

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Nearly seven years ago, Himmel & Wilson served as the primary library consultant for a major assessment of public library facilities for the Omaha Public Library (OPL). The ***Omaha Public Library Facilities Master Plan*** that was submitted in September 2010 was extensive. In addition to a functional assessment, the study included architectural, engineering, and even general property valuation appraisals of each of the twelve OPL facilities. Comprehensive facility profiles were compiled for each building.

This report serves as an update to that original Facilities Master Plan and evaluates the status of OPL buildings in light of the passage of time and continued population growth in Douglas County. The study is limited in scope in that funding was not available for architectural, engineering or real estate studies. In short, this study reviews the findings, assumptions, and recommendations of the 2010 report and determines whether those findings, assumptions, and recommendations remain valid. The new report compares recommended actions against changes and improvements that have taken place, and offers a revised set of recommendations.

As their name implies, “public libraries” serve people. Therefore, the number of people being served (or service population) is the most important criterion used in library planning. For purposes of both the 2010 study and the current study, the library service population was/is presumed to be the population of Douglas County Nebraska excluding the City of Ralston, which maintains its own independent public library.

Collection of data for the 2010 United States Census had recently been completed and its results were not available when work on the 2010 ***Omaha Public Library Facilities Master Plan*** was being conducted. Consequently, sources other than the dated 2000 U.S. Census data were used for planning purposes. Among other sources, population and population projection data were drawn from the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Planning Agency and the University of Nebraska's Bureau of Business Research.

For the 2010 Plan, Himmel & Wilson used a 2010 design population of 510,000 people. The subsequent release of U.S. Census data reported the Douglas County population at 517,110 and the City of Ralston's population at 5,943. This means that the actual service population for OPL at the time of the earlier study

was 511,167 (517,110 – 5,943). Obviously, the service population estimate that was used was extremely accurate. However, the 2010 study also used a very conservative 2030 projected service population of 560,000 for planning purposes. It is clear that population growth in Douglas County will far exceed this projection. The U.S. Census Bureau’s July 2016 population estimate for the County is already 554,995 and the Center for Public Affairs Research University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) now projects Douglas County’s 2030 population at 625,173. As we approach the 2020, it also makes sense to consider projections for 2040. The Center for Public Affairs Research predicts that Douglas County’s population will reach 680,008 in 2040.

The questions at hand are:

1. How well are the existing Omaha Public Library facilities meeting the needs of Omaha/Douglas County residents, and,
2. what public library facilities will be required over the next 20 years to continue to effectively meet public library service needs?

A final note of background. The demise of “bricks and mortar” public library facilities has been actively predicted since the proliferation of personal computers began in the 1980s. The reasoning has always been that people will no longer need or want print books. In fact, the printed book has proven to be very resilient. Although a steep climb in the use of e-books occurred when the price-point of e-readers such as the Kindle broke the \$200 mark, this trend has leveled off and e-book use has receded modestly.

Although some types of print materials (reference books for example) have largely been replaced by their virtual counterparts, publishers report that approximately seventy percent (70%) of the sales of book-length materials are sales of hard copy. Furthermore, over the last two years, e-book sales have actually declined. In short (and to paraphrase a quote sometimes attributed to Mark Twain), “The reports of the death of libraries is greatly exaggerated.” There is little doubt that we will need bricks and mortar public libraries in the year 2040 and that these public libraries will contain sizeable collections of print materials. In applying a “rule-of-thumb” measure of .75 square feet per capita to library needs in the following report, the consultants have already factored in anticipated reductions in the sizes of some specific collections such as reference materials and non-print/media items such as DVDs that are quickly moving toward downloaded/streamed modes of delivery.

PUBLIC LIBRARY SPACE STANDARDS

Library planners are often asked "how much public library space is appropriate for our community?" It is difficult to offer a precise answer to this question because space needs are impacted by multiple factors. The range of services offered by the library or libraries, local conditions including the quality of and public access to libraries in educational institutions, the availability of other community meeting spaces, the history of library services in an area and a host of other issues can affect the answer to a significant degree.

Nevertheless, some "rules-of-thumb" *are* available and, because they offer a good starting point for discussion, are frequently used.

