Bridging Capital: New Directions for Learning, Innovation and Community

A Report of the
Palo Alto Dialogue on Libraries and Community Services

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This report is written from the perspective of informed observers at the Palo Alto Dialogue on Libraries and Community Services. Unless attributed to a particular person, none of the comments, ideas or recommendations contain in this report should be taken as embodying the views of carrying the endorsement of any specific participant or affiliated organizations or employers at the Dialogue.

Palo Alto Dialogue on Libraries and Community Services

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Introduction

The Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries creates unique opportunities for community leaders, innovators and institutional partners to collaborate on developing next generation initiatives for libraries across the country. Libraries play an important role in areas that are priorities for communities, like civic engagement, workforce development, education and democratic discourse. As the nation continues to confront intense polarization, libraries are increasingly serving as third spaces, where diverse populations can coalesce, connect and confront the challenges in their community through open and trusted channels and relationships.

The Aspen Institute in partnership with the Palo Alto City Library and Community Services Department convened community leaders from diverse constituencies. The day-long roundtable in Palo Alto, California on September 13, 2018 focused on the key themes of learning, innovation and community. Participants examined how to align goals for service to residents of Palo Alto and consider creative and innovative pathways toward pursuing them. The Palo Alto City Library and the Community Services Department are two important service providers in Palo Alto and their future alignment will impact how and why the community invests in them.

The participants represented diverse and intergenerational stakeholders whose experience reflected different angles on the core themes of the day. A number of long established relationships, as well as an important combination of potential new partners, were represented in the room. The discussions during the Dialogue tended

more towards the Library, a familiar place, and less toward the Community Services Department, which oversees a wide array of programs designed for improving community wellness and the quality of life for people in Palo Alto. While the programs and services of the Community Services Department are well-known and widely used, its entire portfolio of services is less recognized as one brand. This outcome of the dialogue highlights the need for opportunities for the Community Services Department to increase the visibility of the entire department as a community partner.

The Palo Alto Context

Palo Alto is a city with strong educational values, a rich cultural history and exceptional community assets. The people who live, work, study and play in Palo Alto have many different relationships with the city. In a city with a census population of just under 67,000, the daily influx of workers and students brings the daily population to 158,000 people. Participants embraced this and considered the workforce population as part of the "whole community." They also acknowledged some challenges with building cohesion with such an incredible flow of people in and out every day. Participants described the city as economically and culturally diverse and said that diversity is valued and celebrated. Despite this, there are undercurrents suggesting work to be done. The National Citizen Survey found a decline in the sense of well-being and belonging in the community, along with concerns about where the community is heading. Some suggested that it is home to a population of people highly invested in the whole community while disengaged with certain critical parts of it. Participants were sensitive to these impressions. This was reflected in the participants' commitment to building a sense of community as they worked through strategic questions.

The library and community services connection. The library system in Palo Alto was once a part of the Community Services Department. This department includes parks, recreation, community theater, art center, children's museum and zoo, human services, and other programs and classes designed to enhance the quality of life and community wellness for residents. Monique le Conge Ziesenhenne currently serves as Director of both Libraries and Community Services for the City of Palo Alto. Key indicators show library usage is going strong, with year over year gains in circulation, facilities usage and online activity. City leaders present at the roundtable were eager to explore synergies between the libraries, Community Services Department and community partners to improve their services. Both departments have a vested interest in the wellness of the community and stand to benefit from increased collaboration.

Redefining success: "health not wealth." Participants expressed the need to redefine what success means for a young person in Palo Alto: physical and mental health, not wealth, should anchor the new definition. Participants shared a vision for a more connected and engaged community of diverse and well-rounded people. This was not in reaction to the pervasive technology in the community, but in recognition that it was not all encompassing. Participants who work with youth said they often see young students channeled into academia and tech—two highly competitive fields. They suggested that vocational schools and skilled trades be encouraged and available for young people, as they can lead to sustainable, fulfilling careers. Participants wanted to find ways to encourage more of the local community to move into these careers and have a way to stay in the community itself. (It was noted, for example, that public safety workers in Palo Alto rarely live in the city.) They saw this as providing a healthy balance to tech and academia.

