



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
December 15, 2006

“In Long Overdue: A Fresh Look at Public and Leadership Attitudes About Libraries in the 21st Century, we hear loud and clear that people believe their communities must have well-functioning public libraries in order to be healthy and strong.”

-From Executive Summary
of *Long Overdue*
(www.publicagenda.org)

This past week I have been reading a report prepared by Public Agenda, with support from the Americans for Libraries Council (ALC) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This eighty-four page document presents an in-depth look at the attitudes of 1,203 adult community members, and 34 national and community leaders in politics, business, education, public health and library architecture. This kind of study fits in well with the goal of Public Agenda, which is described as an organization that “works to help the nation’s leaders better understand the public’s point of view and to help the average citizens better understand critical policy issues.”

It is appropriate for ALC, as well, since they are “a non-profit organization that champions the role of libraries in American life and promotes new approaches to sustaining and developing libraries in the 21st century.”

As a preface to the results of these surveys, there is

“America’s Public Libraries at a Glance.” The numbers on this page are impressive. As of 2003, there were 9,211 total public libraries, 16,541 total library buildings with branches, and 1,284,175,000 total library visits nationwide – which works out to 4.6 per capita. A look at the trends shows the per capita visits have increased (from 1991 to 2002) by 27%, the circulation has increased by 41%, and the children’s program attendance has increased from 35,573,000 in 1993 to 51,800,000 in 2001.

To do the research on *Long Overdue*, a range of questions were asked - by telephone, in person, and through focus groups in six diverse communities across the United States. The questions covered a range of topics, from “How many times in the past year have you visited the public library?” to “Do you believe that libraries use their money well, or do they spend it on the wrong things?” to “What do you think is the most important problem facing your local community

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today?”

ALC (www.americansforlibraries.org) has a summary sheet for this report and the first item they show is that libraries are trusted – almost 50% gave libraries an A, over public schools, local news media and the police. Respondents also saw a larger community role for libraries, in four areas in particular: A safe and engaging place for teens; literacy skills for a strong workforce; a center for community information – including government documents; and, greater access to technology. It is pointed out in the report, however, that many libraries are already providing these services, but public awareness is low.

However, while the public’s impression of libraries is consistently positive, *Long Overdue* points out that “the vast majority of the public does not sense that its own libraries may be at risk.” The recent closure of the Salinas, California, libraries

is given as an example of this problem, and the “canary in the coal mine” metaphor is used. As they put it: “For public libraries today, the greatest challenge is not in convincing the public of their worth...public libraries will need to look carefully at opportunities to strengthen their role in addressing the serious problems in their community.”

This is certainly a challenge for libraries but I think public libraries are up to the challenge. So far, we have adjusted well to a changing world, especially with our expanded technology. A report like this should help all of us – librarians, community members and leaders, and politicians – understand the power of the public library and its particular ability to meet the needs of changing communities.