that could be done. Those who identified themselves as working for different nonprofits in town spoke in very hopeful tones about the networks that exist among Anderson's social service agencies. They feel that a strength of this community is in how connected the agencies are, in how they share resources and information, and how the representatives know each other and meet regularly. Interestingly, the opposite did come up

through interviews – some individuals feel that there is a LACK of coordinated effort among the organizations, even stating that, “organizations need to set aside their turf war and work together. Everyone wants to take credit for solving problems, but no one seems to want to do the hard work.” Another individual noted that people seem siloed and don’t work well together, that there is “a lot of talk but very little follow-through.”

## **Prosperity**

Residents of Anderson used many different words and phrases that come together to form a picture of an aspirational thriving, prosperous community. Both conversations and interviews revealed a large desire to live in a beautiful, aesthetically pleasing, clean community. Individuals specifically mentioned good roads, neighborhoods with curb appeal, and a beautiful, active, bustling downtown. The infrastructure would be such that people would want to spend time in the community. It should be a desirable place to live, a community that people *choose* to be in rather than leave to seek out better. The community would include plenty of jobs, specifically jobs that provide a living wage, for those who want to work and be prosperous enough to support those done working to live comfortably through their retirement years. Many mentioned that they would like to see opportunities that would allow residents to improve their own economic standing. They spoke of a wish for a prosperous future for their children and for generations to come.

These discussions around aesthetics and prosperity brought out one of the largest areas of concern for participants. There was discussion in almost every encounter about blight, empty warehouses, poor roads, neighborhoods that “look trashy,” crumbling buildings (both commercial and homes) that have been empty for years with no sense of anything changing. One person did note some road work had been done, but felt the city was using that as a way to say something was happening, while not putting improvement resources into other problems. One person mentioned that the infrastructure of the city seems to be, “built on a 1960s-90s love of the automobile that forces us to have to drive everywhere.” Many believe there is not enough green space, and that some lots in town could be converted into parks and trails. Others feel that parks and trails are something the city *does* have to offer, but that improvements need to be made in their maintenance and safety.

Many mentioned an ugly, unattractive, depressed look confronting both people within and those who visit the community. Some have read (and agree with the likelihood) that this is leading to a decline in population, as youth move away, and new people don’t want to move into the area. Interestingly, many of the people we spoke to were fairly recent additions to the community. They spoke, though, of reasons for coming being about affordability or family nearby, rather than the actual community being desirable. One participant shared the

metaphor she had developed to explain the community this way: “It seems like this horrible thing happened in the city’s past, when big industry left, and the city is depressed. Like any depressed person, it has been trying to come back, but hasn’t found the right therapist yet. In the meantime, it’s just sitting there wallowing and hoping someday something will help.”

Likely because so many participants are associated with local nonprofits, when asked why participants felt that economic stability and prosperity were important, several spoke about creating a community where nonprofits are able to fundraise effectively and benefit from tax funds. The point was made that in a struggling community, nonprofit agencies struggle that much more to gain the funding they need to meet the needs.

### **Growth**

A natural outcome of the prosperity of the community would be growth, another much-discussed aspiration for the community. One participant identified desiring a community that is, “growing in all respects.” Some focused on a community that would attract new *people* to it, one that is desirable enough for people to want to move there for reasons other than its proximity to other places. They also desire to keep quality people in town for more of their lives. This was a point of concern for many: a teen participant mentioned feeling like the youth of Anderson are “just waiting until they can leave.” A middle-aged individual said he wishes for a community where people want to stay after graduation, but that he doesn’t see this currently, which he feels is because opportunities for jobs aren’t abundant, the city is not attractive, and there aren’t enough entertainment options. Some focused their idea of growth on attracting new *businesses*; a community that would attract outside larger businesses to want to invest in the area. Some feel like this is the past of Anderson and wish that the community would move on from glorifying the past, when the auto industry was a huge part of what made the town prosperous. Those individuals would rather see growth in small, locally-formed businesses, which will be addressed in more detail in the next category.

Participants are concerned that if the city is an environment that makes it difficult for businesses to be prosperous, doesn’t attract new growth, and doesn’t actively seek out and work to bring growth, nothing will change. One participant mentioned that the area DOES have some wonderful assets, such as Hoosier Park, but he feels Anderson tends to rely on that one thing to carry the town, and that this will not drive the community forward. Across the conversations and interviews, there was a sense of desiring a community with strong, positive economic and social growth, and concern that Anderson hasn’t yet found a way to kick-start this.



## **Support Local**

Anderson residents and those who work in the community both aspire to support local. This aspiration ranged from developing more small, local businesses to raising up local talent, to having local entertainment options, to creating a small-town feel for their community. They want to see a thriving community filled with functioning businesses. Many are tired of hearing about “the good old days” when large corporations made up most of the jobs and economy of Anderson, and don’t feel that the way to address concerns about growth is to try to recreate what worked in the past, but rather to inspire new, local, small business development. One participant specifically mentioned a concern in a lack of businesses on the west side of town. They want to support local entrepreneurship, which would create local jobs and help community members feel connected to each other because they would know the business owners and patrons. They would like to see young talent recognized and invested in, in a way that would lead to young people staying (or returning after college) and growing the local economy.