Alignment. Community leaders and stakeholders participating in the roundtable discussed the issue of disconnects between organizations whose goals may be aligned. They asked how libraries can bring the residents of Palo Alto together to inform each other about what various sectors are accomplishing and aspiring toward, and how the library can serve as an onramp to seeding collaboration between different actors. The roundtable discussed the need for a more robust environment for civic engagement, which participants agreed is complex and tricky to navigate. Palo Alto is home to so many highly educated and deeply experienced citizens that it can often become a drag on forward progress as different experts engage in long running debates. The consensus was that more creative and frequent collaborations could unlock greater alignment.

A varied and changing community. The entire Bay Area struggles with growing economic disparity and its impact on housing. Palo Alto is a diverse community, where diversity finds its greatest expression in cultural diversity, including a growing number of immigrant residents. Palo Alto also benefits from a population of longtime residents entering retirement and families with young students. Economic diversity is becoming more problematic as the cost of living in Palo Alto is pricing people out of the community. For some, the wealth disparities were a concern for insuring a balanced and open civic leadership. The roundtable discussed common goals for the community as a whole, while considering the specific and varied needs of individual populations in order to accomplish those goals.

Framing the dialogue. Ziesenhenne identified a key question to lead the roundtable discussion: How can the strengths of the Palo Alto City Library and the Community Services Department be leveraged to build resources for communities that are better than what Palo Alto has now? To answer this question participants had at their

disposal the considerable assets of the community. They also had to negotiate the acknowledged "Palo Alto Process" which they recognized can stall broad participation as a highly committed core of people often dominate some key civic issues. If the participants were to make progress towards answers they would have to apply the considerable assets of the community while negotiating the acknowledged "Palo Alto Process."

Learning, Innovation and Community

> "Innovation is usually a group effort, involving collaboration between visionaries and engineers, and that creativity comes from drawing on many sources. Only in storybooks do inventions come like a thunderbolt, or a lightbulb popping out of the head of a lone individual in a basement or garret or garage."
>
> - Walter Isaacson, *The Innovators*

Doug Hagan, chair of the Palo Alto Library Advisory Commission, helped open the dialogue by reflecting on Palo Alto's values and their alignment with those of the library. He identified those values as belonging to three tent poles: Learning, Innovation, and Community. Palo Alto places extraordinary value on learning and is committed to developing literacies in both academic and social environments. Palo Alto also breathes innovation and has been driving incredible market shifts through its research and technology leadership for generations. Finally, Palo Alto is also passionate about community. Hagan asked that participants think about how to address each of the strategic questions through these three filters. The roles of the Libraries and the Community Services Department are fundamental and intersecting. They exist to preserve the health and vitality of Palo Alto and their evolution should reflect its values.

At the epicenter of Silicon Valley, Palo Alto libraries embrace new technologies. Recognizing this unique advantage, participants deepened the question beyond taking advantage of its location to engage new modes of information and new communities. Participants explored how the library should stay current, and best deploy emerging technologies to continue to be a learning library for their communities in an age struggling with polarization and anxiety. The commitment to its core values makes Palo Alto unique; Hagan's lead-off remarks challenged the group to incorporate them in thinking through the big questions confronting the community, including questions of health, civic engagement and education.

New Approaches to Problem Solving. Technology innovation is central to Palo Alto's culture. Importantly, participants highlighted other forms of innovation that can be applied to generate a broader sense of collaboration and creative thinking around public services. First among these would be establishing a non-consumer-driven culture of creative problem-solving. *Design Thinking* is another transformational force to emerge from Palo Alto, with the d.school at Stanford University lighting the way. Applied in this context, its *user centered* approach to problem solving could capture insights and requirements for where to begin and how to proceed in transforming the role of libraries. Participants asked how the library in Palo Alto can harness innovative models, develop meaningful and lasting partnerships in the community, and ensure the relevancy of library services in the city well into the 21st century and beyond. Libraries have already evolved to meet the demands of their role as information access provider and convener for community. By diversifying their approach to innovation, they can integrate more fully with other important partners.

