

Community Conversations

Moorestown Library

A Summary of Discussions

About Collections, Services, Programs and Facilities

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“People want to come back to the Moorestown Library from Cherry Hill or Mt. Laurel or elsewhere – We need to give them good reasons to come back and stay.”
Focus Group Comment

Introduction

What is the future of the Moorestown Library? What are local expectations for library services, collections and the much discussed Library facility? What can the Moorestown Library do today and during the next few years to stay ahead of community expectations and deliver the kind of service that will benefit the community? What does the library of the future look like in Moorestown? How will it be achieved and will residents be willing to pay for it?

These are some of the questions that residents and Library Board members are asking. Library Development Solutions was hired to work with the Library Board and a Planning Committee to assist with answers to some of these questions. The Moorestown Library was to begin renovation to its facility in 2006, which was cancelled. Before moving ahead in a similar or alternate plan; the Board determined that a community needs assessment and strategic plan would assist in providing a clearer vision of the Library’s future. Additionally, the Library Board needed to determine the impact of technology on library services, the existing impact of the library’s role in the community, and the impact of changing community needs to the library’s mission.

A series of focus group discussions were held with library users and non-users, to listen to their perceptions about current library services and their suggestions for the future. The Planning Committee of the Moorestown Library and the Library Board believe that the information from the focus groups, community meeting and survey will assist in the Board’s responsibility to make critical decisions about library resources and facility and to meet new expectations for library services in the beginning of the 21st Century.

Focus group discussions and a community meeting were held in March and April 2007 in the Library. Two hundred and five (205) people attended the discussions, including staff and four hundred and fourteen (414) people responded to an online and print survey for library users.¹ The survey elicited over 600 comments from residents. Each focus group was

¹ See survey report available in the library

asked a series of open-ended questions designed to stimulate discussion about the Library, its future and its role in the quality of life of Moorestown. The information obtained from the groups provides important information about resident's perceptions about the Library and specific suggestions for services and facility improvements.

The information from the discussions and survey should be an invaluable resource for the Library Board as they consider the next steps in meeting the current and future community library needs.

About The Process

Focus group discussions are essentially group interviews in which people are asked a series of open ended questions in order to obtain information about their perceptions and attitudes concerning a topic. In this case, we explored their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with current library services, use patterns, collections and policies and their vision of an "Amazing Library". The discussions provided the consultants with a good deal of qualitative, anecdotal information that can be used to assess perceptions about the Library and its future. The data from these groups is helpful in obtaining a "snapshot" of where the community may be in terms of its attitudes about libraries in general and the Moorestown Library in particular.

The Focus Groups and Community Meeting

The following topics are the ones discussed with the various groups:

- ✓ What do you like most about Moorestown?
- ✓ What changes have occurred in Moorestown and the surrounding area the past few years that may impact the library and its services?
- ✓ What other libraries do you use, and why?
- ✓ The role that the Moorestown Library plays and should play in response to community needs.
- ✓ A description of an "Amazing Library."
- ✓ What do you like about the Library's staff, policies, collections, programming, services and facility?
- ✓ What can be improved in library collections, services, programming, policies, staff and facility?
- ✓ Community awareness about the library and its services?
- ✓ Reasons for library non-use and any factors inhibiting use.
- ✓ Understanding of library funding and advocacy issues.

Discussions were held with various members of the Moorestown community, including:

- ✓ High School and Middle School students
- ✓ Local civic, business and government leaders
- ✓ Parents of young children
- ✓ Seniors
- ✓ Library staff
- ✓ Library users and non users
- ✓ Friends of the Library and volunteers

Each focus group discussion lasted approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours. The community town meeting lasted approximately 2 hours. Similar questions were posed to all groups to ensure comparable data. Comments from all discussions were recorded and transcribed to create a record of the meetings.

Most focus group and community meeting participants were pleased to find that the discussions did not focus primarily on funding or the facility and that their opinions and comments were being sought on matters such as book, video and audio collections, policies, technology, hours, programming, outreach and their vision for the future of library service in Moorestown. Participants were eager to be asked for their comments, appreciated the opportunity to engage in a dialog about the library with other community residents and offered practical suggestions for both short and long term improvements. The Planning Committee and the Library Board of Trustees can use many of these useful suggestions as they plan for the future of the Moorestown Library.