A Brief History of Space Needs Standards

For much of the 20th century, standards and guidelines issued by professional organizations and state library agencies suggested that approximately 0.5 square feet (SF) of public library space should be provided per capita. For example, the application of this standard to a community with a population of 20,000 would yield a recommended public library of approximately 10,000 square feet (20,000 population X 0.5 SF/capita= 10,000 SF).

This 0.5 SF/capita rule-of-thumb began to change in the late 1980s and 1990s as libraries added computer workstations, larger collections of non-print media (e.g., audio and video tapes, CDs, DVDs), more extensive meeting facilities and more amenities such as cafes, friends of the library bookstores, interactive "discovery" areas for pre-school children and larger areas for teens. The rules-of-thumb and/or standards frequently cited first increased to 0.6 SF per capita, then to 0.75 SF/capita and, by the year 2000, most library planners were suggesting a ratio of one square foot per capita or greater.

During this period of time, many states that had at one time promulgated the 0.5 SF/capita standard abandoned the quantitative approach entirely in favor of a "bottom-up" calculation of space needs based on service offerings. In other places, typically in states offering grants to local governments for library construction, library agencies embraced higher per capita standards. For example, the Texas State Library and Archives applied a 0.6 SF/capita guideline as a minimum requisite and the State of Delaware required applicants for state aid for the construction of library buildings to meet or exceed a 0.75 SF/capita standard.

As noted above, many library planners (including Himmel & Wilson) adopted standards higher than the 0.75 SF/capita level in the early 2000s; however, many have now returned to the 0.75 SF/capita level as representing a compromise that accounts for some future reduction in collection sizes, some reduction in the amount of space dedicated to wired computer workstations (in favor of spaces to use portable/hand-held devices using Wi-Fi), and increased demands for collaborative and group study spaces. Himmel & Wilson used the 0.75 SF/capita standard in the 2010 study and it is applied in this study as well.

The Application of Space Needs Standards in Omaha in the Past

Himmel & Wilson was not the first to employ a 0.75 SF/capita criterion to estimate public library space needs in Omaha. The "Facility Element" of the City of Omaha's Master Plan, which was first developed in 1997 used an overall benchmark of 0.75 SF/capita in assessing library space needs. It was noted at that time that this was "slightly under, but close to, national standards." At the time, the Omaha Public Library system was composed of ten facilities. These buildings totaled approximately 218,000 SF in size. More than half of this space (57%) was accounted for by the W. Dale Clark (Main) Library. At the time, Omaha fell well below the 0.75 benchmark that was suggested. To address this fact, the plan called for the addition of nearly 150,000 SF of additional space (including additions to existing buildings, replacements for existing buildings and new facilities). This represented an increase of more than sixty-eight percent (68.7%) over the space available for public library purposes at the time the first plan was released.

The City's "Public Facilities Element" report looked at the library system's total space needs in two categories: neighborhood library service space and reference service space. Neighborhood library space was generally calculated at 0.55 SF/capita (the two facilities co-located in community centers, Florence and Sorensen, were calculated at 0.41 SF per person). Reference space was calculated at 0.34 SF per capita; however, it was rightly assumed that the W. Dale Clark (Main) Library would provide reference services to an extended area. The blended target reached by adding neighborhood needs and reference needs (with the adjustment for the Clark Library) was the 0.75 SF/capita.

The Current Situation

In the years that elapsed between 1997 when the City Master Plan estimated library space needs and 2010, the Omaha Public Library added approximately 87,000 SF of library space, or a little less than sixty percent (58%) of what was

envisioned in 1997. This increase included the expansion of the Benson, Millard, Sorensen and Washington libraries, the replacement of the South Omaha Branch with the South Omaha/Metropolitan Community College joint-use library facility, the addition of the Saddlebrook joint school/public library facility, and the acquisition of the Bess Johnson Elkhorn Library as part of the annexation of Elkhorn to the City of Omaha.

