

Check it Out!
at the AVALON FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY

AVALON FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY STRATEGIC PLAN 2018-2020



March 8, 2018

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I. PLAN IN A GLANCE

Core Values

- Service
- Responsiveness
- Innovation
- Accessibility

Mission

- To inform, inspire, and enrich the Avalon community near and far.

Vision

- Guide Avalon's informational resources into the future with innovation and great service.

Goals

- INCREASE USE - Facilitate maximum community use of Library resources and services through local and remote access.
- SPREAD AWARENESS - Attain widespread community awareness of the full array of Library resources and services.
- FOSTER INNOVATION - Make the Library a creative and dynamic place to be.

Measures of Success

- High ratio of property owners: satisfied card holders (satisfaction judged through formal surveying and informal direct feedback).
- Circulation (print and digital), program attendance, and visitation increased/maintained, in keeping with rate of active card holders.
- High engagement in History Center initiatives, judged through visitation, program attendance, object donations, and Historical Society activity.
- Increased digital engagement, both Library and History Center.
- Staff retention and positive morale.

Selected Projects

- Improve the Library's website and develop easy to use tutorials to assist patrons with the use of online resources.
- Curate digital resources to ensure they are innovative and relevant.
- Improve tools for surveying to ensure responsive programming and events.
- Implement a One Book, One Community program to foster a sense of community through literature and discussion.
- Implement a Library Book Bike program to gain awareness in the community and reach new users.
- Form a staff technology committee tasked with guiding the organization's technology goals with an eye on the initiatives.
- Stream and record programs and events for expanded access.
- Identify opportunities to increase acquisition and donation of objects for the historic collection.

II. CORE VALUES & MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS

Core Values

SERVICE

Among the Avalon Free Public Library's highest priorities is patron satisfaction. Staff endeavor to provide a positive experience to every community member that comes through the door. Great customer service is a consistent focus of staff training and coaching.

RESPONSIVENESS

As our community changes with the seasons and through the years, so does the Avalon Free Public Library. Collections, programs and initiatives are tailored to meet evolving needs, and in some cases to introduce the community to resources they may not yet be aware of.

INNOVATION

Among other challenges, the Avalon Free Public Library is in the unusual situation of having a significant non-local patron base. Innovations in delivering service are an essential part of the Library's strategy.

ACCESSIBILITY

Avalon Free Public Library strives to cultivate a sense of welcoming such that community members turn to us first with information requests, or for education and cultural enrichment.

Mission Statement

To inform, inspire, and enrich the Avalon community near and far.

Vision Statement

Guide Avalon's resources into the future with innovation and great service.

III. SUMMARY

In fall 2016 the Avalon Free Public Library decided to embark upon a new strategic planning process ahead of schedule due to the recent change in administrative leadership. The Planning Committee convened in early 2017 and worked throughout the year to gather data from the community, staff, and other key stakeholders through a staff SWOT analysis (a study undertaken by an organization to identify its internal Strengths and Weaknesses, as well as its external Opportunities and Threats) and broad community surveying (intercept and online). We crafted a new mission and identified a renewed vision for the organization. Identifying our core values shaped our analysis of the data as we worked to organize the many contributions received into a comprehensive plan that will guide us into the future.

Our use of the word guide is intentional. Public libraries are dynamic organizations that are most successful when they can adapt flexibly to meet changing community needs and utilize emerging technologies and trends. This plan is a living document, intended to inspire and guide our ongoing goals to best meet the needs of the Avalon community while granting us the flexibility to innovate when facing challenges we have yet to consider.

Our planning process led us to the following three strategic initiatives.

- INCREASE USE - Facilitate maximum community use of library resources and services through local and remote access.
- SPREAD AWARENESS - Attain widespread community awareness of the full array of library resources and services.
- FOSTER INNOVATION - Make the Library a creative and dynamic place to be.

IV. PLANNING PROCESS

A Planning Committee, comprised of members of the Board of Trustees and the Library and History Center Directors, carried out a planning process from February-December 2017. Members of the Library staff, community stakeholders, and Library patrons were also involved in the process.

