

Community Needs Response Plan for Bennington Public Library, Bennington NE

September 2024 - September 2029

Library Mission Statement:

The mission of the Bennington Public library is to inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge, and strengthen community. To deliver on this promise we rely on three great resources—our staff, our collection, and our physical space.

Library Vision Statement:

The Bennington Public Library creates opportunities to engage, connect, and discover.

Introduction/Planning Committee Process

Library staff identified key stakeholders to make up a Community Needs Response planning committee and issued invitations to members in summer 2024. Members included: Lisa Flaxbeard, Library Director; Natalie Hartley, Library staff; Jacob Anderson, Library Board member; Oscar Anderson, Teen Library Board member; Erika Hanke, Bennington Public School employee; Ed Hunt, business owner and local Chamber of Commerce member; Janene Huntley, parent and leader of local community group; Terry Rohren, Library Board and Friends of the Library member; Carole Sandeen, Friends of the Library member. The planning committee met four times during this process and worked to gather data and share ideas on what the community needs were and how the library could best respond.

Community Profile

For planning purposes, the committee used the greater Bennington area when compiling important demographic, socioeconomic, and other data. Using the Zip Code Tabulation Area (ZCTA) of 68007 provided the following information. This area contains 5,546 households and has a population of 16,250.¹ The median household income in 2022 was \$131,523. The Bennington School District serves the town of Bennington and the surrounding unincorporated areas. The district's total enrollment as reported in its 2022-2023 annual report was 4,017 students. The district has a total of five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school.²

The community has seen growth in new local businesses in the downtown area, as well as a business park located off Highway 36. Outdoor recreation facilities include parks, baseball

¹ https://data.census.gov/profile/ZCTA5_68007?g=860XX00US68007

² <https://tinyurl.com/bdewm7fc>

fields, a basketball court, sand volleyball courts and soccer fields. Construction is underway for a 50-acre park and athletic complex located in the heart of Bennington between 156th Street and Bennington Road.³

Community Needs

Community needs were identified through several different methods. A community-wide survey was promoted through library channels, local community pages, and paper flyers throughout town. Focus groups were conducted with community teens, the Friends of the Library, the Bennington Chamber of Commerce, library staff, and a group of community parents.

In response to the question, “What would you say is the most critical issue facing Bennington today?”, there were four clear areas of concern that were identified and were consistent throughout the different gathering methods. They are:

#1: Community resources are needed to keep pace with the growth of the community. There is a lack of a community center and gathering spaces for residents of all ages to connect and engage.

#2: A result of the housing growth, the public high school is over capacity. The community is divided about how to solve the issue.

#3: Economic Development is needed to increase tax revenue resources and decrease the dependency on property taxes for the funding of city services and the growing school district.

#4: There is a need for more and improved communication and understanding within the community, especially as it relates to the divide between those in incorporated Bennington versus unincorporated Douglas County. There is also a need for greater community awareness of the Library’s resources, programs, and services.

The community survey also included questions about how the library or its services could be improved. Many of these suggestions help answer some of the critical issues identified for the community as a whole. These answers can be grouped into three main categories: Space, Hours, and Collection/Programs. Suggested library space improvements are: more space to accommodate population growth, larger teen space separate from children’s collections, and dedicated quiet/study areas. Suggested hour improvements are: Friday hours, later open times on Saturdays, more evening hours. Suggested collection/programming improvements are: online access to partnership passes; more level readers, larger digital collection, and more guest speakers/adult learning opportunities.

³ <https://www.neumeyerfarm.org/about>

Library Profile, including library strengths and resources, the barriers it faces, and opportunities for improvement:

The Nebraska Library Commission determined the Bennington Public Library's Legal Service area as 4,707 in the 2023 Library Profile. The number of registered borrowers is 6,171 and the number of library visitors was 36,852. This highlights the overlapping nature of our location as a growing community just outside of Omaha. The Library was open a total of 1,898 hours during 2023 and the square footage of the physical space is 6,100 square feet. The collection includes 21,203 physical items and 63,010 items in a digital collection through Nebraska Overdrive Libraries. The total program attendance for 2023 was 8,885, with 7,361 being children ages 0-11, a reflection of the younger demographic in the community.⁴ Library staff includes three full-time librarians, and four part-time staff, which equal 4.25 FTEs (Full Time Equivalents).

Library Strengths/Resources: Community support; established programs that are well attended; qualified staff; modern, updated and welcoming space; Downtown location is adjacent to city park. Spirit of volunteerism in the community and willing community advocates; City Park next to the library; Active Friends of the Library group.

Library Barriers & Opportunities for Improvement: Operating Budget versus service population; Incorporated versus unincorporated areas; limited physical space to grow collection, technology resources, staff workspace, etc.

Strategic Goals and Objectives

Community Need #1: Community resources are not keeping pace with the population growth. There is a lack of a community center and gathering spaces for residents of all ages to connect and engage.

