

MENDON PUBLIC LIBRARY BOARD STRATEGIC PLANNING FOCUS GROUP

DEVELOPING A VISION

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FOCUS GROUP: MAJOR TAKEAWAYS

A Strategic Planning focus group was held on September 23, 2026 at the Mendon Public Library. At this session, Library Board members discussed questions designed to surface their perceptions of the library's current and desired future state, as well as concerns about impending risks, priorities for growth, and things that must be preserved in the face of future changes. During the discussion, the group was encouraged to write down words and phrases that continued to surface and aligned with the three major categories Aspire, Change, and Preserve.

ASPIRE

The Board members isolated several concepts relating to the things they would like to aspire to when it comes to the future of their community and how the library can help achieve that future. The following notes were taken down:

- Innovative
- Abundance, economically stable
- Anchoring the community
- Expanding capacity
- Living wage
- Positive relationship with municipalities (town + village)
- Continued alignment with the comprehensive plan

Concepts surfacing under the “Aspire” category typically indicate directions to explore for the organization's **Vision Statement**.

In this case, most of the emerging sentiments center around the library supporting the community's prosperity as it grows, cultivating innovation, supporting economic stability, nurturing community relationships, and reinforcing the efforts of the municipal government to execute its strategies.

One outlier in the list of responses is the mention of a “living wage” for library employees, which indicates a strong desire to achieve these aims for the community while simultaneously building a more equitable workplace for library staff.

PRESERVE

The Board members identified several elements of the library's current character that they considered essential things to preserve, no matter what. The following notes were taken down:

- Trusted resource
- Welcoming
- Community hub
- Staff connections
- Programming
- Architecture / design / aesthetic of our space + the community building

Concepts surfacing under the “Preserve” category typically indicate elements to include in a statement of the organization’s **Values**.

Here, the Board has focused largely on the human elements of the library’s character, calling out the library’s role as a community hub for forging interpersonal connection and community relationships, creating a space that is welcoming and safe for everyone, and remaining an institution that inspires trust. They also mentioned the current strength of the library’s programs, mentioning that this should not be diminished, but only built upon. Finally, the group explicitly mentioned the current aesthetics of the building, stressing that the library’s design was important to creating a sense of place within the community.

CHANGE

Through the course of the conversation, the Board identified the following priorities for necessary change.

- Space to accommodate population growth (capacity)
- Outreach / awareness, N.E. region
- Encourage sense of ownership (marketing + outreach)

This is not a comprehensive list of every circumstance, practice, or policy that should change in the coming years to make the vision possible but begins to surface two major themes that could become the focus of some **Strategic Initiatives**.

1. Building Expansion

Throughout the session, concerns about the physical capacity of the library building to accommodate the needs of a growing population continued to surface. This was accompanied by concern about scaling programs, staffing, and other resources to ensure an appropriate level of service delivery within the space, but the limits of the building itself were seen as a primary constraint.

2. Marketing, Outreach, and Communication

The need to enhance external marketing, outreach, and communication efforts was discussed repeatedly, and in several contexts. This was seen as essential for solving problems relating to

- Relationship building with the local government administrations
- Promoting library use in parts of the service area where use is low
- Encouraging a sense of local community belonging and ownership, both of the library and the Town/Village
- Building a base of local library advocates
- Maintaining general awareness about the library and its service to the community

FOCUS GROUP: ADDITIONAL DETAILS

In addition to the main takeaways, additional considerations and concerns were noted that may be considered when developing the organization's Strategic Plan.

NOW

In describing the Library's current state, the Board members had many positive things to say about the organization. They described it as follows:

- Welcoming
- Safe space
- Physical and emotional
- Gathering
- Conversation
- Community plays a role
- Hub
 - For info
 - For people
 - For connecting info and people
- Hub - For some [not everyone is reached]
- More people
- Building strong families → Strong community
- Intergenerational
- Resource for information
- Trusted
- Programs, all ages
- Something for everyone
- Sparking curiosity
- Staff connected to community
- Population growth → community/economic development and character

The group sees the library today as a trusted, welcoming community hub that brings people together, provides a safe space, connects people with information and resources, supports families, and creates opportunities for learning and curiosity across generations.