Winter 2017

In February 2017, the Planning Committee convened to identify a process for renewed strategic planning. Their initial meeting resulted in the following goals for the plan:

- Revise the Mission and Vision Statements
- Gather data from staff, patrons, and community stakeholders.
- Increase efforts to gather data from Borough tax-paying non-users.
- Identify the Library's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
- Use data gathered to formulate new strategic initiatives.
- Develop a project list to address the initiatives.

Spring 2017

Data-gathering began in April 2017. Survey kiosk stations were set up at both the Library and History Center. The community was encouraged to take the survey through the Library's social media platforms, monthly constant contact email newsletter, and via partners' social media services. The survey also was used as an intercept tool a well-attended annual community event, AHLOA's Community Connections.

Also in April, Library administration led staff through a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) Analysis session. The findings of this session are contained within this document and were invaluable in understanding staff perspective.

Summer 2017

During Summer 2017, the Directors began analyzing data and outlining the plan. While the volume of data was significant, the findings were focused in a few clear areas.

Fall 2017

One common thread of discussion with staff and Board was, "how will we ensure we stay on target?" The Directors agreed to develop both a set of key performance indicators (included within this document) and a staff committee, to meet quarterly, to ensure that the organization is working toward and meeting its strategic goals at all stages of the planning process. The findings of this committee will be presented quarterly to the Trustees.

Another focus for fall was an attempt to gather additional data from the community for this plan. As outlined in the Community Background section of this document, the user base is nontraditional, due to Avalon's status as a resort community. However, patrons need not be year-round residents to use the library. The Borough of Avalon supported our effort to reach the community with the survey by providing space in their quarterly newsletter. A print survey was also made available to users.

V. COMMUNITY AND LIBRARY OVERVIEW

In order to effectively strategize, the Planning Committee identified the following areas of planning focus:

- Community – Comprised of the Avalon community and their values, aspirations, and expectations of the Avalon Free Public Library.
- Library Capabilities – The materials, collections, staff proficiencies, and technology available to fulfill the expectations of the Community.

By analyzing these two areas, and the ways they relate to each other, the committee attempted to focus on the most needed and valued Library services in order to best meet the community's expectations.

Community Overview

The Borough of Avalon is a coastal resort community in Cape May County, NJ. Like in other seasonal resort communities, the Library works to serve both the year-round and seasonal communities that make up the town. Adults and families residing in Avalon year-round enjoy the pleasures of a small, close-knit, civic-minded community. Children attend the local public school, residents make use of restaurants, shops, and recreational facilities and participate in a variety of civic and social organizations throughout the year. Those who consider Avalon to be a seasonal destination tend to spend the majority of their time on the island during the summer months and occasionally on weekends and holidays throughout the year. Typically, these seasonal residents come to Avalon during their leisure time seeking a variety of recreational and cultural opportunities. They take advantage of Avalon's beaches, bays, and ocean, as well as shopping, restaurants, and recreational facilities, including the Library.

The demographics of Avalon change with seasonal population migration. As a popular coastal resort community, the core population at the height of the summer exceeds 25,000. During the off-season, Avalon is a community of 1,334 (2010 census) where the median age is 61.8. The unique nature of Avalon's shifting population is reflected in housing. The 2010 census showed 5,618 housing units in Avalon, of which 747 were occupied by permanent residents, with the balance for seasonal use. Of the seasonal group, about 20% are available for rentals. These statistics illustrate the difficulty of effectively reaching non-users of the AFPL. According to the Borough of Avalon there were 5,369 housing units in town in July 2016. Approximately 580 units are owner occupied, 1,244 units were rentals (Borough of Avalon, 2015), and 3,545 units owned by non-residents. The trend toward non-resident home ownership has intensified in recent years, increasing the Library's challenge of understanding and serving a diffuse patron base.