The idea of having activities, community events, and just generally “things to do” came up in every conversation and many of the interviews. The specifics varied, but the most mentioned was simply that they would like to have options available right in Anderson, rather than taking their business outside of town. Participants would like to see a busy, utilized, bustling downtown full of people. They feel this would be attained by offering a wider variety of restaurants and shopping which included more locally-owned, family-owned businesses, more specialty and boutique options, rather than just chains and fast food. Residents spoke of being “foodies” themselves, and of desiring a place where they can entertain family and friends who visit, rather than feeling embarrassed at a lack of options or needing to drive to Indianapolis to show visitors a good time. Younger participants expressed both a desire for, and concerns over a lack of current, options of entertainment. Participants of varying ages desired a wider variety of programs and opportunities to explore their passions and be exposed to new interests. They spoke of community-wide events such as carnivals, festivals, nonprofit-sponsored opportunities, and free, public events that would offer entertainment, but would also expose the community to each other and to the cultures that exist within Anderson, and give people a chance to get to know their neighbors. Many see a gap in offerings for cross-generational programming and events.

## **Arts & Culture**

Participants would like to live in a community that supports the arts and culture, and some raised a desire to see an increase or revival of the arts in Anderson. They aspire to more opportunities to be exposed to a wider variety of the arts. Some spoke of having more

museums or art fairs; others spoke of more cultural events to attend (theater, musical performances, dance, etc.) One participant felt that a desirable community to live in would be one that, “embraces and draws out the arts and culture of its own residents.” She spoke of the beauty in the diversity of residents, and a wish to see that held up as an asset and valued by the community through artistic expression. Participants agreed this would be a way to work toward a more inclusive and diversity-embracing community, as well as a more aesthetically pleasing one.

Some feel that Anderson has a lack of downtown development of the arts. They noted that the space is certainly there, but that someone would need to champion the cause and connect agencies. Some feel the community doesn’t currently offer “anything” in the way of arts and entertainment; others feel that there is some, but not enough, and not with enough variety.

### **Safety**

Like most people, residents of Anderson aspire to live in a community that IS safe (lower crime, social issues addressed to make it safe to walk freely, etc) as well as FEELS safe (parents feel safe allowing children to participate in downtown programs, individuals enjoy spending time downtown). Safety came up many, many times.

Again and again, respondents said that Anderson just does not feel safe. Issues around drugs, vagrancy, and a lack of care for community property were mentioned specifically. Many people identified homelessness as a major issue facing Anderson. Interestingly, this was mentioned in several different ways, from varying perspectives. Some spoke of fear of this part of the community, of discomfort in being downtown and specifically at the library. They mentioned being approached for money or being intimidated by homeless people standing around outside and inside the library, seemingly with no purpose. Others, many of whom identified themselves as working for social service nonprofits, had a more empathetic view and see the problem being with meeting the needs of the homeless people as residents who should be served. All agreed clearly that there *is* a problem with homelessness facing this community. They spoke of a lack of resources to help those in need. They also spoke of residents who do not face these hardships themselves, who come from a place of more privilege and options, simply avoiding downtown (and the library), and the negative effects this ends up having on the community. Some feel that this only deepens the community divides, makes it less appealing to restaurants and other businesses to exist downtown, makes the library less effective of a resource, and makes the problems even more complicated to overcome.

## Connected

Members of the Anderson community made it very clear that they want to live in a community that feels connected; a community where people know and understand each other. Several mentioned that they would love to feel like they live in a small town, while reaping the benefits of urban life. They want to know their neighbors and be more aware of the issues facing each other. They want a place to live and work that feels friendly and welcoming; a community where people respect themselves and others and show that through how they live and interact. They would like a community that supports social interaction through programs and activities. One individual mentioned that they'd like to identify their community as one where, "it doesn't matter where you come from or what you look like, you're one of US." Many participants in that conversation nodded their agreement and support of this idea.

They described a community where all residents and workers feel included and like they have a voice and a place. Over and over in interviews and conversations, participants described a community that is caring; that cares for its own; where neighbors look out for each other; one where people make decisions based on compassion and empathy; one where people are "treated right." A community where people characterize themselves and others as giving, and where everyone works together to make the community better and help every individual and family to flourish. People spoke of a community with a spirit of interconnectedness, where people have a "we're all in this together" attitude. They felt this attitude would be shown by the fact that people would get along and cooperate to improve the community for everyone's benefit.

Some feel that there is still much work to be done regarding mutual respect for each other, and that the community feels more polarized now than in the past. The word narcissism was used, and some felt that residents are only concerned about how things affect them, rather than the whole. They spoke about a lack of connection, of not knowing their neighbors. The point was also raised, by several different people, that the most involved people in the community are aging quickly. They feel that younger adults are too busy working and raising their families to commit much time or effort into the wider community. Often, people work outside Anderson, spending the majority of their week outside of the community, and don't really have time to invest back into it. There was a lot of sympathy expressed for this busy time of life, but also concerns raised about what this means for the potential of the community to help itself improve. One participant suggested that it seems the community is not "all in" when it comes to motivation to better itself.