At the same time, there is an emerging recognition that the library's reach and sense of belonging may not yet extend to everyone. As the community grows and changes, the library has an opportunity to broaden its reach and play an even greater role in strengthening community connections, development, and identity.

The connection between population growth, community and economic development, and community character suggests that the group sees the library as having a role in shaping the community's future, not simply responding to its current needs.

FUTURE

When imagining the Library's potential ideal future, the Board described a library that in five years' time would have the following:

- Foundation / Endowment
- Plans for expansion
- More patrons
- Successful Friends (\$)
- Sustainability → role model for community
- Green space next door / project goes well next door
- Community support ↑

- Buzz in community → curiosity
- Innovation
- Meeting space
- More connections
- Learning
- Hope
- Stability
- Pride

This list suggests that the Board's five-year aspirations go beyond simply wanting more library services. They envision a library that is stronger, more visible, more sustainable, and more deeply embedded in the life and identity of the community.

Taken together with their description of the library NOW, there is a fairly clear trajectory:

NOW: A welcoming, safe, trusted community hub that provides information, programs, connection, and opportunities for people of all ages.

FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: A thriving and sustainable community institution with greater reach, stronger financial and community support, increased capacity, greater visibility, and a reputation for innovation, learning, connection, and environmental responsibility.

One of the strongest underlying ideas may be from valued community resource to essential community institution. The Board has already indicated that they believe the library is trusted and welcoming. Their aspirations are less about fundamentally changing what the library *is* and more about amplifying its role and securing its future.

Several more potential Strategic Initiatives Also emerge from this description, including some that stem from the desire to see the library build their long-term financial stability and lead the community as a stewards of public resources.

CONCERNS

When asked to list their concerns about factors that may have a negative impact on the library in the next five years, the board listed the following as things they needed to be prepared to address:

- Town admin
- Funding / grants
- Freedom of speech / book bans
- Space
- Protections for libraries
- Population growth
- Community needs
- AI
- Anti-intellectualism
- Priority of library in decision making
- Perception of libraries
- Awareness

There is a strong connection between these responses and those given in the previous exercises. Taken as a whole, the Board appears to believe the library has a strong foundation, but that its future success will depend on whether it can build capacity, maintain public and governmental support, respond to growth and change, and clearly demonstrate its value to the community.

In considering these particular risks, it is worthwhile to classify them according to the library's ability to act on them. Some are strategic risks the library can address proactively through deliberate initiatives, such as space limitations, community awareness, or readiness for changing technology. Others are external risks the library may be able to influence but cannot control, such as funding decisions, the library's priority within

Town government, or public perceptions. A third category includes external threats or disruptions that are largely outside the library's control, such as legislative changes or organized challenges to library materials. For each category, the Board should determine whether the appropriate response is a proactive strategic initiative, ongoing advocacy and relationship-building, or a contingency and response plan that prepares the library to act effectively if the risk materializes.

GROWTH

When asked to identify one thing that, if given the opportunity right now, the Board would change to improve the Library, the following responses emerged:

- Expansion [Space]
- Programming
- Increase Staffing, FT + PT
 - Living wage
- Solid support from town → consistent
- Supervisor relationship
- Constant education
- Legacy →

These responses sharpened the themes that emerged from the earlier exercises. Most importantly, they show that the Board sees capacity as the immediate constraint on the library's future, with physical space standing out very clearly.

FOCUS GROUP: OVERALL ANALYSIS

Taken as a whole, the focus group reveals a Board that has considerable confidence in the Library's current identity but also a strong sense that the institution is approaching an important point of transition. Board members do not appear to be calling for a fundamental reinvention of the Library. Instead, they consistently describe an institution with valuable qualities that should be preserved while its capacity, reach, visibility, financial strength, and community role grow alongside the community it serves.