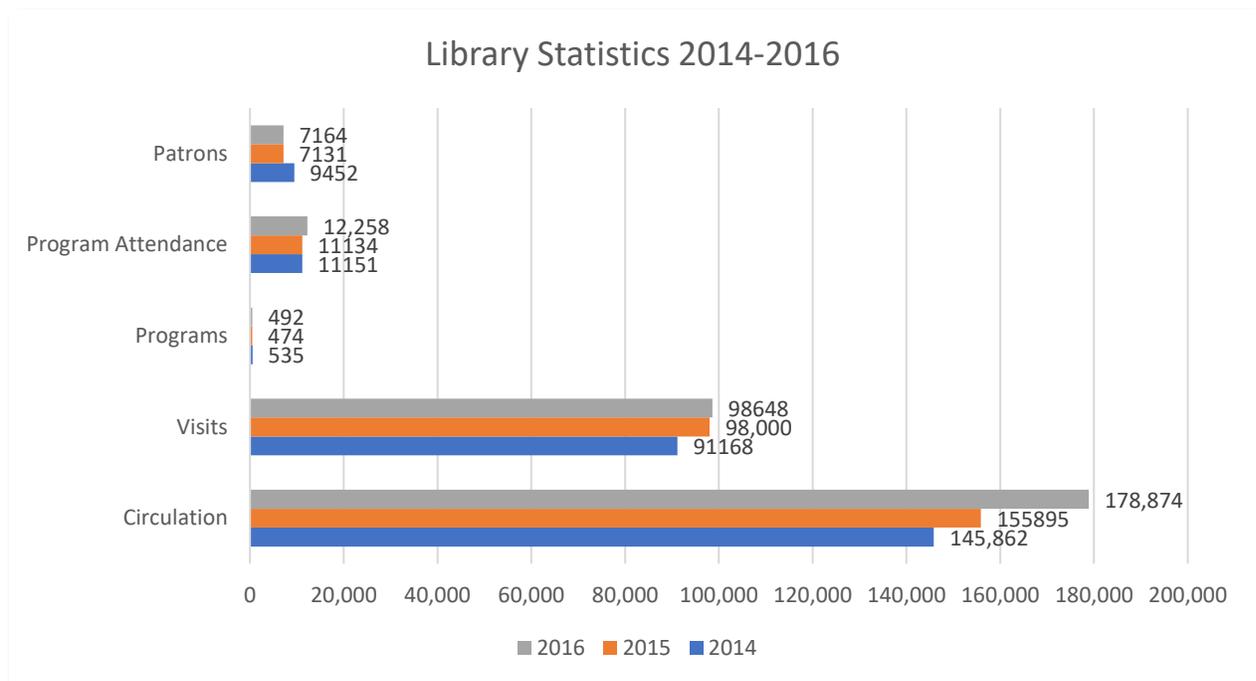
These population characteristics are also reflected in the Library's patron base. At the beginning of 2017, 87% of our patrons did not permanently live in Avalon. 23% were county residents, while 64% lived outside of Cape May County in other areas of New Jersey, 31 other states, and 5 foreign countries. New Jersey residents comprise the largest patron population (3,043, or 49% of library patrons). Outside of New Jersey, the largest group of library patrons come from Pennsylvania (2,507, or 41% of library patrons). Non-resident homeowners in 2016 were responsible for 48.7% of physical circulation.

Library Overview

The Avalon Free Public Library serves as a hub for both year-round and seasonal communities. A significant majority of year-round residents have active library cards and use them often. Many seasonal residents also have cards and use them throughout the year, taking advantage of both traditional library services as well as remote services such as Library by Mail and online resources.

The Library is open seven days per week year-round, with hours until 8pm four days per week. Materials, programming, and educational and cultural opportunities are offered throughout the year. Marketing efforts have been substantially increased in recent years in an effort to ensure that residents and property owners are aware of all that the Library has to offer both onsite and remotely.

