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Getting to the AHA Moment

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William E. Kennedy

In 2008 Stutsman County, North Dakota residents voted to combine the two libraries that serve the 21,000 residents of Stutsman County. The Alfred Dickey library in downtown Jamestown had been built in 1919 for a population of 6,627 and was in need of renovation and expansion to continue to serve today's 15,446 residents. The Stutsman County Library was built in 1952 as a home to the Bookmobile that would serve rural Stutsman County as well as pre-school locations and senior centers in Jamestown.

Voters approved the combination with a 70% yes vote expecting the two facilities to be combined, producing greater efficiency and cost savings while maintaining the same services.

Two boards became one board, two staffs became one staff. Combining two collection systems took a little longer but eventually all items were at the fingertips of the staff whether they were at Alfred Dickey downtown, at the Stutsman County branch or on the bookmobile. Today, the libraries remain under two roofs.

The board had many choices for where to locate a new library. An old hospital had room for a library. A vacant Elks building was close to the Arts Center. A vacant medical clinic offered the needed square feet. All these locations would keep the library downtown, a desired outcome based on the location of the middle school, elementary schools and senior housing. An architect was hired to develop alternative plans and present them to public forums. A plan was in the final stages to purchase the medical clinic and build a 25,000 square foot facility when the space was sold to a developer for senior housing.

A sigh of relief could be heard from those in the community who favored renovating the classic Alfred Dickey library and expanding to the north fulfilling the square foot needs of a current flexible and efficient library and housing the bookmobile. Options were placed on the two buildings adjacent to Alfred Dickey and new plans drawn up.

* refers to the common human experience of suddenly understanding a previously incomprehensible problem or concept.

The first capital campaign letter to raise funds to renovate and expand the library in Jamestown, ND was mailed to 1,500 potential donors. It included a nicely designed tri-fold brochure, a letter explaining the urgent need for a new library and a return envelope for cash or pledges. Over the next few weeks, envelopes arrived with a few thousand dollars in cash and checks and a few pledges. The following letter also arrived.

Dear Mr. Kennedy,

I am very successful. I never went into a library. I don't see the need for the current library, let alone a new one that would cost me some of my hard earned cash. I would rather use the \$33.75 that it would cost me each year in sales tax to pay for a new library to take my family to lunch

Sincerely,

Mr. Smith (fictional name, actual letter)

I was tempted to ball the letter up and toss it in the waste basket. Instead, I smoothed it out as best I could and placed it into the manila folder marked "Letters." Mr. Smith's letter joined nine equally well written rejections of our effort to solicit funds for a renovation and expansion of Jamestown's Library system. I carefully returned it to a hanging file folder between "Johnson" and "Library Media Articles." The classic Steelcase two-drawer file cabinet closed with a solid clang.

Not everybody had a positive story to tell about the Alfred Dickey Free Public Library in Jamestown, ND. Not everybody had been in the library as an infant being read to by a mom or dad, or as a fifth grader finding books for an assignment at school. Not everybody had used the library as a young adult researching colleges, or as an adult looking for a job or health care information, and certainly not as a senior seeking information from a librarian on the latest James Patterson novel.

However, there were plenty of people who had a positive library experience. Eighteen volunteers collected 2,497 signatures to get a ¼% sales tax initiative on the November, 2014 general election ballot. Billboards went up, postcards went out to every household in Stutsman County,

all the service clubs were visited, letters to the editor were written and the local paper endorsed the library's goal. A professional pre-election survey was taken. 36% in favor, 18% against, 42% undecided. Signature gatherers called the undecided. The Mayor held a City Council meeting in Alfred Dickey and had the architect explain the subtle changes to bring the building into the e-world while keeping a treasured building alive. The mayor walked the council to the buildings to the north and the architect answered questions about the modern addition.

Election day came.

Results

NO: 4,240 (54%)

YES: 3,055 (40%)

SKIPPED: 552 (6%)

The majority of those undecided voters aligned themselves with Mr. Smith as definite no's.

What had we done wrong or failed to do?

The answers were not self-evident. There was no smoking gun that if discovered and removed ahead of the vote that would have made a difference. Over the next few months, a common sense list of answers started to appear. They came from a series of meetings in coffee shops and in my office with people anxious to express their surprise and shock at the result of the election. The key to the meetings was listening.

"I didn't know what was going to happen to the old library, so I voted no." A young mother told me when I asked how she voted. I started to explain that the old library was going to be renovated, a friend sitting next to me kicked me in the shin and whispered, "Listen."

"If I had known more, I would have voted yes," she said to the two other young mothers sitting at the table. They nodded. "We did the same." AHA.

"And, there were all those other initiatives on the page just before County Measure # 1 for the library asking for increased taxes. I voted no on all those too. Did you no-

tice that the word library was on the third line and it only appeared once. No wonder people voted no," the other young mother said. AHA.

I met with current and past school superintendents individually and asked for their advice. I learned that the 2001 high school initiative authorizing a 1% sales tax to pay for a new \$28,000,000 high school and renovated middle school, passed with 65% of the vote on a special election. One piece of paper, one yes or no.

That 1% sales tax was retired this spring. In June an activity center initiative authorizing a 1% sales tax to pay for a \$28,000,000 activity center passed with 60% of the vote on a special election. One piece of paper, one yes or no.

The library was on a General Election ballot with seventeen State, County and City individual contests. There were ten initiatives. Eight of the initiatives were for additional taxes, including the library request for a ¼% sales tax to pay for an \$8,000,000 renovation and expansion of the library. They all failed. AHA.

I decided to have meetings with as many people as possible that had worked tirelessly to pass the high school and activity center initiatives. Some were held one on one in a local coffee shop. Others were held in small groups of eight to ten. I called these meetings "The Listening Tour." The people I spoke to were a cross section of the community from educators and parents to those working in finance, insurance, retail, healthcare, local media, arts, and agriculture. Over and over I heard, "Maybe you should have a special election and be the only initiative on the ballot." AHA

When I asked them why they had come to the meetings, they said, "Because you asked." AHA

If John Watson stopped by, I can imagine him describing how his best friend Sherlock Holmes made very complicated cases seem simple by observing, listening, and asking.

All I can do is try.