## **Community Pride**

Anderson residents aspire to see and hear a strong sense of community pride and civic responsibility. These topics came up again and again in the conversations, always with much agreement from others. Participants spoke of the most attractive communities being those in which residents feel good and take pride in where they live, speak with pride about their community, and tell others how great their city is. They spoke about what happens when people keep up their own property and feel a shared sense of responsibility and respect for community property. This in turn creates a community where all are invested and feel like they can (and should) be part of the solutions needed. It then extends beyond property to causing residents to make investments of their time, energy, and resources back into the community through volunteering and supporting both the agencies meeting community needs and those offering more opportunities (such as the library, civic organizations, etc.) Those with pride in their communities are willing to put their money and time where their hearts are, which benefits all.

Many feel this is a major concern for Anderson right now. While they feel nonprofits and organizations are trying hard, the sense seems to be that too many individual residents have just “given up,” that they don’t see a future worth fighting for. Many participants feel that most residents are hanging on to a “glory days” past that is not going to come back, rather than seeking a new path forward. They shared that conversations about their community tend toward the negative and dwelling on what was, rather than what could be. Some feel the community needs to be willing to acknowledge the reality of where it is right *now* and be more forward-thinking and creative. They worry that the community is, “a little sleepy and reactive instead of proactive.” Many feel that there are some truly wonderful things happening, but that until a much larger percentage of residents consciously decide to take pride in Anderson and find a way forward, together, nothing will change and the community will stay stuck. One respondent noted that she feels the community, “has not caught on to the fire that Anderson can be better again.”

## **Leadership & Vision**

Along with individual pride and action, participants aspire to be part of a community with strong leadership and vision; one that thinks boldly and puts the whole ahead of the individual; one with dynamic, courageous, non-partisan local government and leadership. They want a community that looks “both back and forward”- one that honors the past and beauty of what once was, while using purpose, creativity, and future-thinking to move forward. They spoke of local government with diverse hiring practices which create leadership that truly represents and reflects the make-up of the community; policies that enforce the values the community

holds, like safety, beautiful aesthetics, and economic growth; collaboration between government, nonprofits, and individuals. They aspire to live in a community with a clear, well-communicated sense of purpose. They want local government to be focused on the needs of the community, rather than their own power or importance. They want a community that dreams together and aspires to be more than they are, that shares a vision of what it could be. They want those making decisions to think deeper than the first, obvious answer of what would help. They want leadership to ASK the community what people want and need. They want a community that works toward acknowledging and fixing problems rather than ignoring them; a community that makes strides to do better rather than accepting the way things currently are.

When asked how Anderson is doing when it comes to these aspirations, participants expressed that this is a major area where much growth is needed, but also that is ripe for such growth. Many feel the community is poised to make huge strides, but that leadership needs to get on board and drive the growth, and to be willing to shift their focus from maintaining power to getting things done. Many different participants brought up concerns about a local government where the same people are elected, and nothing changes. Some even feel the need for “a total reworking of the political systems at play in the community.” Concerns were raised about a lack of transparency in the local government, and even nepotism in hiring that is not productive for the city. Some feel that there are unhealthy pockets in the community that are actively working against improvement, although no detail was given about what specifically is happening. There were concerns that the vision of the city is scattered and chaotic, that those with power don’t have clear, shared goals. There seems to be short term, “issue of the moment,” reactive thinking rather than the longer-term thinking participants feel is needed. Some felt that at best, the city is stuck and ineffective. One individual spoke about businesses not knowing or following codes and ordinances, and that there is little enforcement of those codes; that there seems to be an unhealthy business environment with very little in the way of training new businesses on being responsible members of the local community.

One more positive view, yet still a concern, that came up among many, particularly those who represented the nonprofit and organizational sector of the community, is that there IS a lot of good happening, but that people don’t know or don’t talk about it. One reason seems to be that people feel comfortable focusing on the negative, and staying stuck. Another seems to be a lack of a clear, widely-accessible communication channel for all.

### **Diversity & Inclusion**

Anderson residents want a community that values and lives out diversity and inclusion of all people. Many spoke of a community that recognizes, even highlights, cultural diversity. They feel the community will only be stronger if residents educate themselves on other cultures and

have more opportunities for interaction and discussion with people who are different than themselves. They wish to live in a community that holds a shared value of strength through diversity. They want a community where all are included and feel safe and able to contribute, one where people feel free to be themselves. More than once, a desire was expressed for their community to be one where residents can disagree agreeably, to learn from each other and live together peacefully and harmoniously even while being different. Some specifically spoke of a community that would provide and ensure equal opportunities for all. The words “equity,” “equitable,” and “equal opportunities” appeared throughout the notes from all the conversations and most interviews. Two people raised an additional point of inclusion also pertaining to individuals with varying abilities, and a desire to live in a community that is accepting of all people and their contribution to society.