Library Use 2014-2016

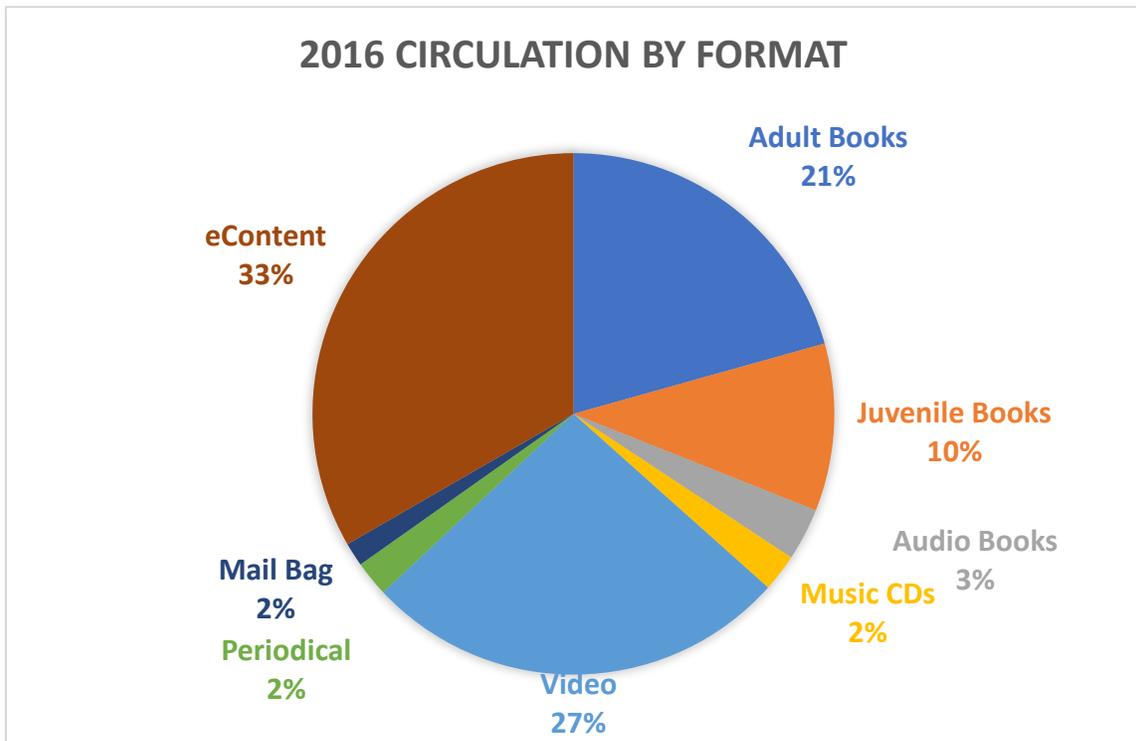
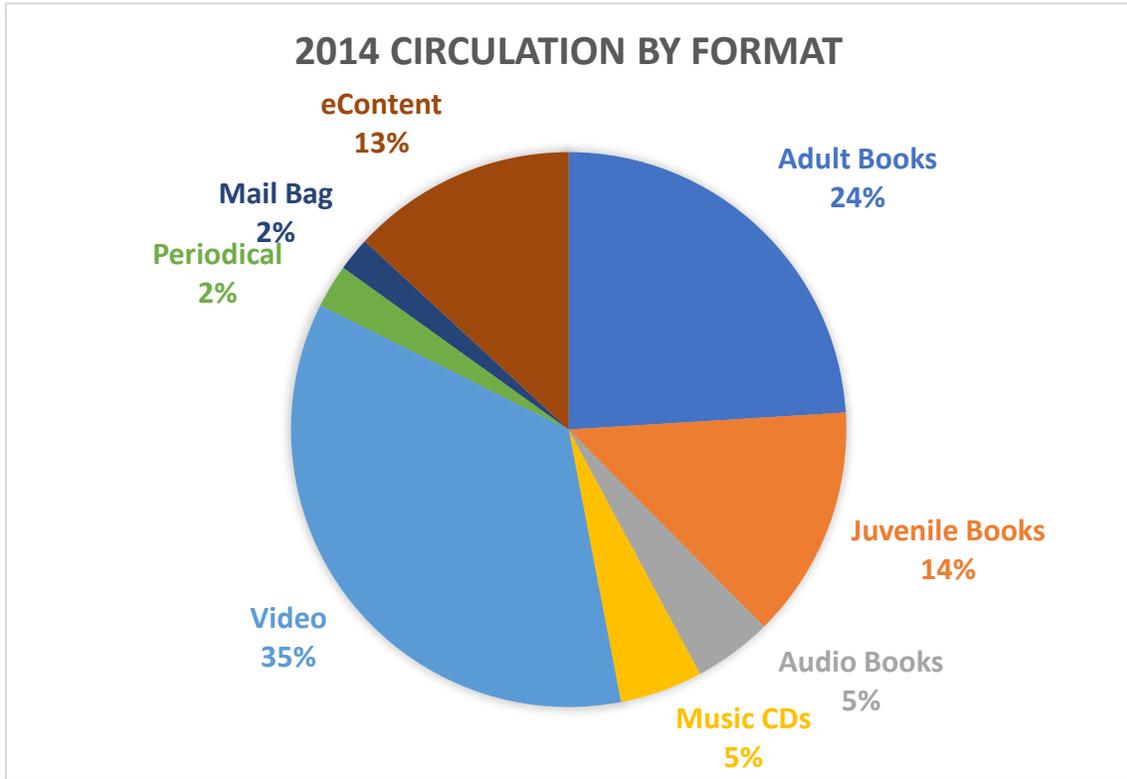