Summary of Key Findings

Participants did not agree among themselves about every topic being discussed; though most topics developed into a common concern about library services and how to deliver them to the community. The major areas of agreement centered on the following issue:

- **The Moorestown Library as a shared public space, or commons, for the community.**
Moorestown continues to experience a transition from an older suburban area into a maturing and modern community. The transition has included an increase in population, especially young families, and an increase in the number of seniors staying in Moorestown after retirement. Other notable changes include an

increase in commercial development on the fringes of town as well as residential development, in traffic growth and in the pace of school building and renovations. Residents expressed a growing sense of disconnectedness from each other and the center of town as the community changes. The downtown area businesses continue to change and turn-over. Moorestown residents are seeking a shared center and sense of community life and many of the participants in the focus groups, community meeting and survey believe the library can and should play that role.

Many residents express a desire for instruction to help them become competent in Internet and catalog use. After school and group study activities are seen as an important venue for teens and preteens. The library is viewed as a safe and valuable resource for students in the community with many dual income families and an increase in the number of children home alone. However, many teens feel uncomfortable in the library due to environmental factors.

Issues relating to hours, availability of popular collections and various formats, availability of programs for adults and children, instruction and use of computers are issues that residents discussed with an understanding that current levels of access and space are not adequate for the future of the community. They believe that the Library Board needs to make a decision on the future of the facility to meet future demand and expectations for service and space. Renovation and expansion or a new building is the expected choice of action. Maintaining the status quo is not a preferred choice by residents.

Initial Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Moorestown Library – First Things First

Moorestown residents use other area libraries. Library users went elsewhere during the months that the library was closed and they discovered better and more appealing libraries. One of the primary reasons, other than a better library environment and Sunday hours, is related to book collections, current DVDs and videos and best sellers, in other words, popular materials and comfortable environment. The hold to reserve ratio must be reexamined to meet the needs of a changing community as retirees and empty nesters find more time for enjoying popular fiction and especially best sellers. A collection development policy to meet these needs should not exceed a 4:1 hold to order ratio. Also, a “Lightening Read” type collection of new best sellers is useful to offer these titles to local residents for a shorter period of time at a fee before they all circulate on the general catalog. This will require an

expanded materials budget to meet the needs for current titles and best sellers. An expanded rental agreement with either *McNaughton* or *Baker & Taylor* can be used effectively to enhance the collection of current titles. Similarly, major and comprehensive weeding must take place to remove thousands of obsolete and damaged material from the collection and allow easy access and attractive displays of new and current materials.² The number of volumes in the collection can be reduced significantly to make space available for other uses. Building good will and new support for the library will go a long way by developing the collection of CDs, DVDs and current titles for local residents. Circulation figures, which have decreased the last few years, will see double digit increases as users return to Moorestown Library for new and current materials.³

2. **Moorestown Library – Identity, Energy and Communication**

The fact that other area libraries are used by many residents is good news. People still use and need libraries. However, the ability of each library and the Moorestown Library in particular, to create and develop its own identity is an important challenge for long term support of the library. Moorestown residents need a new, more positive “Moorestown Library Experience” when they use their own public library. This can be accomplished through an increased use of symbols, icons, communication formats and adult and children’s programming that identifies the Library as a dynamic, service oriented institution in the heart of the Moorestown community. Today, fewer than 30% of Moorestown residents are current library cardholders. This emphasizes the need to create a new energy and a distinctive “Moorestown Library Experience”. The Library can become a “bookends-partner” with other organizations in town by offering information, speakers and material before and after an event hosted by others or with others. An example would be a talk at the library by an artist who is exhibiting elsewhere in town before the exhibit and then a collection of related books and materials during and after the exhibit, the same can be done for music related events. The Library should also begin developing a community wide email database and publish a monthly e-newsletter using Constant Contact or a similar product.

3. **Moorestown Library - Access and convenience**

The Library needs to review all policies and practices that restrict access to library use. Expanded hours, especially Sunday hours are required to meet resident’s needs and to compete with neighboring libraries that may be open

² The Library’s III automation system can produce “dusty book reports” to identify aged materials by decade and material that has not circulated in a given time period.