Since the 2010 study, the only space added to OPL’s physical plant has been a modest addition (less than 2,000 SF) to the Florence Library. Taken together, all of these additions represent considerable improvement since 1997; however, the changes occurred during a period of explosive population growth. Given the lack of new facility development and/or expansion of facilities since the 2010-2011 Florence project concluded and Douglas County’s significant population growth, OPL is rapidly losing the library “space race.”

The Omaha Public Library offers services from 12 library facilities that total approximately 305,252 Gross Square Feet (GSF) of space. Of this space, 122,490 GSF (or 40.1%) is located at the W. Dale Clark (Main) Library. Following is an accounting of the application of the 0.75 SF/capita standard based on current and projected population growth as calculated by the Center for Public Affairs Research University of Nebraska at Omaha.

	Douglas County Population	0.75 SF/capita	Current Square Footage	Deficit in Square Feet	SF/capita (Without Adding New Space)
2010	517,110	387,833	305,252	80,833	0.59
2016	544,083	408,062	305,252	101,062	0.56
2020	571,311	428,483	305,252	121,483	0.53
2025	598,220	448,665	305,252	141,665	0.51
2030	625,173	468,880	305,252	161,880	0.49
2035	652,243	489,182	305,252	182,182	0.47
2040	680,008	510,006	305,252	203,006	0.45

Table 1 – Estimated Overall Library Space Needs and Deficits

As you can see, OPL’s existing physical plant consists of approximately 305,252 GSF. This translates into just under 0.60 SF/capita. Based on national norms, the consultants would characterize this as “marginally adequate.” In our

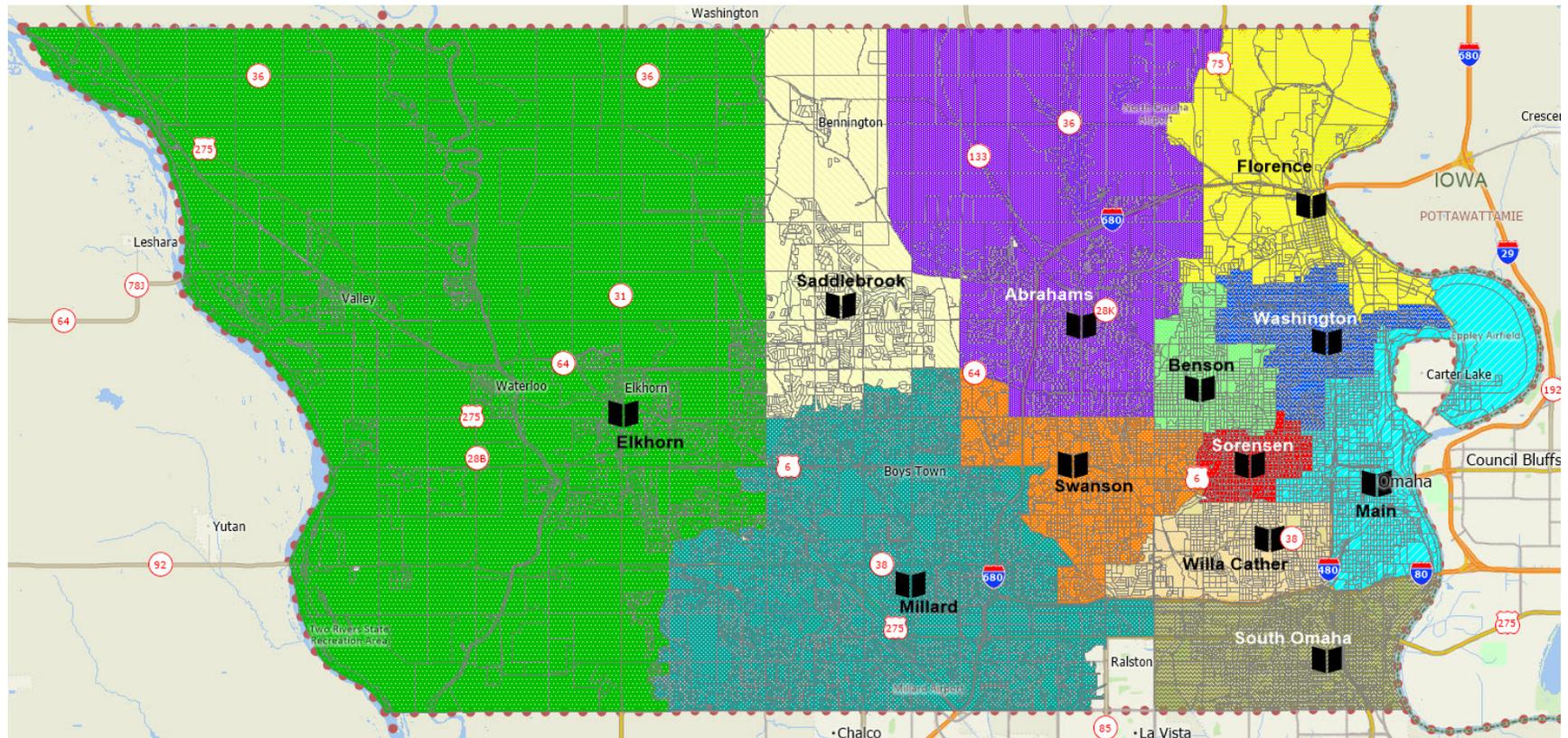
professional estimation, a library system such as Omaha's crosses the line between marginal adequacy and inadequacy when it drops below 0.50 SF/capita. Himmel & Wilson frequently refers to this benchmark as the "West Virginia standard." This is because the State of West Virginia, which is not typically acclaimed for the quality of its library facilities, has traditionally used the 0.50 mark as the minimum recommended facility size. Using the population estimates above, OPL will, as a whole, cross into "West Virginia" territory between 2025 and 2030 if no action is taken.