CIRCULATION

Library circulation has been on an upward trend since 2014. This is in large part due to a dramatic increase in digital circulation. Total circulation increased 23% from 2014 to 2016. The figure on the next page provides an overview of the circulation by format in 2014.

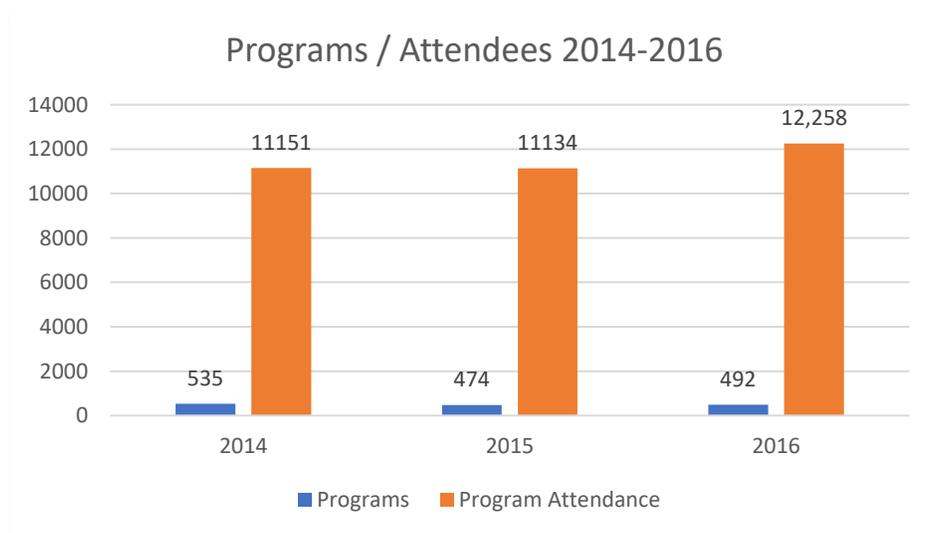
Over the past three years, the Library has continued to see increased use of digital circulation, especially eBooks and streaming audio/video. As these resources evolve and more competitive products are released, we expect this growth to continue in the next few years. In addition, history has shown us that our patron base adopts new technology and resources at different rates, so we also expect to see new interest in existing resources in the coming years. The figures below provide a comparison of 2016 and 2014 figures. As you can see, eContent grew from 13% in 2014 to 33% on 2016.

