

A FEW IDEAS CONCEIVED OVER BREAKFAST

From the active, although perhaps slightly twisted, minds of a handful of system directors and one resource librarian

The Current Environment: There will certainly be no additional system aids for the next two years, and the way the state budget deficit keeps growing, we may be lucky to hang on to what we have got now. Our state agency already faces deep cuts and may face more. In light of the federal situation, any immediate increase in LSTA seems unlikely. It appears probable that these situations will continue at least over the biennium to come, but may well extend beyond that.

On the other hand, life moves on. New technological advances surround us, and the citizens we serve seem to have an insatiable appetite for more and better library materials and services. If past history is any guide, as times become harder, library use will probably increase. One obvious and inevitable question faces us. How do we cope?

Some Ideas for Coping: What follows are a few ideas which may help us to get through this unfortunate period in history, and perhaps even to prosper. They tend to ignore political and service boundaries, current modes of operation, and some cases, the statutes themselves. They are not intended to require commitment, or even acceptance, from everyone. Some may be attractive to one system, some to another. Some may be undertaken by many of us, some by a few, some not at all. All are formative, and all would benefit from the combined wisdom of the entirety of SRLAAW and such other libraries and agencies as may be appropriate. What these ideas are not is an attempt to solve the really thorny problems, such as how to pay for cross border inequities or what the real future of systems should be, which have confronted us for so long. They are also by no means a complete list of current possibilities. The group was too small and breakfast just wasn't that long. It is instead our hope that these concepts will become an initial framework which we will all revise and improve as the months go by. And in so doing, despite trying times, perhaps we can build a better future for ourselves, our members, and the people we serve.

The Initial Ideas:

- 1. Purchasing:** Many systems already purchase goods and services on behalf of their members in order to receive larger discounts than individual libraries could obtain alone. Office supplies, and electronic equipment are two of the items thus purchased that immediately leap to mind. Many resource libraries have contracts with book jobbers at far better rates than do smaller libraries. It would seem logical for us to collect information from across the state concerning such arrangements. Then perhaps one agency with an especially good deal might be willing to try to extend it to others of us who are less fortunate, especially if another agency would broker the purchase of something else on their behalf. In this way, we could build up larger buying groups, thus getting bigger discounts, but also share the labor so that no one agency is overwhelmed. One factor that may help make this possible is the intersystem delivery service. Companies could drop-ship products to our central warehouse in Madison or to a system headquarters or resource library and we could deliver them out

across the state, thus offering suppliers the added incentive of lower shipping costs in return for bigger discounts.

- 2. Cataloging:** With the advent of shared systems and shared OCLC usage, many libraries have essentially gone out of the cataloging business, while retaining selection, acquisition, and processing. The cost to catalog an item centrally, especially if many copies are purchased by the participants in a shared venture, quickly drops from dollars to dimes. Although giving up their own cataloging isn't to the taste of every library, it might be useful to see just how many wish to continue this task, or who would, if the price was right, turn it over to someone else. A system with such a service might be able and willing to extend it to other systems, since we are all only an email away. It might also be possible to ask DLTCL, WILS, or some other agency to set up such a service on a statewide subscription basis, if we could get enough subscribers to make the project profitable for whoever undertook it.
- 3. Reference:** Interactive web based reference is certainly a popular topic these days. It is often called 24/7 reference, which can be highly misleading, as there are many projects which can usefully be undertaken without trying to meet this somewhat mythical standard. There are a number of products out there which enable a wide spectrum of interactive web based reference to occur, using methodologies ranging from chat screens to full motion interactive video. Some of the products are expensive, some are cheap, and some are shareware. The Tulsa Public Library has centralized all their reference resources in their main library, and offers reference in branches only over remote terminals, through interactive video. They apparently believe that this improves the quality of their reference product, while at the same time reducing costs. In many locations across the country, remote reference is offered into the home. This can be done to extend the reference hours of a large library to the customers of a small library with a more limited schedule. It can also be done to extend service for everyone to hours not previously offered, up to and including that ultimate 24/7. Such reference service can be offered from a library, or in one model, simply by a librarian in a remote location who has access to the online materials necessary to provide good reference service. For Wisconsin, several possibilities suggest themselves. The Tulsa centralization model might prove useful to large libraries with branches. This same model could also greatly improve the quality of reference service available to our smaller member libraries. What they save by not offering reference on site could be used to recompense resource libraries for their efforts in this area. Additionally, since remote reference is not necessarily bounded by distance, if several resource libraries each chose to offer after hours reference, either on site or remotely, say for one evening every week or so, then we could indeed move toward the after hours reference concept that appears to be becoming so popular. In return for one evening of offering after hours service, each such library could perhaps gain access for its customers to all the after hours service offered by the larger group. This same service could be open on a subscription basis to anyone, whether they are participants in the shared "production" of reference service or not.
- 4. Shared Circulation:** For many years, we have expressed the hope that someone (preferably the state) would decide what the best shared automated system is and purchase it for us all. This worked for the University System, but seems unlikely to be a reasonable possibility for public libraries. At this time however, the Outagamie-Waupaca and Nicolet Federated