Participants shared many concerns about the current state of Anderson in respect to diversity and inclusion. Individuals mentioned that deep divisions exist in the community, that in some ways it feels broken by these divisions and breaking more each day. These divisions seem to cover every topic, from politics to cultural differences to education level to socioeconomic divides to inclusive hiring practices to people saying they care but not showing it with actions. Many feel this community is still segregated, racially and culturally, or at least that people tend to stay with other like-minded individuals, rather than taking opportunities to meet others who are different. Some felt these opportunities just don’t exist enough, and hoped that if the opportunities were presented, more residents would take part in them. There is a sense that some geographic segmentation by ethnicity is still common in this city, and that many feel marginalized, frustrated, and angry. It was mentioned more than once that there isn’t much racial or cultural diversity in Anderson, and that participants wish there was more, but that they’re not sure how to encourage it while the divisions continue. Some feel that those with differing points of view are not made to feel welcome in the community. In two of the conversations, individuals spoke about those members of the community with differing abilities struggling to find meaningful employment; one specifically spoke to the industry that is in Anderson not being willing to hire or engage with people with differing abilities.

Some feel some progress has been made, that the awareness level has been raised in recent years due to national events and tragedies, but others feel that it has not been enough or come quickly enough, and that there is still a lot of inequality. One individual pointed out a need in the community to, “learn everyone’s history, not just the comfortable parts.” Some feel that better communication is needed, and that information isn’t dispersed to everyone equally.

## **Health**

One of the ideas that came up throughout many of the conversations and interviews was the desire to have Anderson provide an overall high quality of life. When asked what that meant to them, most said they want to live in a healthy community: one that is healthy itself, as well as one that promotes the health of its citizens. This would include infrastructure that promotes healthy lifestyles, including making it more walkable/bikeable, boasting plenty of green space, parks, and trails, and valuing and supporting the environment. Participants also spoke of some difficult to define feelings within the community, such as “happy,” “stable,” “feels good,” “warm and inviting,” and a community that, “feels like home.”

Opinions were asserted that the community could benefit from a stronger focus on its own health and well-being, as well as making sure that the health of its residents is a priority. Comments were made that overall, while there are efforts being made, right now they would assess the community at large as “not healthy,” and that there seems to be public perception and belief that Anderson residents have a subpar quality of life. There was mention that there doesn’t seem to be any local effort to be “green” or to improve the environmental issues facing the area.

## **Education**

When participants spoke about the kind of community they want to live and work in, the words “education” or “quality schools” were used in every conversation and more than half of the interviews. Individuals and groups spoke about a community where there are a variety of educational options and where the community sees the value of a good education. They spoke of a city where quality schools are accessible to all, in all geographic parts of the community; that no matter what neighborhood you live in, education is high caliber. They spoke about safety in schools, and that children would be seen by the community as being of high-value and worth putting money and resources into.

Participants in both conversations and interviews also aspire to live in a community where education extends beyond the children; a community where there is an educated adult population, where the community holds a shared value of life-long learning. Some spoke of living in a place where residents know how to research a topic before making a decision or forming an opinion and where people can think critically and for themselves. Several mentioned that they want to live in a community with a high-quality, outstanding library at its center, which they feel is already their reality through Anderson Public Library.

Several participants mentioned positive current things about the schools in Anderson, from the education offered in the public and private schools to the connections between Anderson Public Library and the elementary schools. However, others felt that public education in Anderson “needs to be overhauled.” Some feel like over time the community has been trained that education is not that important. They spoke about the history of the town creating this environment; that in the past, there were good paying jobs available without even a high school diploma, let alone a college education, and so the community adopted a value that education was only for those who wanted to leave - that it wasn’t something to be pursued by most. They felt that now, however, those same options for jobs don’t exist, and that the community needs to catch up on valuing education for all residents with a high school diploma being the least level attained, and in most cases a path to college being presented as desirable and attainable. They see very little progress toward a change in this community attitude, and many feel frustrated by this.





# Anderson Public Library Community Concerns



# How can the Library help?

Conversation participants and interviewees were asked how the library can help achieve the community aspirations and address community concerns. The responses were compiled and loosely themed, and are listed below, followed by some of the specific suggestions under each category. Some suggestions could fall under more than one category. The suggestions could be a combination of activities the library already conducts, or ideas for new activities.

## **Keep the good work coming!**

In both conversations and interviews, participants made it clear that they love and cherish Anderson Public Library. They had many, many quotes and examples of how and why they love what you're already doing, and hope that you'll keep up the great work. One said, "I have always said that we have one of the best libraries in the country. The facility is wonderful and always making improvements." Participants recognized that continuing and increasing open access of materials and resources to everyone is important to this community. They have much empathy for the tough spot the library is in between limited funding, staff, and resources, and great need and limitless wants from the community. One person shared that, "APL should continue the amazing, wonderful services they provide with the excellent staff they employ. Thank you for all you do." One person specifically said that APL, "has already been innovative, especially during the pandemic - just keep doing what you're doing!" Overall, they hope that you'll continue to build on your excellent foundation and be proactively watching for opportunities to be flexible and adaptable as the community changes.