2014 vs. 2016 CIRCULATION BY FORMAT



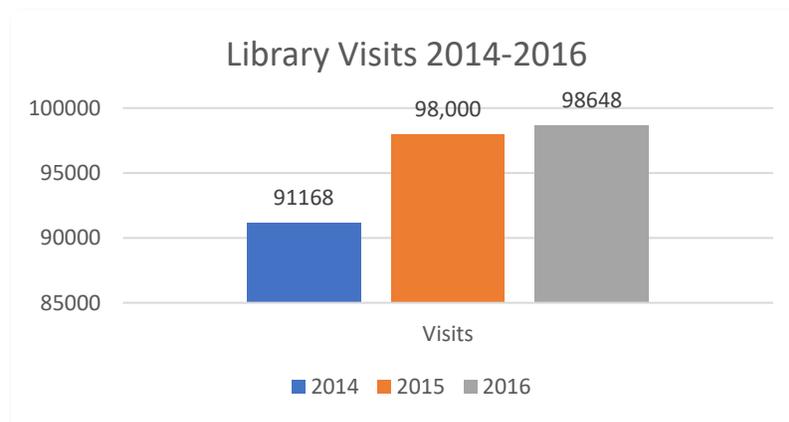
PROGRAMS

Programming is a significant part of the way we serve the community. By offering a wide range of educational and recreational programs throughout the year, we support our goal of acting as a cultural center and community hub in Avalon. While the emphasis on programming as a library service did not change between 2014 and 2016, the approach did. An effort to take a more collaborative approach in 2016 resulted in a variety of successful programs and community events throughout 2017. Ongoing efforts to balance the need for ongoing off-season programming with larger scale recreation-based summer program continue to drive and support the process. Both program quantity and attendance have remained steady from 2014-2016.

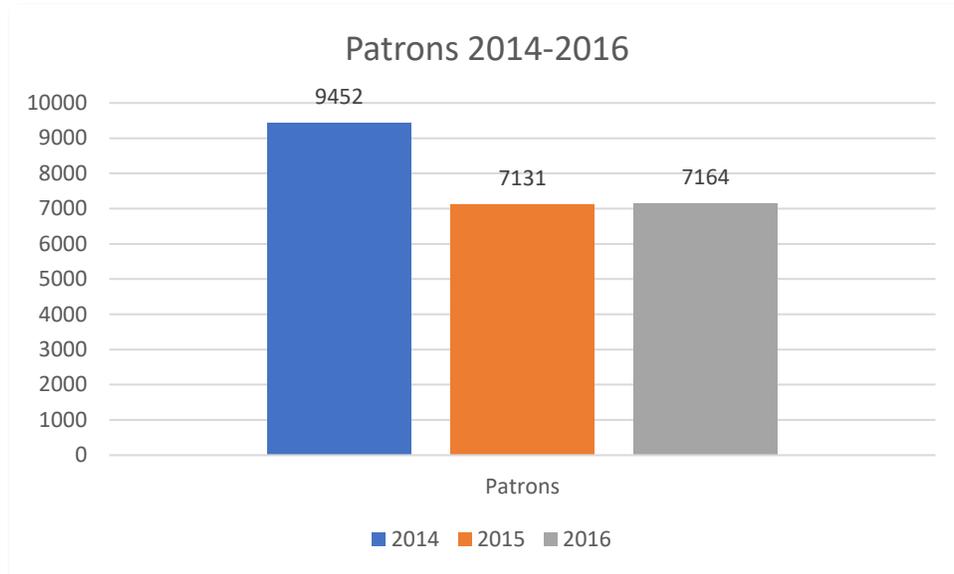


LIBRARY USE

With the increase in digital circulation, it is reasonable to consider the impact on library visitation. One may feel that increased off site circulation could lead to fewer library visits each year. However, library visitation has remained steady. One possible conclusion credits the increase in digital circulation to cardholders who are taking advantage of the library's remote services, while continuing to visit the physical location at the same rate as their previous use.



PATRONS



The Library's patron base remained fairly steady from 2015 to 2016. There was a significant change between 2014 to 2015, due to a database cleanup that cleared patrons who had been inactive for a long time. Our patron statistics are valuable in that they provide an overview of reach in the community. We are fortunate to have a strong base of both resident and non-resident library patrons. A year-end report in 2016 provided the following details:

- 7,164 patrons
- 4,207 non-resident homeowners
- 912 resident home owners

When considering these figures against the demographic data shared in the community overview above, it is clear that Avalon property owners largely value and use their public library. Maintaining this level of use is an ongoing goal and helps to drive the planning process.

VI. SWOT ANALYSIS & SURVEYING

To plan effectively, the committee identified various tools for data gathering, including a SWOT (strengths, weakness, opportunities, threats) Analysis and a general intercept survey for library users and nonusers. The results of these efforts were used to guide the planning process. A brief summary of the data gathered is included below.

What are our strengths?

- Loyal and supportive community
- Standout customer service
- Knowledgeable & experienced staff who provide patrons with individualized and responsive service
- Collections
- Targeted & collaborative programming throughout the year
- Opportunity to offer innovative & unique services, both onsite and remotely
- Access to tools that help us market services and reach community
- Community outreach & involvement
- Location and the Library & History Center environments

Where can we reassess and improve?