The strongest overall theme is therefore one of **growth with intentionality**. The Board sees a successful future as one in which the library becomes larger in its reach and capacity without losing the qualities that have made it trusted, welcoming, connected, and valued.

A STRONG FOUNDATION TO BUILD UPON

The Board's assessment of the library's current state is notably positive. Members consistently describe the library as welcoming, safe, trusted, intergenerational, and connected to the community. They see it as both a physical gathering place and a connector between people, information, resources, and one another.

This is important strategically because it suggests that the planning process does not need to begin with the question, "*What should the library become instead?*" A more appropriate question is:

How can the library preserve what the community values about it while increasing its ability to serve a growing and changing community?

The Preserve exercise reinforces this. Trust, welcome, community connection, staff relationships, programming, and even the architecture and aesthetics of the building were identified as characteristics that should endure. Growth should therefore be approached as an extension of the library's existing identity rather than a departure from it.

GROWTH IS THE CENTRAL CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

Of all the themes discussed, **growth and capacity** are the most persistent. They appear in virtually every part of the conversation.

Population growth is recognized in the description of the library today. Expansion and meeting space appear in the desired future. Space and population growth appear among the Board's concerns. Expanding capacity appears under Aspire. Space appears under Change. Finally, when Board members were asked what single improvement they would make immediately, expansion was the dominant response.

This consistency is meaningful. It suggests that physical capacity is not simply one item on a list of desired improvements. The Board perceives it as a potential constraint on achieving many of its other aspirations.

At the same time, the Board's responses demonstrate an understanding that capacity is not synonymous with square footage. A growing facility and growing population will require corresponding investments in staffing, compensation, programming, collections, technology, meeting and gathering spaces, and operating resources.

This points toward a major strategic initiative around building the library's capacity to serve a growing community, with physical expansion as a central component rather than the entirety of the initiative.

FROM SERVING THE COMMUNITY TO ANCHORING THE COMMUNITY

Another important shift appears between NOW and ASPIRE.

The Board currently sees the library as a **community hub**. In describing its aspirations, however, members used the stronger concept of "**anchoring the community**."

That distinction may be useful in developing the library's eventual vision. A community hub is a place people use and gather. A community anchor is an institution that contributes to the community's identity, resilience, prosperity, relationships, and long-term development.

The Board's references to economic stability, strong families, population growth, community character, municipal comprehensive planning, environmental sustainability, hope, and pride suggest that it sees the library's role in increasingly broad terms. The library is not simply expected to respond to community growth. The Board believes it can help shape the kind of community that results from that growth.

This may be one of the most important concepts to carry into development of the Vision Statement.

GREATER REACH IS AS IMPORTANT AS GREATER CAPACITY

The Board also identified an important tension in its description of the current Library. It described the Library as having "something for everyone," while simultaneously acknowledging that it currently functions as a hub "for some."

That observation connects directly to the Change priorities around outreach, awareness, and reaching the northeastern portion of the service area, as well as the future aspirations for more patrons, more connections, greater community support, and more "buzz."

The challenge is therefore not simply "How can the library serve more people?"

It is also "**How can more people see themselves as part of the Library?**"

The Board's reference to creating a greater sense of ownership is particularly important. Marketing and outreach should not be viewed simply as promotional activities intended to increase attendance. The larger strategic opportunity is to cultivate a stronger sense that the library belongs to the entire community and that residents have a stake in its success.

This makes community engagement, communications, outreach, advocacy, and relationship-building closely related rather than separate activities.

COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENTAL SUPPORT ARE CRITICAL ENABLING CONDITIONS

The Board repeatedly returned to its relationship with municipal government. Positive relationships with the Town and Village appear among its aspirations. Town administration and the library's priority in decision-making appear among its concerns. Consistent Town support and the relationship with the Supervisor appear among the changes Board members would make immediately.