## **Increased and More Accessible Programming**

All expressed a wish for even more programming from the library. There was a strong, specific focus on programming for children and youth, as well as programming at all times of day and days of the week for different types of schedules (such as older people who don't drive at night, or those working 2nd and 3rd shift). Examples that came up several times were classes on money management and other life skills, as families move away from older members and don't learn this at home as regularly. There was also interest in multi-generational events for community members to meet those of other generations, since they are less likely to live near grandparents/grandchildren in this time in history. They specifically mentioned more Black History programming, cooking classes, and movie nights for families and movie days for seniors. Several people mentioned an interest in seeing the library think creatively and try some new programming that might be quite different than what has been done in the past.

There is interest in the library utilizing more virtual programming through COVID and beyond. Participants would also like to see these programs archived and easily accessible for those with varying schedules. Once the pandemic has lightened restrictions, they hope there will be more to encourage families to be in the library building.

Several conversation groups spoke about the idea of creative, themed programming that would involve many agencies and pieces of the community. The idea is that a theme would be chosen and as many organizations as possible would join in. One example given was fly fishing: the library would have a display of related books and dvds, a local park with a river would host fly fishing demonstrations and tutorials, the city government would provide literature and an information night about licensing, a local restaurant would host a cooking class on cleaning and preparing fish, and on and on. They feel the specific opportunities are vast, and that this approach to programming could connect the community in new and exciting ways and highlight the library's importance.

Another idea that was raised was for the library to provide Zoom space/access for community groups that used to meet in the meeting rooms before COVID. A participant who leads one such group mentioned that using a free Zoom account limits her to 40-minute meetings, and that they would appreciate the library making a paid account available to group leaders at set times for meetings. She mentioned that this would also keep the group tied to the library in a way that would keep the library at the forefront in participants' minds until they can gather at the building again. Conversation participants expressed their agreement that this would be a good idea.

### **Strengthen our Shared Value of Education & Life-Long Learning**

Homeschooling, perhaps not surprisingly during the pandemic we're currently facing, was mentioned many times. Participants suggested expanding homeschooling services, offering virtual workshops and guest speakers about homeschooling, and offering and featuring resources to help people educate their children, particularly those who never expected to be doing so.

They suggested pushing out themed educational tools through social media and offering online programming for continued learning. They would like to see the library be a place where students can collaborate and meet safely to work together on projects. Some mentioned appreciating the connections APL has made with local schools, and that they would like to see those connections strengthened.

Participants mentioned that public libraries are uniquely positioned to support all learning for a community, and that they would like to see APL, “cultivate an atmosphere of education and learning and be a repository of resources to facilitate growth.” They can imagine the library being a magnet for learning and self-improvement across the lifespan and feel it can and should play a significant role in helping the community achieve its aspiration of a highly educated citizenry. They feel this is particularly important right now when it comes to educating residents on truthful, trustworthy sources of information in a time when people can find anything online. A specific idea mentioned was to promote a community-wide reading program with facilitated discussions at the end of each quarter. They would also like to see more author visits.

### **Be a Safe Place to Start Addressing the Issues Our Community Faces**

Anderson residents feel that, compared to other places in the community, the library is already seen and respected as a safe, neutral place for the community to meet, where all are welcome and everyone’s ideas can be contributed. While most other organizations are seen as having a specific agenda or point of view, the library is unique. They would like to see this role embraced, built upon, and promoted, and feel that this can lead to the community having a place to start more effectively addressing the issues facing it. It was suggested that the library can and should be a gathering place, both physically and virtually, for all ages, races, and backgrounds to share ideas and culture. Specific ideas included hosting a film and discussion series highlighting community efforts, round-table discussions about relevant issues, or events designed to raise awareness and public support/involvement.

Participants acknowledged that the library building itself provides, on the one hand, a great, central location to reach the community (“They are the focal point of Anderson downtown,”) and on the other, a physical location that does NOT feel safe to many. It was pointed out that this may need to be addressed before this role can be fully realized.

### **Partnerships**

As they acknowledged the incredible opportunities they see for Anderson, and recognized that the library is made up of a limited number of staff working with limited resources, participants highlighted the importance of partnerships between the library and other people, organizations, faith communities, and the city and local government. Specifically mentioned ideas were partnering with the YMCA and the Rotary Tree project and Winterization project. They feel the library, in partnering with others, could look at steps to start addressing cleaning up the town, instituting a neighborhood watch program, reimagining empty spaces for community gardens, developing an Anderson Quality of Life Initiative, and making the parks

and trails safer and cleaner. They suggested partnering with the public transit that already exists to get seniors to and from the library for programming.

One participant suggested that the library work with the city to come up with a plan to address some of the issues facing Anderson; they pointed out that the library has the resources to research and guide development of a plan. Participants would also like to see the library build partnerships with other agencies to figure out how to move the community forward after COVID, considering what long-term changes may affect Anderson.