Library Systems do jointly operate one shared system, thus proving that both political and technical difficulties surrounding such joint operation can be overcome. Over the next decade, almost all of us who have shared systems now will replace them, and perhaps some who have not yet undertaken such projects will do so. It would seem reasonable for us to begin to compare and contrast the features and costs of our shared systems with an eye toward entering into more such intersystem relationships, in order to save dollars both in the initial acquisition of such systems as well as in their ongoing operation.

5. **Expertise:** As all of us are called upon to provide increasingly sophisticated technical training and support to our member libraries, we find ourselves faced with the need to hire more and more specialized and expensive employees who have these skills, and to spend ever increasing sums for the training needed to keep the skills of these employees current. In some system areas, systems and resource libraries already share such employees, to the benefit of both agencies. It might be desirable to extend such sharing relationships across system borders, especially where geography favors such a solution. Additionally, with more electronic products and service being offered, many of us are beginning to operate “server farms” to support such services. In an era of cheap telecommunications, perhaps a few systems could offer this kind of electronic equipment management service to many. The first step in sharing such expertise might be to see who would need such shared services, then who might be willing to offer them, and finally to try to put the pieces together to the benefit of us all.
6. **Delivery:** We have intersystem delivery in Wisconsin, and many of us run our own delivery services within our own systems. In order to cut costs, we might explore the needs of other, non-library agencies to deliver items to and from the municipalities we already serve. Income from such deliveries could cut our own costs as well as possibly enable us to increase delivery frequency where needed.
7. **Excess Capacity:** Some of us have excess telecommunications capacity. This is especially true in the Winnefox System, where a massive fiber optic network was installed by various units of government, acting jointly (something we thought we should all emulate). New laws proposed by the telcos would prevent units of government from becoming general Internet Service Providers, but public library boards and public library systems are specifically exempted from such prohibitions. Is there a role for us in this area, especially in rural communities which the telcos do not adequately serve? Furthermore, we all have networks of pcs which have storage and computing capacity far beyond our day to day needs in many cases. For years hackers have been breaking into machines such as ours just to make use of such excess capacity. Can we isolate it, manage it, and/or sell it?
8. **Shared Databases and Other Electronic Products:** All our customers depend upon the databases purchased by DLTCL, and we all hope that these resources will increase as time goes by. Many systems also purchase access to other databases and electronic products to supplement these central resources. Many individual libraries also purchase databases, although usually for in-library use only. It seems unlikely that either the state or the systems will have the money in the near future to increase their central database access, although it is highly desirable to extend these services to the widest audience possible and to get the

cheaper rates that are generally available only through large group purchases. Our best hope for continuing and expanding these electronic services might therefore be for systems (possibly in cooperation with groups such as DLTCL, WILS, and/or WPLC) to seek out and broker such products to individual libraries. Initially this would involve only those libraries who are interested in certain products willing to invest in them. Ultimately, just as many of us have extended membership in our automated systems to an ever wider range of libraries, we would also extend access to selected databases and electronic products to as many libraries as possible by virtue of providing a far lower price than any individual library could obtain alone. This methodology should work very well insofar as products with in-library use are concerned. If the products are to include remote use, however, which would be available only to the customers of participating libraries, then the statutory "same service" requirement might have to be re-interpreted or modified.

- 9. Shared Websites:** Many libraries are creating websites for their customers that include links to a wide variety of online reference resources. Creating and maintaining such sites can require a great deal of effort, especially when it comes to ensuring that the links are accurate and up to date. Some libraries and systems are conducting these efforts as joint projects. "Cooler by the Lake" is an excellent example of this. By pooling our Wisconsin expertise, and by basing our product on ongoing national efforts where possible, would it be possible for us to jointly create a "vanilla" website, which could be adapted to the needs of libraries throughout our state? Individual libraries could add their own "brand name" to their local presentation of such a site, and add or discard links freely as they chose, but still escape the lion's share of the labor that the creation and upkeep of such a site requires.
- 10. Digitization:** Many Wisconsin libraries have valuable and unique historical and genealogical materials which are generally unavailable to the public. It is now both cheap and easy to have such materials digitized. Some Wisconsin libraries, after properly working out the questions of copyright, are offering materials thus digitized on their websites for free, but are selling them in CD rom format or in hard copy to those who actually want to own the material. Would it be worth our time to survey to see what materials are out there and to try to share the processes that have worked so well for some libraries with others who might be interested? A larger process of digitizing Wisconsin authors, which might be a good project for private foundation grant support, could also be undertaken.
- 11. Brokering Electronic Information:** Many vendors want to place their electronic products in homes, but the cost and process of the marketing required to achieve this are daunting, to say the least. Suppose that we asked the vendors of these products (encyclopedias, newspapers, information services, etc.) to make them available free through our libraries, but that in turn we would market them to our customers as something they might want to purchase in the home, much in the way that many sites have links to Amazon.com, just in case you want to order a book.
- 12. Become Virtual Communication Malls:** In many smaller communities, the public library (especially courtesy of the TEACH and REACH programs) has the fastest Internet connection in town. During the recent crisis in New York, when telephones were either jammed or inoperable and electricity was out in vast areas of the city, library Internet