- Circulation of older formats
- Signage and space (appropriate venues for programs)
- Internet service quality
- Outreach tools
- Uniform staff proficiency of all available technologies
- Programming targeted to less engaged demographics
- Historic resources available digitally

What can we do to meet community needs?

- Working with local business/organizations
- Simplify online experience & expand electronic delivery of services
- Explore new social media avenues
- Keep working to make the library as a source of connection for entire community
- Expand off-season programming & pilot new formats and collections
- Surveying
- Extending hours & more seating/quiet space for patrons
- Expanded training for patrons and staff & tools to support our online resources

What stands in our way?

- Changing community population
- Changing patron collections and technology needs and interests
- Retail providers of books/streaming/technology
- Space challenges

VII. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Goal 1: INCREASE USE - Facilitate maximum community use of library resources and services through local and remote access.

The Avalon Free Public Library is a nationally recognized organization, noted by users for its commitment to patrons and the community. The Library strives to be responsive by both providing what its users are asking for, and by anticipating resources they will find useful. The Library also prides itself on the breadth of its offerings, meeting a wide variety of needs and requests.

Strategies

1. Evaluate digital services to better serve patrons, especially remote users, and ensure fewer barriers in accessing online resources.
2. Curate digital resources to ensure they are innovative and relevant.
3. Expand off-site physical circulation via innovative and community minded services.
4. Identify new initiatives to boost year-round and seasonal visitation.
5. Modify & improve the Library facility.
6. Increase collections and programming for underserved demographics.
7. Identify new resources to increase remote accessibility of historic collection through digitization and other tools.

Goal 2: SPREAD AWARENESS - Attain widespread community awareness of the full array of library resources and services.

In order for the Avalon Free Public Library's creativity and innovation to be impactful, the community must be aware of Library resources and services. Due to the resort nature of the town, Avalon experiences a great deal of turnover in community members -- making marketing a top priority.

Strategies

1. Improve the framework for ongoing analytics.
2. Identify opportunities for varied marketing approaches.
3. Expand staff community outreach.
4. Develop and maintain community partnerships.
5. Identify opportunities to increase acquisition and donation of objects for the historic collection.

Goal 3: FOSTER INNOVATION - Make the Library a creative and dynamic place to be.

The Avalon Free Public Library is proud to support a team of enthusiastic, service-minded individuals. In turn, it is our goal to ensure that team is given opportunities to communicate and execute innovative ideas in a supportive and structured environment.

Strategies

1. Expand employee professional development process.
2. Create a framework for evaluating and implementing new technology and resources.
3. Evaluate nontraditional resources for identifying new innovations.
4. Pilot new mechanisms for interacting with patrons remotely, for the purpose of education and entertainment.

VIII. MEASURES OF SUCCESS

One of the most essential parts of the plan concerns our ability to gauge our progress. Below are a set of measures we will use to ensure we are meeting our objectives. They will be reviewed quarterly with the Board of Trustees.

1) Strong positive ratio of property owners : card holders.

Ensuring the community's property owners possess and use their library cards has always been a tenet of the Library. A strong positive ratio of property owners to card holders shows that those who fund the library are making use of its collections and resources.

2) Circulation (print and digital), program attendance, and visitation increased/maintained, in keeping with rate of active card holders.

By tracking visitation and resource use against the current rate of active card holders, library staff can be sure collections and resources are aligned with community interest, and when needed, make adjustments.

3) High engagement in History Center initiatives, judged through visitation, program attendance, object donations, and Historical Society activity.

Expanded awareness of the History Center's offerings will provide additional value to community members who already use the Library. A diverse set of metrics allow us to assess engagement of different kinds from throughout the community.

4) Increased digital engagement, both Library and History Center.

As our world continues to advance technologically, our ability to connect with our users via our websites and digital resources is only expected to increase. By measuring remote access and use, we can be sure that the tools we use to engage these users are effective and meet their needs.

5) Staff retention and positive morale.

Our first core value is service. Ensuring that staff approach their responsibilities and the community with great service in mind is key to the Library's success. By fostering an environment that supports its employees, along with their creativity and innovation, we are working to ensure the Library is a creative and dynamic place for staff and patrons alike.