More than one person brought up that the library needs to be sure to have a place at the table and a voice in the conversation when it comes to the network of organizations in Anderson. One representative of a local nonprofit mentioned that she used to see the Library Director more involved in the different community networks, but not as much anymore, and feels it is important to revive that presence, or by utilizing other staff if her schedule just will not allow. Another person, though, said that she thought there had been a real *increase* in the library's place at the table lately. Some mentioned a high turnover of nonprofit leadership and mentioned that the wider nonprofit community may need to be reminded that the library is one of them more regularly. Across the conversations and interviews, the importance of this place as one of the vital organizations in the community was agreed upon. While again acknowledging that the library is made up of a limited number of people with limited hours in the day, there was also wide agreement that more library staff presence at other community events and activities and as participants in groups and committees would be valuable. One participant mentioned that in a community she lived in formally it would be strange to go to any event or meeting and not hear from someone representing the library in some way.

It was suggested by several that Anderson Public Library investigate coordinating resources with other libraries in the region, perhaps even forming an active alliance with other library systems to sponsor or host events, share programming, and make resources go farther rather than duplicating efforts. Participants also suggested tapping into resources right there in the community already, such as Anderson University. They felt that retired (or current) instructors, or others in the community with expertise on topics or as educators could be utilized to lead programs, which would free up library staff for other projects. They would like to see APL more willing to step out of its comfort zone and think creatively to leverage the assets the community already has.

### **Lead the Way**

As participants spoke about the value of partnerships, they took it one step further and felt that Anderson Public Library needs to lead the way forward in the community. Several different ideas were raised for what this might look like in action, but the idea across the conversations

and many interviews was that no one else is stepping up, so the library should. One group felt that if the library leads, the city will see its success and then be energized to join in the efforts. They would like to see the library lead the rest of the community in modeling long-term thinking and proactive, strategic visioning. Some felt the library is more uniquely positioned than others to stay non-political, and that because it is already the place many people automatically think of for legitimate resources, it “can be the centralized, quality method of community-wide communication of information that Anderson is currently lacking.” They see the library as the “point place” for a community calendar, as it already knows a lot of what is going on, is trusted, and is believed to be for all.

Many participants and groups mentioned how important it will be to ask the community what it wants and needs – much like these conversations and interviews have! They expressed gratitude that the library was asking these questions, and a desire that this should be done much more often. “I am so happy to have had this conversation. It really gives me hope for Anderson to hear from others who are also inspired and excited to keep making Anderson better. You talk to people and you just don’t hear that, so this has been so great.” They felt that the city should but doesn’t, so maybe the library could and then share the information with local leaders and organizations to help bring out new ideas and help Anderson think outside the box. It was suggested that someone, perhaps the library, should coordinate a leadership team or communication method to spur the city and various organizations to action and make them aware of what the community truly wants.

Although it didn’t initially seem like the library’s wheelhouse or even their problem to solve, participants wondered how the library could take the lead in advocating change around some bigger issues facing the community, such as better public transportation; many participants liked the idea of the library using its position to move forward issues like this that might seem outside of their usual purview. One participant did voice dissent on this, however, feeling strongly that the library has a specific role in education and learning and that it should not try to be something it is not, or everything to everyone.

One participant summed it up and pointed out that it can be scary and overwhelming to realize the library has the community on its shoulders – it is, after all, a huge responsibility – but that Anderson needs you. She asked you not to leave it up to the city as others seem to, but rather to lead the way.

### **Tell Our Community’s Story**

Anderson residents shared that a major frustration they have with their community is that people focus on the negative instead of the positive. Some expressed that there is a lot of good

going on, but nobody talks about it! One way they felt the library could help them achieve their aspirations is by telling the community's story. The library's role in literacy, education, and information-sharing felt like a natural fit for honoring their history, reflecting on the current moment, creating hope for what could be, and helping the community craft a future they will be proud of. The community is ready for someone to lead the charge on speaking positivity into the story, and to help them build on the strengths and assets they already possess. They want to see the way that Anderson residents talk move from "we used to be" to "we are" and "what we can be." They felt excited about how helping tell their story could improve the community pride they spoke of as an important aspiration, and how it could help change the narrative of the community moving into the future.

Participants saw opportunity for this storytelling through the library's collection, which they reminded should reflect the community and its shared values. They pointed out the area's rich sports history and some of the beautiful things newer residents might not even realize. They want to see those stories told and archived in accessible ways. They also felt it could be accomplished through presentations or writings. A writer's workshop or group was one suggestion to help the people of Anderson tell their own stories. Another suggestion was that the library be sure to host different speakers who have a part in Anderson's story, including elected officials, women, people of color, etc. One participant suggested the library look at how it could be involved in bringing mural arts projects to downtown, which could help both tell the community's story and diversify the community's exposure to art, all while helping spur organic growth through the spread of beauty.

They pointed out that social services are growing and expanding in Anderson, and that residents need to know all the good that is going on. They felt the library could definitely help with this. As a first step, they noted that you already have a digital sign to promote the library's events and suggest that maybe it could be expanded to include other community events.