³ See the circulation graph at the end of this report

earlier, later and/or on Sundays. The drop box should be open 24/7 allowing residents a time saving convenience. At the same time, the Library should begin plans to install a drive through book drop in the parking lot or nearby.

4. Moorestown Library - Staff as Advisors and Navigators

The role of library staff has changed in response to the needs of a changing community, though retaining a friendly service orientation that the current staff displays. Community expectations of library staff is that they serve as navigators to information resources and are fully trained to assist users in retrieving information through the library's on line catalog, in Internet searches, through database searches as well as in print materials. They also need to be active advisors for the book, audio and video materials that the Library offers. Residents expect staff to assist them in one on one use and instruction on computer related activities, until they are competent themselves. Trained and focused staff can execute these newer roles more effectively. Residents, at the same time, insist on the sense of community they enjoy when staff recognizes them and their reading preferences and knows them by name. Participants would like to recognize staff by name as well through name tags, as has recently been started.

5. Moorestown Library – Online and Access to technology use

The library needs to add additional computers for Internet use as well as word processing and e-mail. The request for additional computers was mentioned in each of the focus groups. Participants believe that the library should be the first place that residents think of when they need access to computers for Internet and database searches as well as for other uses. Additionally, participants were not aware that the library has wireless access, so that they can use their own notebook computers. The Library needs to redesign its web site to create a dynamic, interactive “branch” of the library. The Library also needs to purchase and use simpler addresses such as www.moorestownlibrary.org for a web site, email and marketing purposes. Similarly, bandwidth in the library needs to exceed 512k in order to provide the type of speed and breadth of Internet service that residents request. Automated systems such as a “time and attendance” system are needed to free up staff for more valuable customer focused work.

6. Moorestown Library – The Next Generations - Expand preteen and teen use

All libraries face a challenge in creating a welcoming space for teens and preteens. Moorestown teens and students did not identify the library as a place in which they feel particularly comfortable or welcome. The odor of the Library is a particularly unwelcome feature for teens. Though not an unusual response, the need for dedicated space, activities, collections and programs for students of all ages appears to be an important need in Moorestown.

The library needs a closer collaboration with the school system to identify resources that students need to be successful. Space for teens to study in groups and alone is an issue the Planning Committee should address. Extended hours and special programs for students such as study nights during finals are important. Developing a Teen Advisory Board should be a priority.

7. Moorestown Library - Moorestown's Living Room

Participants and residents have expectations for a 21st Century library that will require a significant transformation of the library environment in Moorestown. Residents request a modern library environment and experience that is satisfying, a comfortable environment for quick or extended use and is easy to use. They want a library experience of fresh, relevant and available book, video and audio collections; interesting programs for all ages and easy access to computers and electronic resources. They want an experience of easy parking, Sunday hours and a staff that is knowledgeable, friendly and eager to help. Participants comment about the failed renovation project to update the facility to meet modern library uses, and the continuing need for modern library meeting space, space for children and adult use, quiet study and programming space. Though there are a few Moorestown residents who prefer that the Library remain untouched, as is, this preference has led to the growing irrelevance of the Moorestown Library. Poor maintenance, and/or continuing the status quo is not a recommended strategy for the future. The Library Board and Township need to weigh the opportunity to renovate and expand the Library as had been planned, or to pursue a new library either on the same or different site. A new library facility might very likely be less costly to build per square foot than renovating and expanding the older facility. There is also the problem that the environmental negatives, such as the odor and lack of natural light may not be corrected through a renovation.

8. Moorestown Library-Funding and Advocacy

The Moorestown Library is under-funded to achieve many of the modernization goals that respondents discussed. The Library needs to develop an active fundraising process to augment the regular Library budget. The Board should consider creating a separate 501(c)3 Moorestown Library Foundation, with a separate Board, immediately, to raise funds for new programs, services and a potential capital campaign for a new Library. The Library needs a Development Coordinator to cultivate and oversee all private fundraising. A successful capital campaign will help fund a new or renovated library and instill additional community ownership and pride in a modern and heavily used Moorestown Library.