This suggests that the Board recognizes an important reality: its vision for growth will depend substantially on relationships beyond the library itself.

Expansion, increased staffing, stronger programming, and long-term financial stability will require the library to articulate its value clearly and build support among municipal leaders, residents, partners, advocates, donors, and other stakeholders.

Consequently, communications and advocacy should not be treated merely as supporting functions of the strategic plan. They are likely to be essential mechanisms for accomplishing the plan.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IS ABOUT RESILIENCE, NOT SIMPLY FUNDRAISING

The Board's interest in a foundation or endowment, a financially successful Friends organization, grants, community support, and stability points toward another significant theme: **reducing vulnerability and building long-term institutional resilience.**

The Board appears interested in creating a Library that has sufficient resources not only to maintain current services but also to pursue opportunities and withstand changes in external funding conditions.

This suggests a broader approach to sustainability encompassing municipal funding, philanthropy, Friends support, grants, advocacy, partnerships, long-range financial planning, and potentially an endowment or foundation.

The idea of legacy fits naturally within this theme. The Board appears to be thinking not only about what it can accomplish during the next five years, but about what kind of institution it will leave to the next generation of residents and trustees.

INNOVATION IS DESIRED, BUT NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF THE LIBRARY'S CORE IDENTITY

The Board's references to innovation, AI, learning, curiosity, and "constant education" suggest an awareness that the Library will need to adapt to significant technological and social changes.

At the same time, the Preserve discussion makes clear that innovation should not undermine the characteristics the Board considers fundamental: trust, human connection, welcoming spaces, strong programming, and staff relationships.

This creates a productive strategic tension: The Library should be willing to change **how** it serves the community without losing **why** the community trusts it.

AI provides a particularly useful example. The Board identifies it as a potential concern, but its aspirations around learning and innovation suggest an opportunity as well. The library can potentially help residents understand and navigate emerging technologies while maintaining its established role as a trusted source of information.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AND TRUST REPRESENT STRATEGIC RESPONSIBILITIES

Freedom of speech, book bans, protections for libraries, and anti-intellectualism constitute a distinct cluster among the Board's concerns.

These do not necessarily require a standalone strategic initiative. They do, however, reinforce the importance of several values already present in the discussion: trust, access to information, curiosity, learning, conversation, and intellectual exploration.

These concerns should be addressed through appropriate policy, trustee education, staff preparedness, communications planning, and contingency planning. They may also inform the eventual Values Statement by clarifying what the Board believes the library must continue to stand for even when doing so becomes difficult.

SUSTAINABILITY HAS BOTH INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNITY DIMENSIONS

"Sustainability" has two related meanings in the Board's thinking.

The first is **institutional sustainability**: stable funding, adequate staffing, strong governmental relationships, community support, and sufficient capacity.

The second is **environmental and community sustainability**: responsible stewardship, the neighboring green space, alignment with municipal planning, and the library serving as a sustainability role model, especially through its involvement in the Sustainable Libraries initiative.

Both fit the broader aspiration for the library to be a community anchor. The strategic plan may benefit from acknowledging both rather than limiting sustainability to environmental practices alone.

AN EMERGING STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Based on recurring themes in the Board's conversation during the session the following six strategic initiatives are beginning to emerge. These can be considered a starting point for future planning as the rest of the Strategic Plan is developed.

1. Expand Capacity to Serve a Growing Community

This appears to be the most strongly and repeatedly expressed priority. Develop a long-term approach to physical expansion while scaling staffing, programming, technology, collections, meeting space, and operational resources accordingly.

2. Expand Community Reach, Awareness, and Ownership

Reach portions of the community that are currently less connected to the library, increase awareness and use, strengthen communications and outreach, and cultivate a sense that the library belongs to and represents the entire community.

3. Strengthen the Library as a Community Anchor

Preserve and deepen the library's role as a safe, welcoming place where people gather, connect, learn, build relationships, strengthen families, and participate in community life.