Human Capital. Palo Alto is rich in human capital. Many of the city's aging population remain invested in Palo Alto and give back to their community either by

donating or volunteering. They could be incredible allies for sharing knowledge and information with young people in the community. This generational force was seen by the participants as an ongoing engine of progress requiring new relationships in more diverse parts of the city. Emerging communities of color were also seen as sources for new leadership and energy in the civic life of Palo Alto. Home to many immigrants, the participants were invested in finding ways to bring them into the social scaffolding by offering new ways to participate on public boards, commissions and working groups. Participants also shared examples from adjacent communities that might provide additional resources and space for new civic engagement.

Library Strengths. Public libraries have key assets that could be leveraged in the community to advance innovation: people, place and platform.

People. Human capital remains the critical resource in communities and is the gating factor in considering how to move forward in the era of ubiquitous digitization and dawning AI economic transformation.   Developing and supporting the pathways for local residents to participate in expanding economic and cultural opportunities is essential for libraries to deliver within their missions.

Place. Libraries provide physical infrastructure and human capital in a community. They represent investments made over generations that bring people together and help to build community at a time when virtual experience and interactions (often solitary) are ascendant. Libraries exist within deeply local relationships and histories rooted in their geographies. They reflect the dynamics of their communities and they also struggle with the same issues confronting the regions they serve. They are also reflections of the strengths and

peculiar assets of their locations. For libraries, place is not abstract. It defines their conditions for success.

Platform. It is often assumed that platforms are inherently technology based. In the age of social media, this is easily a safe assumption. This trend does not exclude the possibility that civil society institutions can also perform the role of a platform for enabling connections and programming that otherwise would not exist. Libraries are this kind of platform and more. They provide an essential layer of trust that is required to bridge many of the divides that challenge community development.

The New Information Environment

Learning, innovation and community are deeply impacted by communications infrastructure and culture. The rise of mobile technologies has changed the calculus for understanding how people learn and innovate. Community adoption of these technologies and practices acts on the community itself, expanding possibilities and complexity. Setting a baseline of understanding is critical for considering how society is evolving in a community like Palo Alto. To help frame this context, Richard Adler, fellow at the Institute for the Future, delivered a PowerPoint presentation titled "Building Blocks for New Civic Ecologies," in which he invoked the contours of a changing technological landscape. He listed the building blocks shaping the environment as follows:

1. *Personal mobile computing* – Two-thirds of the entire population of the world carries at least one cell phone, a powerful computer in a handheld device.

2. *Ubiquitous connectivity* - The world is more connected than ever before through online social networks and other internet platforms.

3. *High resolution sensors* - The Internet of Things is requiring new levels of awareness and understanding of the world around us.

4. *Orchestrated hardwar*e - All connected devices in our environment will be sending data back and forth, allowing conversations between one another.

5. *Abundant supercomputing* - A vast amount of computing can be embedded in a single program or application, like Google Maps. An unlimited amount of computing goes into the "cloud" every day.

6. *Augmented reality* - Immersive technologies allow layers of information to overlay reality.

Adler then asked, "What does it mean to be a smart city?" He used Rio de Janeiro, Brazil as an example of one kind of smart city, whose model was top-down. Rio de Janeiro manages and monitors the city from an operations center, where data from municipal and state departments and essential services are aggregated in one headquarters. This version of total surveillance and data-driven municipal management benefits from network efficiencies, but does not necessarily build community trust and engagement. Adler went on to provide a different approach.

An alternative model Adler presented was described as bottom-up, in which all of us as individuals are empowered *with* technology to make connections and navigate the environment. He noted two kinds of social capital that help to strengthen communities—bonding capital, occurring in relationships among existing friends, family and associates, and bridging capital, which brings together people from disparate groups. Palo Alto is rich in bonding capital, while the National Citizen Survey and other indicators suggest it is lacking bridging capital. The question then

follows, how can the Library and Community Services Department work with community partners to become a bottom-up smart city that leverages technology to build bridging capital for learning, innovation and community?

Bridging capital. Libraries have been a repository of information since their inception, and the way information is obtained, consumed, shared and secured has evolved over time. Libraries have maintained their role as a trusted information source by continuously adapting to these new modes of information access through books, the internet and the community. Libraries have deployed their often limited resources in strategic ways to capture new opportunities to serve their communities and boost literacies, often introducing new innovations earlier than other agencies. This trend is now challenged by the accelerating pace of change in the marketplace of competition for people's attention. It is also reinforced by the platform libraries provide to develop the capacity and network to build bridging capital.