### **Reintroduce the Library to the Community**

As participants thought about how the library could help the community achieve its aspirations, they started to reflect on the fact that the library building just went through a major renovation, only to be shut down by the pandemic. They talked about how the community knows the library is there but needs to be reminded of its value from time to time. They shared how many of them have not used the building in quite some time yet use other services or attend programs. They remembered a past where they would go in to look for a book, end up wandering around looking at other titles, ask a librarian for help and end up learning about a class the library offers, run into a neighbor and hear about what *they* use the library for, and glance at the bulletin board on the way out and find out about a community event coming up.



In thinking about this current moment, both because of the pandemic and just because of the busyness of modern life, they feel like this encounter with the library is rare today. They suggested that the library consider this, too, and think creatively about how it can achieve this cross-use of services that just won't happen as organically anymore. They felt that people will use the library when and if they realize they need it, and that many may not even realize all that is available. Across the conversations, participants agreed that APL has a great mission statement that is so much wider than books; they want to see you get the message out about all the assets the library offers, and feel confident that the library will see increased use!

Some of this might be as simple as advertising what the library has to offer, such as databases even during the pandemic, or that there are meeting rooms available for free. They encourage APL to think about HOW they spread the word; the library's website can be part of the answer, but they think it shouldn't be expected to be the only or main way that people know about the library. They spoke about inviting people so that all feel welcome. Participants said over and over that the library needs to tell its own story bigger/better/bolder! They feel the library brings so much to the community, and that it is time the whole community realized that.

One of the youngest participants noted that the library offers many wonderful interest groups and meetings at the library. She suggested that the library consider helping promote those groups in new ways, to people in demographics that might not ever hear about them. For example, she is very interested in history, and knows there is a great historical society that meets at the library. However, she also knows that the group is made up of people much older than herself. She wonders if others her age might join if it was presented to them through a communication method they use, and specifically indicated that they were welcome. Another participant suggested that similarly, the library could promote groups that meet at the library who are not sponsored by the library, such as the knitting group. By not just offering space, but helping the groups promote themselves, the library could help grow attendance, which in turn might lead to people coming to the library who may not otherwise, and would build their own captive audience who can then be told all the other wonderful things the library has to offer.

Participants agreed that Anderson Public Library has a beautiful building downtown, and that it needs to be shown off more. It was suggested that the library host open houses once the pandemic situation is better, as a direct way to reintroduce themselves to the public. They are hopeful that next spring might be a great time for this, and suggest capitalizing on spring themes of rebirth, renewal, fresh start - come see all the library has to offer!

### **Connect Residents to Services and Information**

Participants felt that an important role of any public library is to be a resource that connects people to information at low/no cost; to be a "provider of access to the world." Anderson residents felt that by embracing this role, APL could definitely help the community achieve several of its aspirations. This connector role could be interpreted in many ways, one of which was to find a way to make it easier for people to volunteer and invest their time back into their community. This could include helping them know of opportunities through some kind of database coordinated by the library, or even just lists of opportunities and contact information.

Another way to be the connector would be through connecting residents to the social services available to them. One participant suggested offering mental and emotional support on-site at the library; others felt this was not needed or the library's role, but rather that the library should provide the access point to connecting to these services. There was also discussion around helping destigmatize seeking help, whether through programs or speakers, books and resources, or just normalizing the conversation. One specific suggestion was that there seems to be a gap in avenues to access resources for veterans, and in breaking down pride and stigmas around utilizing the services the community has to offer, that the library could potentially fill this gap in some way.

One specific suggestion about how the library could directly connect residents to services and information is by finding more ways to provide internet access for all. This might be through mobile wi-fi hotspots or considering whether a separate building for technology and computers would be a useful expansion of library services. They suggested increasing technology opportunities for individuals, whether through classes, supporting a community makerspace, or loaning out more items through an expanded Library of Things. Participants would like to see the library facilitate more community needs fulfillment online (such as job search assistance, accessing benefits, connection to social services, etc) as well as in-person (providing phone numbers, perhaps even inviting a social worker to use space at the library and make him/herself available to the public).

Another idea was that the library host other nonprofit programming at the library and help promote it. They could also facilitate partnerships between groups that meet at the library and local nonprofits (for example, connecting the knitting group that meets at the library to the Linus Project or a local organization that helps new moms and would love to receive donated blankets and hats.)

### **Engage the Homeless and Others in Need**

As discussed in the Community Narrative, the Anderson community clearly perceives a problem with homelessness and other needs. Some participants spoke of seeing the homeless as one

more negative thing keeping people away from downtown. Others spoke with concern about this large pocket of the community needing help, but feeling overwhelmed to even start tackling the issue. One participant in a conversation said it so clearly: "The library has become... a place for the homeless to come in the winter to stay warm and in the summer to stay cool, and to hang out in the fair weather times of spring and fall. It is a congregational gathering place for that community. I think a challenge for the future is a more creative way of engaging this population that is coming to you anyhow and finding ways to empower them at their point of need. This becomes an opportunity for the library to engage them in places of need and readiness. They're a captive audience, so let's see what we can do to enhance their quality of life." Those in that conversation and others seemed to agree that the library cannot ignore the problem and wait for someone to do something; APL must instead take the lead in coordinating programming involving other agencies (such as Christian Center, Willow Place, Grace House, local churches, and others) to engage this population in a more productive and effective way. Even those who expressed fear or not wanting to be at the library because it caused them discomfort agreed that trying to engage those just "hanging out" would be better for everyone. Some also suggested that the library could work to help change the public's perception of the homelessness to being a community need to fulfill as part of taking care of its own, rather than a population to be afraid of.