Other Important Considerations

The 0.75 SF/capita standard presented earlier is a "blended" average. That is, it presumes that differences in a specific building's program of service and neighborhood characteristics may result in some libraries being larger and some being smaller than the 0.75 SF/capita average. The City of Omaha's "Public Facilities Element" in the 1997 City Master Plan looked at the library system's total space needs in two categories: neighborhood library service space and reference service space. Neighborhood library space was generally calculated at 0.55 SF/capita (The two facilities co-located in community centers, Florence and Sorensen, were calculated at 0.41 SF per person). Reference space was calculated at 0.34 SF per capita; however, it was rightly assumed that the W. Dale Clark (Main) Library would provide reference services to an extended area. The blended target reached by adding neighborhood needs and reference needs (with the adjustment for the Clark Library) was the 0.75 SF/capita benchmark. While the mix of general and "reference" space has changed over the years, the 0.75 SF/capita standard still remains valid. Following is a summary of how the application of the 0.75 SF/capita standard relates to specific buildings.

Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping of a sample of actual library usage was conducted as part of this study. Service areas were assigned based on the prevalence of usage on the Census Block level. (Areas with no use were assigned to the library that made the greatest sense; for example, all territory east of the Elkhorn Library was assigned to Elkhorn and areas immediately to the north of the Saddlebrook Branch Library were assigned to Saddlebrook.) The map on the following page displays the service areas that were derived from this process. The table on the page following the map (Table 2) shows how these service areas translate into square feet per capita at the branch level.

Map 1
Omaha Public Library Branch Service Areas 2017



It should be noted that the service populations reported are based on 2010 Census Block populations and therefore understate the actual number of people served in growing areas. This is particularly true in the western portion of the County. In short, the situation is even worse than the table would indicate for libraries such as Elkhorn and Saddlebrook.

Himmel & Wilson has also developed “effective service area populations” based on drive-times to help identify underserved areas. These calculations are presented in support of the recommendations later in the report.

Library	Approximate Square Footage	Estimated Service Population (Based on 2010 Census Data)	Estimated 2017 SF/capita
Abrahams	20,450	51,414	0.40
Benson	20,300	30,156	0.67
Cather	11,477	37,780	0.30
Elkhorn	7,893	35,053	0.23
Florence	7,412	14,113	0.53
Main	122,490	42,529	2.88
Millard	31,360	139,603	0.22
Saddlebrook	14,155	36,619	0.39
Sorensen	6,495	18,811	0.35
South Omaha	21,050	38,963	0.54
Swanson	25,495	35,908	0.71
Washington	16,675	29,077	0.57

Table 2
Branch Level Square Feet per Capita

It was mentioned earlier that OPL as a whole will cross into “West Virginia” territory (less than 0.50 SF/capita) in regard to square feet per capita between 2025 and 2030 if no action is taken. As you can see from the highlighted libraries in the table above, half of Omaha Public Library’s individual facilities already achieve this dubious distinction.