stations represented the only means for thousands of people to communicate with their loved ones and to tell them they were all right. In several Wisconsin cities where the tourist trade depends upon the importation of overseas workers, library Internet stations perform much the same communication function on a regular basis. A dairy farmer from the Hollandale area recently testified at a Tammy Baldwin listening session that he did much of his dairy business (ranging from buying and selling cows to keeping track of federal regulations) on the Internet, but that no commercial provider cared to extend high speed access to his isolated neighborhood. In England, small libraries appear to be turning toward the provision of a ever widening range of electronic products and, in at least one case, styling themselves as “idea stores” rather than just libraries. Some ideas are really worth stealing, and the concept of offering small libraries (or large ones for that matter) as communication malls, idea stores, or whatever, might be just the ticket to motivate the public to help us latch on to a larger share of scarce public dollars. Surprising as it may seem, we do have the technology, and especially in rural areas, we certainly have both the customers and the need.

- 13. Library Operation:** Many small libraries have a hard time keeping their heads above water with regard to both certification and the provision of adequate service. One possible answer is for systems or resource libraries to provide “roving” directors who would fulfill the necessary certification requirement and provide necessary expertise to small libraries, for a fee. The small library would provide basic desk staff and quarters. Reference could be provided electronically and remotely, as could cataloging and other support services, including membership in a shared automated system. Most of the collection could be provided on a rotating basis from one or more larger libraries, and existing delivery services could handle the transshipment. The small library could maintain its independent board (and thus its legal status), and do everything else by contract. The system or resource library could offer this “product” to a municipality in return for a guaranteed per capita level of support. If LSSI can offer this service to municipalities, why not us?
- 14. The Law:** Our breakfast group first discussed mandates, and if we should ask the state to relax them since we are not getting any more money. Unfortunately, upon closer inspection we determined that most of them really don’t cost much, and that those that do (technology, interloan, delivery, etc) are so central to what we are that by eliminating them we would virtually cease to be systems. We also didn’t want to give the legislature the cheap out of being able to take away both our funding and our purpose at the same time. We did note, however, a real need for district legislation. If no one else will give libraries money, then the obvious answer is to tax for it ourselves, and the continuing success of technical colleges in Wisconsin shows how well this works. It was noted that with many of our municipalities and counties pushing up against tax caps and levy limits, they may be as eager to get us off their tax rolls as we may be to leave. We also discussed the concept that it might be a good idea for single county systems to have the same freedom of operation as their multi-county brethren (and sistren?). All systems are run by system boards, but in the case of single counties, the county board also exercises a great deal of control which may well thwart more “creative” efforts at developing new and improved library services. Can we change this? Finally, we noted the issue in #8 above. Would the law need to be re-interpreted or changed to permit remote usage of database to be limited to the customers of those libraries who purchase the products?

15. The Dollars: DLTCL, by a very rough estimate, has about \$4 million library dollars to spend annually. Systems have about \$16 million. Public libraries have over \$146 million. None of these sources, except perhaps the last one, seems likely to grow very much in the near future. It is a slippery slope to start charging the public for library service directly, so this doesn't seem to be the way to go. Grants, especially for group projects from private foundations, are a very real possibility, but the limitation is that grants are usually only for seed money, and won't cover the long haul. This leave us pretty much with the dollars that are already on the table. But that is quite a few dollars. Our idea, therefore, is to prioritize what we do, and to start any new projects that seem worth doing on a shoestring, primarily by replacing what we do now with what we hope to achieve.

16. And In Conclusion: There you have it. The product of one breakfast, many cups of coffee, and almost no hallucinogens. We are up against a wall. We can watch much of what we have worked so hard to build for so many years slip away, or we can seek out new, and hopefully better, answers to our problems. There probably isn't any one easy answer to the library problems we face, but there are many productive directions in which we can proceed. As we said, this list represents just some opening thoughts. Now we need more, and hopefully better. The water's fine. Jump right in.