



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
July 20, 2007

“At its core, strategic planning involves effectively planning, creating and managing forthcoming changes in the way your organization functions.”

-From “The Accidental Library Manager” by Rachel Singer Gordon

The Alameda County Library is currently revising its Strategic Plan. The new plan will serve as a guide for the next three to five years, as library’s role in the community continues to change and grow. Strategic planning involves many steps and lots of people – which is good, because it should be a collaboration of all those who are affected by the library. This includes administration, staff, library users and even library non-users, since librarians always want to know why people aren’t using their libraries.

In the last few years, other local libraries have implemented new strategic plans. For example, Berkeley has a plan in place for 2005-2010 and Contra Costa County has a new one as well. Each library system has collected information and used it to create a plan they hope will serve their community well.

To help gather some of this information for Alameda County, branches will be holding community forums – oppor-

tunities for community members to come and give their opinions about the needs of their city. The one for Albany will be on July 28, from 2 to 4 p.m., at the Albany Library. Library consultant Yolanda Cuesta will facilitate it, and she will help participants consider and answer a range of questions. These include ones like: “What changes would you like to see in your community?” and “When you have a problem or a situation you need help with, who do you go to for help?”

I love the idea of a strategic plan. In theory, by listening to those who are affected, a library can create a way to grow and change while still fulfilling its mission and meeting the needs of its users. But of course it isn’t as easy as all that. If people who don’t use the library don’t participate, the information gathered is incomplete. This is the biggest challenge for any organization – finding out why people don’t use their services. Sometimes it is simply a matter of marketing – some

people don't know what a business offers. It isn't unusual at library forums like this for participants to express some desire, only to find out the library is already doing whatever it is. They may say: "If only the library had DVDS or wireless Internet or quiet study rooms or books in Russian or a place a book group could meet - then I would use the library."

On the other hand, there may be services or materials or programs the library could be providing that would improve the lives of community members. It is the goal of these forums to find out what people need and how the library could play a part in meeting those needs.

To help the library help you, I encourage those of you who do use it and those of you who don't to come to the community forum. Or if you know someone who doesn't - take them along. The library needs to hear from all of you.

The plan can only be as good as the information - and you, the community, hold some of that information.

The Albany Library is also starting a blog, which is short for weblog, and is basically an online journal that can be read by anyone. For people who can't make it to the forum or who prefer to communicate virtually, this will be another way to contribute to the strategic plan. Express your opinions and help give an accurate picture of your neighborhood, your city, your schools - your life. It will make your library and your community even better.