The location of facilities is also of great importance. The placement of the existing Omaha Public Library facilities is heavily influenced by historic

population distribution. In other words, most of the libraries were built where the majority of the people lived in the past. It is no secret that the center of population in Douglas County has gradually shifted to the west over the past several decades. This has resulted in a growing mismatch between population served and facility availability.

Given the history of population development in the County, it is not surprising that OPL's existing facilities are heavily skewed toward the eastern portion of Douglas County. However, to an increasing degree, the population growth that has already occurred and the future expansion that is predicted, the current distribution of facilities has created and will continue to create significant service inequities.

That said, it is important to point out that it is quite appropriate to have neighborhood branches in urban areas located in closer proximity to each other than they are in outlying areas. This is especially true in urban areas with large numbers of low-income households. Transportation availability (often reflected in the number of vehicles available in a household) significantly limits the mobility of individuals. Regional branch libraries serving suburban areas can often effectively service residents within a six-minute drive-time. However, a six-minute drive-time is both meaningless and a real obstacle for an individual in the inner city who must walk to the library because they don't have a vehicle or come from a household in which a single vehicle is used primarily to go to and from a work site.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Questions that Need to Be Addressed

- Is it more important to address the needs in unserved areas than to bring existing libraries up to contemporary standards? Is it possible to do both?
- Which, if any, libraries should be expanded?
- Which, if any, should be replaced?
- Are new facilities needed? If so, approximately where should these facilities be located?
- Are there any new service models that might enable the Library to offer high- quality service from smaller facilities?
- What is the best approach to maximize the excess capacity of space at the Clark (Main) Library?

Findings

- The Omaha Public Library has a serious deficit of public library space. Past growth in the central portion of the City/County and current/anticipated growth in the central and western sections of Douglas County result in underserved areas.
- Even if the conservative 0.75 SF/capita guideline is applied, the Omaha Public Library will need approximately 163,628 GSF of additional public library space by 2030 (based on an estimated population of 625,173) and approximately 204,754 GSF of additional public library space by the year 2040 (based on an estimated population of 680,008).
- The overall quality and condition of existing facilities is good. The Millard and Abrahams facilities are excellent; several of the other branches (e.g., Washington, Benson) are very good.
- Facilities remodeled over the last decade have incorporated many of the positive characteristics observed in the best public library facilities in the nation. (A major exception to this observation is that Radio-Frequency Identification [RFID] technologies for checkout, self-check security and materials handling have not been implemented to date.)
- The W. Dale Clark (Main) Library is dated and was designed at a time when service philosophies and practice (especially in the area of reference service) were quite different. The facility is inefficient and under-utilized.
- The Benson Library is attractive and well used. However, lighting is poor in most areas of the facility and should be addressed in future capital budgets. Carpeting is also in need of replacement.
- Several other libraries built and/or renovated in the 2005 – 2011 period are beginning to look a bit tired. New carpeting, upholstering, and, in some instances, new furniture is needed.
- The bandwidth available to all libraries is inadequate and is sub-standard. While this study is NOT a technology assessment, this factor limits OPL's ability to maximize the use of its facilities.
- While relatively new, the Elkhorn Library is poorly designed, inefficient, and inadequate to meet the public's needs. Some design and construction elements of the building are more appropriate for residential structures than for commercial/public buildings. The current structure (under 8,000 SF) is inadequate to meet current, let alone long-term,

needs resulting from population growth. The building needs to be significantly expanded (more than doubled in size) or replaced with a much larger building.