4. Build Long-Term Financial and Organizational Sustainability

Strengthen municipal support, Friends fundraising, philanthropy, grants, partnerships, staffing, compensation, and potentially foundation/endowment resources to provide stability and support future growth.

5. Foster Learning, Curiosity, and Innovation

Build upon strong existing programming and information services while embracing emerging technologies, new forms of learning, experimentation, and opportunities that keep the library relevant to a changing community.

6. Lead Through Sustainability and Community Stewardship

Align the Library's growth with broader community planning, model responsible environmental practices, capitalize on opportunities associated with surrounding public spaces, and contribute to the community's long-term prosperity and quality of life.

A CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITY: RELATIONSHIPS AND ADVOCACY

One theme is so pervasive that it may be better treated as a strategy that cuts across the entire plan rather than as a seventh initiative: **building relationships and demonstrating the library's value.**

Achieving virtually every aspiration identified by the Board will require stronger relationships with the Town, Village, Friends, community organizations, residents, donors, and other stakeholders. Communications, advocacy, partnerships, and ongoing education about the library's impact should therefore be incorporated throughout the strategic plan.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

The Board focus group provides a strong starting point for the strategic planning process, but the emerging vision, values, and strategic initiatives should now be tested and refined through broader engagement. The next phase should determine where the Board's perceptions align with those of staff, residents, community partners, municipal officials, Friends, and other stakeholders, while also identifying needs or perspectives that may not yet have surfaced.

1. REVIEW AND CONFIRM THE MISSION

The existing Mission Statement does not necessarily need to change simply because a new strategic plan is being developed. The first step should be to determine whether it continues to accurately describe the library's fundamental purpose.

Rather than beginning by drafting a new mission, the Board and staff could ask stakeholders:

- Does the current mission still accurately describe why the library exists?
- Is anything essential about the library's purpose missing?
- Is there language that no longer reflects how the community understands or uses the library?
- Could small changes make the mission clearer, more memorable, or more reflective of the library today?

If the existing mission remains fundamentally sound, modest revisions may be preferable to replacing it.

2. CONTINUE DEVELOPING THE VISION THROUGH BROADER COMMUNITY INPUT

The Board has provided an important first perspective on the library's future. The next step should be to test that emerging vision with other stakeholders, particularly staff, library users, non-users, community organizations, municipal officials, Friends, educators, families, older adults, teens, and representatives of different geographic areas within the service population.

Engagement does not need to ask stakeholders to write a Vision Statement. Instead, focus groups and surveys should ask people to describe the future they want for the library and community. The planning team can then synthesize those responses into vision language.

Useful community focus group prompts could include:

- Imagine Mendon Public Library five years from now and it has been extraordinarily successful. What is happening there that makes you say it is successful?
- As this community grows and changes, what will residents need most from their public library?
- What should the library do more of, do differently, or begin doing over the next five years?
- Who is the library serving particularly well today? Who could it serve better?
- What would make more residents feel that Mendon Public Library is "their library"?
- What role should the library play in strengthening the community beyond providing traditional library services?
- What would make you especially proud of Mendon Public Library five years from now?

For municipal officials and community partners, additional questions could include:

- Where do you see the library contributing to the community's broader goals over the next five years?
- What community needs could the library be particularly well positioned to help address?
- Where could stronger partnerships between the library and other community organizations make the greatest difference?

3. SPECIFICALLY TEST THE CAPACITY AND EXPANSION QUESTION

Because physical capacity emerged so strongly from the Board discussion, this issue deserves targeted exploration rather than assuming that the Board's perception is universally shared.

Ask staff and community members questions such as:

- Where does the current building support your needs well, and where does it create limitations?
- What activities, programs, or services are difficult to provide because of current space limitations?
- If additional space became available, what should it make possible?
- What types of spaces will the community need from its Library over the next five to ten years?
- How should indoor library space and neighboring outdoor or green space complement one another?

Staff input will be particularly valuable here because staff can identify operational constraints that may not be visible to trustees or patrons.