GOAL #1: Serve as a stopgap community space in the absence of other alternatives.

By expanding physical space and service hours, we can reach more patrons and be more accessible to all areas of the community.

1. Update physical facilities to better serve the Bennington community.
 - a. Create a proposal for library expansion that addresses the community needs that additional square footage will meet, the potential costs of an expansion project, and a project timeline.
 - b. Identify community groups, leadership, and stakeholders to help advocate for expanded library space. Invite Library Board, Mayor, and City Council members to library events and programs to see firsthand the need for space.
 - c. Create a proposal to reconfigure current floor space if expansion isn't feasible or approved. This plan would take into consideration usage statistics, circulation trends, and other factors that show how the library space is actually being used.

⁴ <https://nlc.nebraska.gov/stats/Downloads/20222023stats/index20222023.aspx>

2. Expand open hours to meet community demand.
 - a. Identify what additional open hours would best meet public wants/needs.
 - b. Determine staff and budgetary resources necessary to accommodate additional hours.
 - c. Create a timeline for proposed changes to hours.
3. Create more parking for visitors to the library, Centennial Park, and other city attractions.
 - a. Work with City leadership and City personnel to look at feasibility of better signage, crosswalk, possible paving for public parking located across 156th Street.

Community Need #3: Economic Development is needed to increase tax revenue resources and decrease the dependency on property taxes for the funding of city services and the growing school district.

GOAL #2: Support business growth in the Bennington area.

High property taxes is a major concern for the majority of residents in the greater Bennington area. More commercial growth is needed to provide tax revenue to help offset costs of municipal services and public school district. These strategies will help position the library to support this growth.

1. Partner with local businesses for library programming and outreach opportunities.
 - a. Identify local businesses and programs that would fit within the Library's mission to strengthen the community.
 - b. Create a calendar of potential outreach events and work with local businesses to promote these events.
2. Partner with the Bennington Chamber of Commerce
 - a. Highlight community bulletin boards and business card and brochure holders in the Community Conference Center hallway.
 - b. Attend Chamber networking events.
 - c. Partner with community groups and the Bennington Chamber to create a welcome packet to offer to persons new to the community. (Individuals and families who sign up for a library card for the first time are often brand new to the community.)
3. Promote Library Conference Center meeting space as a place for community events, private events, and other occasions.
 - a. Update library website with pictures and different room configurations to appeal to broader community groups.

Community Need: #1: Community resources are not keeping pace with the growth of the community. There is a lack of a community center and gathering spaces for residents of all ages to connect and engage.

Community Need #4: There is a need for more and improved communication and understanding within the community, especially as it relates to the divide between those in incorporated Bennington versus unincorporated Douglas County. Greater community awareness of the Library's resources, programs and services is needed.

Community responses for library specific areas of improvement included a demand for more services and programming for adults and teens.

GOAL #3: Improve community awareness of library programs and services by cultivating connections with area schools and partnerships with local and regional organizations. Offer more programs for adults and young adults.

1. Create an Adult/General Interest program calendar.
 - a. Identify and schedule outside groups to present on various topics.
 - b. Promote these events through library channels and other community outlets such as the Bennington Herald and flyers in different community locations.
2. Work with local schools to be a resource for staff and families.
 - a. Coordinate with schools to distribute library information/resources for staff during new school year orientations.
 - b. Work with teachers and administrators of area schools and daycares to arrange class tours of the library. (Possibly kindergarten classes or third graders as part of their Bennington history unit.)
3. Create a calendar of Teen Events and Programming
 - a. Work with the Teen Bennington Library Advisory Board to create a calendar of events and programs.
 - b. Promote events through library channels, school newsletters, and other community outlets.

Evaluation and Accomplishments

The Community Needs Response Plan will be reviewed by library staff and Library Board each January. Specific goals may require more frequent review by library staff as they develop and implement the above objectives.

Significant accomplishments as they relate to the previous Community Needs Response Plan include the development and implementation of youth programming that addressed early literacy, STEM, and teen engagement. Music and movement and ECRR–Every Child Ready Read concepts were incorporated into weekly storytimes. A highly successful preschool STEAM program was launched and continues today. A Teen Advisory Board was established and engaging and welcoming teen programs and services abound today. In addition to our well

attended programs, an expanded community conference meeting space has and continues to serve numerous organizations, families and businesses. These additional activities have contributed to the economic development in the area by bringing more people into downtown Bennington. The Library Conference Center also hosts meetings for the Bennington Chamber of Commerce and has been a primary and general election polling place for the Douglas County Election Commission. It is important to note some challenges and barriers the Library has faced since our last plan. Though we experienced a world-wide pandemic, crucial changes in the Friends of the Library leadership, and the retirement of long-time library personnel, the Bennington Public Library proved resilient. Opportunities to add full-time salaried positions to the Library budget emerged, helping to attract outstanding and qualified staff. Our success in the community also attracted and revitalized leadership for the Friends of the Bennington Library.