



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Members of the ICMA Local Government and Public Libraries Partnership Initiative Advisory Committee are committed to gaining and promoting an understanding of the role and value of the modern public library.”

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ICMA Management
Perspective

I recently spoke to Albany City Administrator Beth Pollard about her role on the Bill and Melinda Gates-funded International City/County Management Association Advisory Committee. This committee is composed of local government managers and public librarians from across the United States. Their charge is, as Pollard put it, to look at how public libraries can help cities solve problems.

The 25 members represent a variety of city/library arrangements. The Albany Library, for example, is a branch of a county library system but is also supported by city funds. Other libraries may be exclusively city libraries, while others may be only county libraries. These varying kinds of arrangements create different kinds of relationships between the city and the library; some are more collaborative, while others are more disconnected from each other.

Those of us who work in public libraries know the value

of what we do every day. Taken moment by moment our work could seem insignificant – how valuable can it be to walk someone over to a shelf and help them find the right book? Or demonstrate how to reserve a computer? Or set up furniture for a film series? Yet taken all together and multiplied by the thousands of librarians doing the same thing at the same time in other libraries, you have what Michael Bryan, director of the Seminole Community Library in Florida, calls “the manifestation of democracy.”

But those who work in local governments may not spend much time in the local library and, as Pollard pointed out, may be thinking of the library they used as a child. By being on this committee, she has come to understand the many reasons libraries offer more than reading. This experience “opened my eyes to those possibilities” she told me.

The goal is to help cities appreciate and take advantage of what public libraries have to

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offer. To do this, they defined four roles the city manager can take to provide greater support to the public library. Strategic planning includes looking at the mission of the library as well as the city to see whether or not they complement each other. Funding encompasses both traditional and nontraditional sources of revenue. Promoting library programs and services helps garner public and political support. And accountability means the city manager helps the library director “align their programs with the broad goals of the local government.”

They also laid out four roles for the library. The first is as a “third place,” meaning a destination all members of the community use for a range of reasons, from homework centers for students to programs for seniors. The second is building communities: libraries are “viable partners in community development projects and anchors for new retail centers and

residential development.”

The third is that libraries enhance education, the workforce and local businesses by providing literacy programs, access to technology and technical assistance for small businesses. The final role is as change agent, by being a focal point for neighborhood change and helping to create new economic development.

What I particularly appreciate about this committee is that they are grappling with the same issue public librarians confront every day: How to let people know the value and relevance of their local library. We know we provide critical services, excellent programs, the latest technology and a neutral place to take advantage of all of these. Having city managers know that, too, should go a long way toward helping public libraries continue to exist as the valued resources they are.