4. TEST THE SIX EMERGING STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

The six initiatives should be presented as preliminary themes rather than predetermined priorities. Community engagement can determine whether they resonate and whether anything important is missing.

A survey could briefly describe the six themes and ask respondents to indicate which are particularly important to the community:

- Expand capacity to serve a growing community
- Expand community reach, awareness, and ownership
- Strengthen the Library as a community anchor
- Build long-term financial and organizational sustainability
- Foster learning, curiosity, and innovation
- Lead through sustainability and community stewardship

Rather than simply asking respondents to rank them, include an open-ended question:

What important priority for Mendon Public Library's next five years is missing from this list?

That question is especially valuable because the purpose of broader engagement should be to challenge and expand the Board's initial assumptions, not simply validate them.

5. DEVELOP AND REFINE THE LIBRARY'S VALUES

Several potential organizational values are already emerging clearly from the Board discussion:

- **Welcome and Belonging:** The Library should be a place where people feel safe, respected, included, and connected.
- **Trust:** The library should remain a reliable and trusted institution, source of information, and community resource.
- **Intellectual Freedom and Access to Information:** People should have the freedom to seek information, encounter ideas, ask questions, and make their own choices about what they read and learn.
- **Community Connection:** The library should strengthen relationships among individuals, families, organizations, and the broader community.
- **Curiosity and Lifelong Learning:** The Library should inspire discovery, exploration, learning, and intellectual growth throughout life.
- **Innovation and Adaptability:** The Library should be willing to learn, experiment, embrace appropriate technologies, and evolve as community needs change.
- **Stewardship and Sustainability:** The Library should responsibly manage public resources, plan for the future, and contribute to the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of the community.
- **Sense of Place:** The Library should preserve and strengthen the distinctive character, architecture, environment, and community identity that make it a meaningful place.

6. ASK THE COMMUNITY TO DEFINE WHAT THOSE VALUES MEAN

Rather than simply asking stakeholders whether they "agree" with values such as trust or welcoming, use engagement to discover **what those concepts mean in practice**.

For example:

- What makes a public library feel welcoming to you?
- What does the library need to do to earn and maintain the community's trust?
- What principles should Mendon Public Library never compromise, even as the community and Library change?
- What should everyone be able to expect when they interact with Mendon Public Library?
- What qualities about Mendon Public Library today should never be lost?
- Are there values or principles important to the future of this community that are missing from this list?

These responses can help transform broad words such as *trust*, *innovation*, or *belonging* into short value statements that are specific to Mendon Public Library.

7. INTENTIONALLY SEEK PERSPECTIVES THAT MAY BE MISSING

Because one of the Board's most important observations was that the library is currently a hub "for some," the engagement process should deliberately include people who are less connected to the library.

This could include residents from geographic areas with lower library use, people who rarely or never visit the library, newer residents, teens and young adults, families with young children, older adults, local businesses, educators, civic organizations, and other groups identified through community data.

A particularly useful question for non-users would be:

What would need to be different for the library to become more useful, relevant, or important in your life?

This may reveal barriers and opportunities that will not emerge from conversations primarily involving existing library supporters.

8. BRING THE FINDINGS BACK TO THE BOARD

Once broader engagement is complete, the Board should reconvene to compare the findings with its original visioning session. Rather than beginning the conversation again from scratch, organize the findings around three questions:

- **CONFIRMED:** Where did the community strongly reinforce the Board's thinking?
- **CHALLENGED:** Where did community perspectives differ from the Board's assumptions?
- **DISCOVERED:** What important ideas emerged that the Board had not previously considered?

From there, the Board and planning team can finalize the Mission, Vision, and Values, refine the six strategic initiatives, and begin developing specific goals, objectives, measures, and actions beneath each initiative.

The result should allow the Board's initial vision to serve its intended purpose: not as the predetermined answer, but as the starting hypothesis that is tested, challenged, expanded, and ultimately strengthened through community input.