Libraries as places of access and discovery. Library services have always been expansive and formed around the needs of communities, yet books remain a core feature of libraries. This essential function ranges from introducing young readers to the power of reading to empowering users to stay connected to literature throughout their lifetimes, regardless of income. Whether you are a low-income parent finding your way to great children's literature or a senior on a fixed income, the rewards of reading can be experienced across all walks of life through public libraries in Palo Alto. They are places of access and discovery. While technology evolves and information is more accessible and more contested, the joy of reading does not require innovation. It merely requires engagement. With the themes of learning, innovation and community in mind, new forms of engagement offer pathways for both the Library and Community Services Department.

Libraries as resource navigators. Participants highlighted the opportunity for libraries to serve as an information access point for community and social services resources. The government and nonprofit sectors have information to share and libraries have trained and trusted staff ready to assist. The library is a public space equipped with restrooms and temperature control. They also typically have charging stations, computers and Wi-Fi. All of these resources are crucial to lower income users who need support in developing workforce skills and access to networks. There are also many nonprofits in Palo Alto who need a platform for reaching constituents. Libraries are a platform, broker and catalyst for these kinds of connections. <u>A rotating desk for nonprofits to engage visitors inside libraries was proposed to increase awareness for available programming and services.</u>

Information curation. The internet has become such a basic research tool that people are expected to be proficient in gathering information this way. The library can offer access to technologies that are already embedded in modern society as well as new technologies to help the community keep up with a rapidly changing digital environment and workforce. Participants also identified tensions with the internet in the age of social media. Although it is an incredibly useful research tool, the internet is overloaded with information, some of which is not factual and purposely misleading. This leads to the internet being, in some instances, an obstacle to information. Libraries are increasingly required to support users in finding credible sources and reliable networks for critically consuming information. This new domain of information literacy has major implications for libraries in our democratic society. Even in a community with the intellectual resources of Palo Alto, there was shared concern with the problems of misinformation and polarizing filter bubbles.

Libraries as platforms for the sharing of information. There has never been more information available than today, with ubiquitous connectivity driving a glut of data into every available channel. There was a shared sense of frustration with finding the right civic and community information at the right time. To make this information available for everyone requires connection and multiple channels of communication. In Palo Alto, the library acts as a key facilitator for the sharing of information. Its physical space allows for community gatherings and fosters awareness of new opportunities to learn and engage. Libraries host classes, meetups, community activities and more. Library branches are in diverse parts of each community, providing an equitable opportunity for participation.

New services. The library can serve as hosts for new services. The ongoing exploration of universal pre-K in California is a critical opportunity for libraries to consider an expanded set of services. Low-income families could benefit greatly from such an expansion and libraries in Palo Alto would be natural platforms for connecting them to new services. The library's role as a convener could also benefit local business leaders by hosting innovation meetups where entrepreneurs can talk, network and learn from each other simply through convening or hackathons. The same model could extend to other sectors like art, education or nonprofits.

Alignment with Community Goals.

> "As a Library, we value: Providing free and open access to collections, resources and services to all. Learning and being a learning organization. Embracing differences and diversity. Challenging the norm. Fostering an engaged community and staff. Our relationships with one another and with our community."
>
> —*The Palo Alto City Library 2018-2021 Strategic Plan*

Those at the roundtable were tasked with identifying goals that span various sectors of the community. Participants shared a vision of a Palo Alto that has a strong sense of community across social and economic demographics, a broad worldview and understanding outside of the Silicon Valley bubble, and a balance between historical preservation and advancement. They asked how they can ease barriers to deeper civic engagement, identify and better serve underserved populations in the city, and contribute to the social well-being of youth. All of these are areas that the library pursues in its mission to support learning, innovation and community.

While the roundtable agreed that embracing technology is necessary for meaningful progress, they also valued the nostalgia for both historical Palo Alto and dependable, familiar library services. They asked how libraries and other organizations could capture the memories and history of the community while offering new services to keep pace with changing modes of information access, and teaching its residents how to deploy tech purposefully, wisely and efficiently. This mix of lived experience, relationship driven insight, and openness to new ideas was an essential part of the dialogue.