Discussion of Findings

Moorestown – Tradition and Modernization

Focus group participants discussed the features they like most about their community. Residents see Moorestown as a traditionally oriented, self-contained community with almost all necessary services conveniently available or available nearby. Moorestown has mostly maintained its small town sense of involvement, volunteerism and participation in community life. People believe that town government and town services are responsive to resident's needs and provide access to opportunities for parents, children and retirees. With an emphasis on the schools and recreation, people believe that Moorestown is an excellent community for families. Comments include:

- Many people care about the community and are not afraid to try new ideas
- We have a walkable town center-Main Street
- We are a town of family neighborhoods
- There is a sense of history and tradition
- Moorestown has excellent schools
- We are a small town in a larger urban area
- We are an oasis-a lot greener and quieter than areas around us
- This is a multi-generational town with many members and generations of the same family

"We have a "Quaker" tolerance of all different views and ideas – we may disagree but people are respectful of each other"

Participants were asked to discuss those things that have changed in Moorestown during the past several years and how they might impact library service in the future. Most significant is the increase in population, especially of young families with young children, and these families' expectations for easy access to public services and programs is high. As the newer, younger, more affluent and time-starved families have made Moorestown their home, their expectations for readily available services have challenged the infrastructure of the community to modernize.

The use of computers and the Internet has also impacted the way that residents seek and use information resources today. The need for knowledgeable hands-on assistance and instruction with technology resources has increased.

Additional comments about the changes that have occurred in Moorestown include:

- There has been an increase in population with younger families and more new residential development
- The newer, younger residents have become impatient waiting for things – their expectations for service is higher than veteran residents
- There are more dual income families and more children home alone or with nannies
- There is a wider range of family income and economic status that may separate older sections of the community from newer ones – eastern from western sections of the town
- We have become more “spread out” residentially
- Other languages such as Spanish are being heard in the community more often, especially during the day, -we need to think of non-English speaking library users
- Though some are leaving, seniors and retirees are staying in Moorestown
- There is an increase in property values and taxes
- There is an increase in home size
- We have built a new Upper Elementary School and expanded Middle and High School
- Our commercial areas are struggling, especially the downtown as commercial development continues on the peripheries of the community
- There is no video store left in Moorestown
- Our community has become “more political” with two viable, active parties
- There is a much more competitive environment for adults and children-schools, grades, sports, homes size
- We have become more “boundary-less” than before-area towns blend into each other at times

There is, however, a growing undercurrent of dissatisfaction and distrust with local government and public services. A backlash has developed in response to the increase in population, school taxes and property values and the difficult task of modernizing an ageing public service infrastructure. Local government and improvement activities have become an occasional target for both local boosters and critics who all are concerned with the future of their community. The Moorestown Library, as previously mentioned, has provided its own controversies as plans for modernization have been debated, amended, planned and halted during the past 20 years.

Use of other libraries and the reasons for use⁴

Participants were asked about area libraries they use and the reasons for their use. Most participants reported using other libraries recently, especially as they were encouraged to use the Cherry Hill Public Library and Mt. Laurel Public Library while the Moorestown Library was closed. A minority stated that they never do and some stated that they mostly use other libraries. Some of the comments about area libraries include:

- **Cherry Hill Public Library** – I used it for my Junior paper-an excellent place to study, very convenient, large meeting rooms - many available computers, only \$10 for a senior non-resident card, superior collections, cafe, friendly, good ambiance, lots of seating, gorgeous,
- **Burlington County** – Great selection, close and convenient, better all around especially current materials and best sellers, snack bar,
- **Mt. Laurel Public Library** – Good children’s area and books, excellent DVD collection, open Sunday, senior film group, book clubs, great ambiance, I still use it since the closing, I go there weekly

“People want a reason to come back to the Moorestown Library.”

The Amazing Library

Participants were asked to imagine a Moorestown Library of the future; a library they can imagine unrestricted by budget or space. They were asked to think about other libraries they have visited that impressed them and what specifically they thought was amazing. Ideas from the Cherry Hill Public Library and the Mt. Laurel Public Library served as examples for many people. Many participants recognized that the Moorestown Library had become less relevant to Moorestown

⁴ It should be noted that the other mentioned libraries have Sunday hours during most, or part, of the year.

residents as it failed to modernize. Some of the visions of an amazing library focused on facilities, layout and space. The majority addressed areas of collections, policies, staffing, hours and services. Comments include:

- A lot of adult programming
- Multiple copies of best sellers – should not have to wait too long for a best seller
- More current DVD's for adults and children
- Clean new books that don't smell
- Up to date and larger selection of new books
- A café in the library
- Book clubs in the library
- More people in the Library for fun-chess, films, lectures, etc...
- A lot of natural light
- Very bright and cozy – the opposite of what we have today
- A casual, warm and inviting feeling to the library
- A warm and engaging environment for children's
- A safe and comfortable environment
- Sunday hours all year
- Comfortable couches and chairs throughout the library
- Keep the book drop box open all the time and a drive through book return
- Large and modern meeting room space
- A Heating and Ventilating system that works

Additional comments concerning space, layout, access and technology include:

- A business resource center
- Differentiated spaces for noisy and quiet uses
- An interactive web site
- A lot more computers for public use-no wait
- A computer lab

- Space for cultural performances like music and art
- A place to eat or have snacks after school
- Cozy space to sit, talk or read

“An amazing Moorestown Library would be an important anchor for Moorestown’s downtown economy.”

What Are You Satisfied With At The Moorestown Library?

Library users are always eager to comment on all that their library does well and Moorestown Library users are no exception. The level of general satisfaction with the Library appears to be low but most respondents recognize that there are many opportunities to improve.

Staff receptiveness to user requests for research and for locating materials was a comment heard often. The staff is an area of satisfaction for the community, though not all participants’ experiences with staff are positive ones. For the most part, the staff receives high marks. Other comments of satisfaction include:

- The location
- I can walk or bike to the Library
- Inter Library Loan
- The children’s programs and staff
- The African American collection
- The religious books
- The book sale
- The periodicals
- The parking is usually good
- Summer Reading Program
- No fees for the videos
- Online renewal
- The school textbooks in the library

“The status quo is unacceptable ...everything is open for improvement.”

What Can Be Improved?

Residents are eager to offer comments for improvement to the Moorestown Library. Improvements to the Library have been discussed for many years. Many of the comments are focused on improvements to enhance what they feel is already an important community resource but is losing importance and relevance. Comments focused on issues of access, hours, collections, computers and programs. An expanded collection of new DVDs, CDs, current titles and best sellers and expansion of library hours to Sunday are the top comments about improvements. Following these are comments about services to teens and older adults, expanded selections of books on CD, and additional computers and Internet access. Comments about the facility centered on the offensive odor, noise and the lack of comfortable seating and natural light. Respondents were critical of the outside of the facility commenting about the drainage, appearance, and entrance and lighting which are all lacking. Planners should take special note of teen's perceptions about the library, many who claim they dislike the library due to these and other reasons including the odor and age of materials. Comments from seniors focus on the collections of the library and a lack of comfort when they use the library. As one participant comments:

"The focus has been on building - related items for years and what we couldn't do to lack of space – let's focus on new ideas for programming, book clubs, collections, etc... and do them."

Other comments are:

- We need to accommodate more children and more children's programs in the library –no waiting list for children's programs
- Open the library on Sunday
- The lobby area is very dark and foreboding, feeling unsafe
- The whole area in front of the Library is unwelcoming and unattractive
- Improve the travel and medical collections
- Multiple copies of best sellers – *"I have waited too long to get a best seller at the library"*
- There is a need to weed and get rid of old, obsolete materials
- The web site and catalog need to be made much more user friendly
- A dedicated teen area
- New Carpeting

- Technical instruction on computers, email, etc...

Priorities: Change One Thing

In order to determine those changes that the participants might care about the most, they were asked to name one thing they would change tomorrow about the library. An improvement in the physical condition of the library, removal of the odor, and Sunday hours are the top responses from many people. Weeding and improving the book and video collections are next. Staffing to assist with Internet searches and computer instruction are also top responses. An increase in public relations, communication to the public and fundraising follow. Comments include:

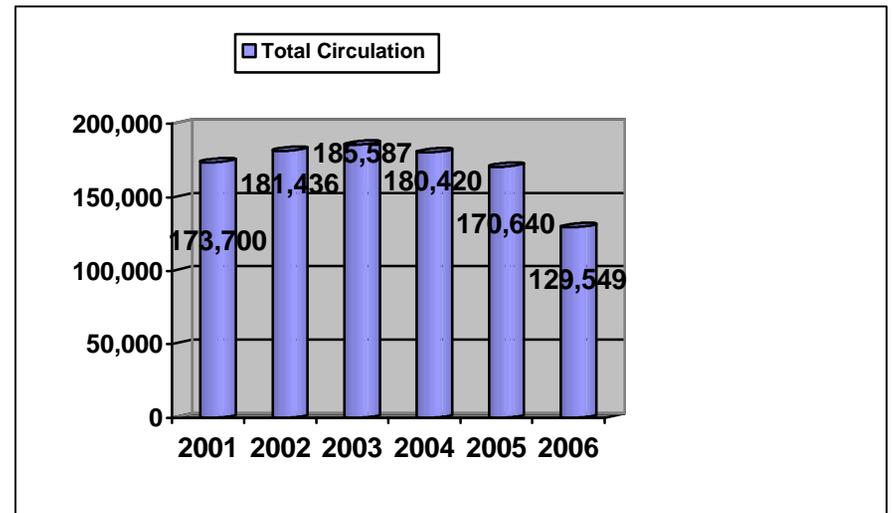
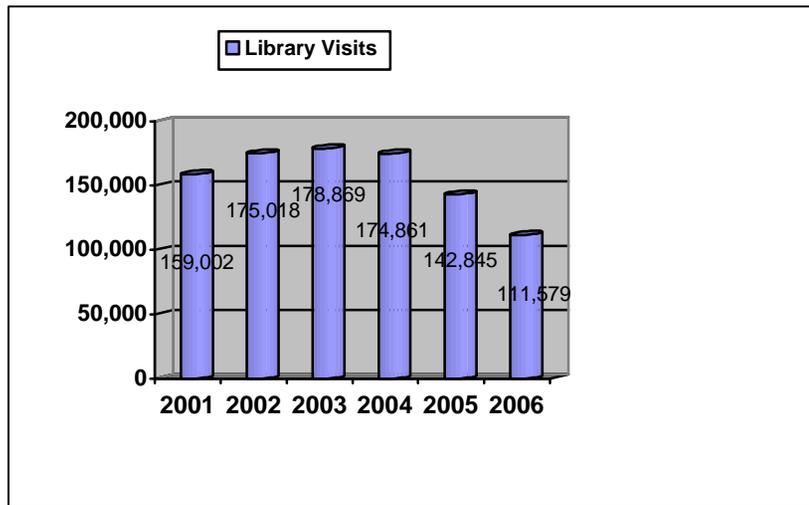
- Get rid of the odor
- Heating and air conditioning that work
- A warmer and more welcoming environment-a whole refurbishment program
- Change the layout to create a friendlier environment-get rid of large stacks
- Open Sunday
- Many more new computers
- More new books
- Get rid of the old books-open up the space for other uses
- Start all over with the children's collection
- More children and teen programs
- Easier access to using the meeting room for the public
- It takes too long to get new books on the floor
- A clean, new space for teens
- A copier that works well
- Advocacy-look for new fund raising sources aggressively
- The public's perception about the Library
- Build a new library

Student's comments include:

- Newer, faster and more computers-no wait

- A snack area after school
- Open Sunday
- More new books and new titles
- Comfortable seating for me or a group of students to work together
- Update the DVD collection – old movies – even the new movies are old
- There is a limited selection of teen books-especially whole series are lacking
- Make sure that MS Office on the computers are the same version as in the schools

The following tables describe circulation and library visit trends for the last several years. It is important to note that the library was closed on 10/14/06 for the planned renovation and did not reopen un-renovated until January 2007. These trends have recently improved with dramatic increases in circulation and visits since the Library Board and Administration have begun to implement many of the requests of the planning study participants and early recommendations.



In Conclusion:

Participants in the focus groups, community meeting and the survey recognize that the library must keep up with population changes and changes in resident's life styles and library needs. Residents believe that the library is lagging behind in changing with resident's needs and that it needs a renewed energy and vitality that community discussion and concern can bring to it. Participants concerns about the collections, hours, staffing, programs for children and adults and the library facility were all noted and recorded. They will serve along with this report as a basis for the Library Planning Committee to develop a new strategic plan and make its recommendations to the Library Board. As noted, a renewed focus by the Library Board has reenergized the library and started to respond to residents' concerns and needs.

"The library should be 'The Place' for people to go in Moorestown and feel a part of the community."