- The expansion of the Florence Library enhanced library services in the northeastern portion of the City/County. Staff spaces are inadequate; however, this issue pales in comparison to challenges presented in other buildings.
- The Millard Library, although an exceptionally fine facility, is significantly overused. The branch library currently serves over one-quarter of the County's total population. The building is adequate to serve 60,000 to 70,000 people, but not the 150+,000 residents for whom Millard is the closest library
- The Saddlebrook Library is an innovative and well-designed facility; however, it is not adequate to meet the current, let alone the long term, needs of north-central Douglas County.
- The Sorensen Library is a vital community asset and the renovation that was completed in the late 2000s enhanced library services in that neighborhood. However, the facility is beginning to look a bit tired. The library lacks much needed meeting room space and the space available for computer use is also inadequate to meet public demand.
- The South/Metro Library is innovative and attractive. However, the small size of its children's area does not match the demographics of the area, which includes the highest percentage of young children of any branch in the County.
- Much of the space in the Swanson Library is not available for general public use and the building's design limits its functionality and flexibility. Furthermore, the two-level design and entry point far removed from the parking lots are not consistent with the older demographic prevalent in the area.
- The Washington Library is a very attractive facility that provides critical services in the neighborhood it serves. It should serve the community well for many years to come.
- The Willa Cather Library is the poorest of the existing facilities (single-pane windows, inadequate power and data distribution, etc.) and needs to be replaced. Significant capital expenditures would be wasted given its dearth of parking and the lack of space for expansion.

Principles

High quality public institutions, including public libraries, are essential to quality of life and are integral to the educational, cultural, and economic well-being of a community. The Omaha Public Library needs to begin to address its public library capacity needs in the near future or it is at risk of becoming increasingly irrelevant and a signal of the community's decline rather than its ascendance.

Himmel & Wilson recommends that the following principles be applied in OPL's efforts to grow its infrastructure:

1. Adopt the 0.75 SF/capita standard as the systemwide target for library development and a minimum 0.50 SF/capita for any individual branch. (Based on 20 year population projections.)
2. Use a maximum six-minute drive-time measure as the target for the construction of new/replacement facilities. (A replacement for Elkhorn is likely to create some drive-times exceeding six-minutes in very rural portions of the County.)
3. Reject short-term fixes to long-term problems. (The Saddlebrook Library was a short-term solution but fails to meet long-term needs.)
4. Address unserved/underserved areas first with long-term solutions.

Recommendation - Highest Priorities

1. New facility – North of Q Street on the 180th St. corridor. This would be a new 40,000 GSF branch and would serve approximately 70,000 people currently underserved in the area west of the Millard Library and southeast of the Elkhorn Library. Building this facility would solve two problems. It would reach many residents in a developed and growing area and it would take considerable pressure off of the over-utilized Millard Library.
2. Replace Willa Cather Facility – Center St. in the neighborhood of S. 63rd St

(considerably farther west than the existing branch. This would be a new 35,000 GSF branch and would serve approximately 70,000 people. The new facility would continue to serve the traditional Willa Cather base but would add underserved populations to the west of the existing location and would reduce overlap with the South Omaha Library.

3. Replace Elkhorn Library – At or near the existing site but with better access to Hwy 31. This would be a new 20,000 GSF facility designed to be expanded to 35,000 GSF in the future. It would replace the poorly designed and constructed existing building and would initially serve a primary population of 20,000 within the six-minute drive time and would eventually serve approximately 60,000 people.
4. Replace Main Library and Swanson Library – A new “Downtown Branch” Library at or near the existing W. Dale Clark site and a replacement for the Swanson Library that would serve as a new “Central Library.” The Downtown Library would be approximately 30,000 GSF and would provide primary service to approximately 20,000 area residents as well as serving the downtown workforce. It could be in a mixed use setting with the public library occupying the ground floor. The new “Central” Library would be built along the Dodge St. corridor somewhere between 72nd and 90th. The structure would need to be approximately 140,000 GSF in size and would house the OPL back of the house functions, Friends of the Library functions and would serve as both a regional branch library facility and as a research facility.
5. Replace the Saddlebrook Library – Fort St. near N. 156th St. This would be a new 15,000 GSF facility designed to be expanded to 25,000 GSF in the future. The new facility would replace the inadequate Saddlebrook Library and would initially serve a population of approximately 20,000 and would eventually provide primary library service to 30,000 people within a six-minute drive-time.