Creative Collisions

Participants were assigned to one of three working groups: Lifelong Learning, Citizenship and Civic Engagement, and Health and Wellness. Some were placed in areas of their expertise, and others assigned to provide diverse perspectives in each priority area. The groups examined the goals, aspirations and priorities identified during the morning sessions. Considering the assets and strengths of the library and the community, they developed frameworks to articulate and advance the goals for

Palo Alto in each area, and identified potential partnerships across community sectors. The working groups documented their findings and presented them to the entire group at the end of the day.

Lifelong Learning Working Group

The Library and the Community Services Department engage with residents and have an impact at various points across a person's lifetime. The working group envisioned a community where lifelong learning is supported, encouraged, and available to all. The group recognized the importance of understanding learning needs across the continuum of learning, and **cataloging** opportunities available in the community. The group focused on gathering information, mapping opportunities and resources, marketing services and engaging community.

Get the word out. Palo Alto already has spaces for lifelong learners, like the Palo Alto Adult School and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Santa Clara University. The working group suggested better marketing and advertising for these services. In line with the expressed concern for supporting diversity, the group agreed that any new push in advertising should focus on non-English outreach to ensure equitable knowledge of and access to lifelong learning opportunities.

Offer a lifelong learning card. The working group conceptualized a marketing plan in the form of a "lifelong learning card." This card would create a "marketplace" surrounding learning, expressing the intrinsic value of each opportunity for learning. The group suggested that the library could partner with local businesses, schools or nonprofits to offer skill-building workshops or classes. A person's library card could be

loaded with "lifelong learning credits" that are redeemable for these workshops or classes.

Survey the community. To better plan for additional library programs surrounding lifelong learning, participants encouraged continuous interactions with the community about their needs and aspirations. This could be in the form of relationships with various nonprofits or other organizations or consistent surveys of the public. Once specific needs are assessed, the library can offer programs like speaker series on popularly requested topics or classes teaching skills that are in demand. The group expressed a desired outcome of increasing cross-cultural connection and inclusivity.

Through collaborations with other organizations, the library can better understand and map the services being provided throughout the city. This would prevent duplications in services, and avoid competition between organizations. Instead, the group imagined that the library could connect organizations in order to better plan for gaps in service, and to build up the success of each individual effort toward city goals.

Citizenship and Civic Engagement Working Group

This working group focused on an interdisciplinary approach to its charge. First, it reflected on the strengths and contradictions of the community. Participants recognized Palo Alto as a dynamic place where high civic engagement concentrates with a narrow constituency. This was identified as the "Palo Alto process," where deep debate and consideration was given to certain issues by a relatively small group of highly committed people. While providing clear benefits, this characteristic was also seen as closing off participation for many. The working group worked towards strategies for

broadening participation through capacity building and more open channels for engagement.

Develop and host Civic Bootcamps. The vision took shape as a series of Civic Bootcamps developed and hosted at libraries to invite, train and empower new members of the community to step forward and receive support for participating on boards, commissions and organizing opportunities in their own neighborhoods.

The working group acknowledged the need for a leveling up in the architecture for the Civic Bootcamps. This means easier entry and lower demand activities to introduce community members initially. As their interest and capacity increased, there would be more complex and time intensive roles for participants to take on. This ultimately would lead to an ecosystem of exposure, engagement and empowerment that would better represent the entire community of Palo Alto in its formal civic infrastructure. There is already a wealth of retired experts who may be tapped to volunteer their guidance for such a program, advancing the goals shared earlier in the day for intergenerational collaboration and building bridging capital.

Members of the community were careful to describe the pressures of housing prices and affordability for people who work in Palo Alto. Many members of the library staff cannot afford to live in Palo Alto. The filter bubble effect was a concern for the working group as it wrestled with how to ensure that issues local to Palo Alto reflected larger forces operating regionally, statewide and across the country.

