

Submitting Organization: American Library Association

Contact: Lynne Bradley, leb@alawash.org

Paper name: Libraries as Civic Spaces

Category: Mandate for E-government / Crisis in trust in government

Format: MS Word (attached)

Document Name: ALABriefing4

Libraries as Civic Spaces

by Nancy Kranich, President of the American Library Association

Adapted from an article in *American Libraries*, November 2000)

Civil society "needs a habitation; it must become a real place that offers the abstract idea of a public voice, a palpable geography somewhere other than in the twin atlases of government"

Over the past decades, the United States has experienced a decline in voter turnout and in attendance at political rallies, fewer people are engaging in politics, and there is reduced involvement with civic organizations. While countries throughout Eastern Europe and elsewhere seek to establish democratic institutions, here at home there is a deepening cynicism about public affairs. Concern about our civic disengagement has sparked a renewed interest in reinvigorating civil society and encouraging more opportunities to participate in our American democracy.

Librarians can be key players

Who is better equipped to face the challenge of strengthening citizen action and civil society in our communities than libraries? A democracy needs safe gathering places where community members can share interests and concerns. This is especially so as e-government evolves. Information is essential to civic participation and the development of civil society. Effective citizen action is possible only when citizens know how to gain access to information of all kinds and have the skills to become responsible, informed participants in our democracy.

...Librarians can be key players who help prepare citizens for lifelong civic participation and membership in civil society. Our libraries provide both the information and the community forum opportunities for dialogue that the public needs to make decisions about common concerns. Libraries offer citizens the real and virtual civic spaces where they can speak freely, share similar interests and concerns, and pursue what they believe is in their and the public's interest. Ultimately, free discourse among informed citizens assures civil society; and civil society provides the social capital necessary to achieve sovereignty of the people, by the people, and for the people.

...Libraries can stimulate e-government and „community dialogues in projects that:

- Rekindle civic society through libraries;
- Increase public awareness, understanding, and participation in issues related to

Created by Lynne E. Bradley on 3/5/01 11:11 PM

Version 2 saved by Lynne E. Bradley at 3/5/01 11:24 PM

Production Data:Applications:Eudora Pro 4.0.1 Folder:Eric's Eudora Folder:Attachments
Folder:ALABriefing4.doc

democracy;

- Provide communities with in-person and virtual forums to examine important issues and encourage their involvement in problem-solving and decision-making;
- Increase awareness and use of libraries as essential community centers by providing librarians with the tools and materials necessary to present thoughtful, engaging, and enlightening programs about problems facing our democratic way of life; and
- Develop model programs for replication in libraries nationwide.

... All libraries, be they school, academic, or public, should recognize the important role they can play as local civic spaces for dialogue and exchange of ideas. If our grant effort is successful, funds will be available for pilot projects in libraries across the country. With the renewed interest in civic participation everywhere, ...libraries can play as a community space for public dialogue, and a perfect opportunity to prove that libraries are the cornerstone of democracy. ...

Created by Lynne E. Bradley on 3/5/01 11:11 PM
Version 2 saved by Lynne E. Bradley at 3/5/01 11:24 PM

Production Data:Applications:Eudora Pro 4.0.1 Folder:Eric's Eudora Folder:Attachments
Folder:ALABriefing4.doc