Participants in the conversations and interviews would also like to see the library participate in and/or lead discussions on addressing the systemic problems in the community that perpetuate such large statistics of homelessness, poverty, and child abuse, which many are frustrated by or ashamed of. They identified that the community has decent services for homeless men, but is in desperate need of more shelter for homeless women and children, and encouraged the library to find out if there are ways they could help. They would like to see investigation of the possibility of reimagining empty buildings into solutions for homelessness and aren't sure how the library might be directly involved in that but feel like *someone* should.

Related suggestions for engaging others in need were to host job fairs, provide space and coaching for interviews, and offer workshops and resources on basic skills around employability. They felt the library could certainly offer more in the way of technology classes, possibly through partnerships with those in the community with skills to offer. Participants felt strongly that people need technology skills to find jobs today, and that this would be a way to help achieve more equitable opportunities for all. They also felt that the model of family has changed, and that more people than ever live alone. Participants suggested finding ways the library can support building stronger networks for those individuals.

### **Bring the Library to the People**

One of the areas where participants felt the library could have a lot of immediate impact was in finding ways to bring the library out of the building. They would like to see the library find ways to overcome barriers to library use, such as lack of transportation, childcare, and limited mobility, in order to fulfill a need of the community for access to the internet, technology, and educational resources. There was mention of building another branch to extend library services into another part of the community. It was suggested that APL revisit outreach efforts of the past, such as the bookmobile, and consider how to make such services even more relevant in 2020. They suggested creating a “roving resource center” that would bring wi-fi, print, copy, and fax capabilities, technology help, etc. out to the neighborhoods.

The library could partner with the Parks department to use outdoor space to bring resources out to neighborhoods or hold library programming in spaces other than the library buildings. Participants know this is happening more than in the past, and would encourage the library to keep it up and even expand upon it. The suggestion was made to make even more of the library programming virtual, or to record live programs, and to archive those so they are available on demand, easily accessible on a YouTube page, for those who can't get to the library building.

Participants spoke of the need for the library to be more visible in the community. One teen participant mentioned only hearing about the library when they have direct contact with the youth librarians when he attends a program; they would like to hear the library spoken of by others and seen in their everyday world. Several mentioned wanting to see the library expand its social media presence.

Quite a few participants represented local nonprofits or other organizations, but don't live in Anderson themselves. However, they spend the largest part of their time in the community and would appreciate more access to all the library has to offer, whether on their lunch breaks or to support their community work. They know they can utilize the *building* already, but suggested that the library consider some sort of “business membership” for those who work in but don't live in the community.

### **Community Events that Connect and Entertain**

In all conversations, and many interviews, participants spoke of a desire to see the library organize and host, or partner with others, to offer community events that connect residents to each other and offer entertainment opportunities. Specific suggestions included facilitating community forums and discussions that uplift the community's diversity and foster connection between people. They mentioned interest in topics like sustainable living, entrepreneurship, and promoting healthy habits. They could see the library having a role in larger community events like block parties, city-wide cleanup initiatives, opportunities for trying new things, or

yoga in the park. A successful mystery night that the library offered in the past was remembered fondly, with hopes of it being revived. There were several suggestions for community events designed to expose each other to the different cultures that exist right in the community, which could be focused around holidays, language, or food. They mentioned that the library already has great outdoor property it should capitalize on, and dreamed of seeing the library be THE place to go for outdoor events. There was a specific suggestion to host an outdoor literary festival for the community. They mentioned utilizing the fourth parking lot or closing a section of 11<sup>th</sup> Street and spoke of the proximity to the Dickmann Town Center and stage. They felt the library could expand the reach of such an event by bringing in partners in a way that makes it feel accessible to all and appealing to many in the community through talks, activities for families and all ages, food, and the arts.

Participants would like to see the library as the source to encourage discussion and starting dialogue within the community. They suggested starting by imitating things like TED Talks or A Town Center's "Movies That Matter," and growing from there. They want the library to continue to offer chances to interact with others and learn about new or diverse life experiences.

Whatever events are offered, residents felt that the library should be strategic and thoughtful about being the place that has offerings for the WHOLE public. It is important that, if nowhere else, at the library and its events all feel welcome and included.

### **Help Us Shape Our Future**

Participants across conversations and interviews stated that the future is coming. They hope the library will do whatever it can to help the community shape that future, rather than letting it shape the community. They hope to define what that future will look like rather than be defined by it. They like the mission statement of the library, and hope that the community will move farther from expecting what they feel is an old-school definition of libraries, and instead embrace a much broader spectrum of resources and services. As one participant put it, "The library is for living! People need to let go of an outdated image of a quiet building full of books and embrace a vibrant space that is busy all day long." They expect to see the "look" of the library continue to evolve as community needs evolve, and that the library leads the community out of being "stuck" and into a time of hopefulness.