Do outreach to maximize inclusivity. Education and diversity are well indexed in Palo Alto. These strengths were seen as key assets in launching the Civic Bootcamp. The Bootcamps can launch quickly by bringing stakeholders in to participate and facilitate

training and capacity building. The group also proposed inviting community-based organizations to have a physical presence at libraries to connect the Bootcamps to day-to-day resources available to residents. A desk, kiosk or other space within the library could host a rotating series of representatives from these organizations. This in-house retail presence for community resources is a novel approach to space and networking. The group acknowledged that outreach is key in developing civic engagement. The voices missing in local government are frequently of those with language barriers, young people or families struggling economically. The working group suggested that libraries and organizations that successfully serve any of these groups be engaged to participate in the Civics Bootcamp, with the goal of lifting the voices of those who need more support from their city. The group was firm in its belief that learning, innovation and community in the civic life of Palo Alto should be equally distributed.

Health and Wellness Working Group

This working group envisioned a community that provides accessible opportunities for all people in the community to be well physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially. They recognized that some aspects of self-care come with harmful stigmas, and asked how libraries can partner with other organizations to ease barriers—social and otherwise—to health and wellness information.

Be a clearinghouse for health and wellness information. The working group considered the library's role as an information access point, and suggested that libraries act as a clearinghouse for up-to-date health and wellness information, as well as a space to facilitate human engagement. The library can partner with outside organizations to consolidate health data, survey the community to assess needs, and communicate the availability of services to those they would benefit.

Create a safe space for all. The group acknowledged that the library's unique role as a nonpolitical convener and trusted source for the navigation of information could be of great value to outside organizations with aligned goals for the community. Libraries already attract a diverse intersection of the population in Palo Alto, making it a natural space to provide health and wellness information and data. The working group emphasized a need to be inclusive of vulnerable populations, to make sure that everyone in Palo Alto has equitable access to accurate health information.

They suggested partnerships with legal resources to navigate the sharing of health information as the library is not a licensed health provider. The library, in its clearinghouse role, would be able to access the many existing resources for health data and connect library visitors to those trusted resources. A key model for bringing this service to the library could be Project Safety Net, an organization centered around resources for fostering youth health and wellness in Palo Alto. This organization already partners with mental health organizations, nonprofits, youth organizations, faith organizations, individuals, Palo Alto Unified School District and the City of Palo Alto staff. A partnership with Project Safety Net could bring access to the services offered throughout the city inside the walls of the libraries, where visitors from all walks of life may connect to those resources.

Conclusion

Palo Alto is home to a community living at the epicenter of Silicon Valley. It is a city with strong educational values, rich cultural history and tens of thousands of commuting tech workers during the week. Participants at the Dialogue discussed some

of the contrasting values of Silicon Valley and Palo Alto. While Palo Alto embraces the new technologies and the resources that Silicon Valley offers, those at the Dialogue agreed that they want to build an environment for their youth that fosters well-roundedness, civic engagement and a value system that defines success around the health and development of the whole person, which includes physical and mental health as well as academic and financial prosperity.

The Palo Alto Dialogue on Libraries and Community Services yielded many insights for further discussion and exploration. Some are simple and easy to test, while others will require increased collaboration across the community. There was a consistent commitment to leveraging both the Library and Community Services Department to play a guiding role in accelerating new ideas and programs. Core to the missions of these city departments, each of these ideas were also developed to fundamentally increase access to information and resources for the entire community. Working groups established bold ideas for thinking about the service frameworks necessary to make libraries critical partners for success across the continuum of a person's life. Maslow's hierarchy of needs was suggested as a reference to imagine the scaling of services for different stages of people's needs.

The Dialogue on Public Libraries gives communities a chance to consider the responsibilities of the library in an era where the foundations of civil society are suspect and trust in institutions continues to decline. Participants agreed on the urgent need to reinforce the role of the 21st century library in rebuilding trust and achieving those dreams. The assets of Palo Alto are many and have accrued over many generations of learning, innovation, and community building. Now this community is poised to develop new pathways for building community and understanding what a "smart" city looks like and how it acts, by embracing new technologies, insights and connections. This report, full of progressive ideas and potential partnerships, was generated from a

convening that lasted one day. Palo Alto has the people it needs to grow a culture of commitment to its library as a platform to not only reach the goals outlined in this dialogue, but to continue to develop and achieve transformative and equitable goals in the future.