

NEW HANOVER COUNTY

Request for Qualifications For Professional Architectural Services In Providing Design Services Renovation Carolina Courtyard

General Information

The purpose of this Request for Qualifications is to solicit qualifications from qualified applicants to provide architectural services for the renovation of the Carolina Courtyard located at the New Hanover County Main Library at the corner of 3rd and Chestnut Streets in Wilmington, NC.

The project scope will require the design and development of an addition to the existing building and courtyard. The purpose is to create an inviting outdoor library environment and learning space as more clearly described in the attached exhibit "A". The scope of services required will include the development of plans and specifications and to provide consulting services to the County during the design development, contractor selection and building phase. Please refer to the "Basic Design Scope of Services" as outlined in exhibit "A".

New Hanover County requests qualifications from firms experienced in planning, design, and construction observation of similar projects. Firms should submit their qualifications on standard form SF330, available for download in the forms library at www.gsa.gov. Completed form SF330 shall be submitted by **4:00 PM September 10, 2014**.

Contracting Office Address

New Hanover County
Attn: Kevin Caison, Facilities Project Coordinator
200 Division Drive
Wilmington, NC 28401
(910) 798-4338
kcaison@nhcgov.com

Please submit questions electronically via email to kcaison@nhcgov.com and in the subject line note "**RFQ-2015-20897 Carolina Courtyard.**" Deadline for questions is by **5:00 PM, August 22, 2014**. Any changes in the qualification's request may be sent by email and furnished to all proposers. Verbal information obtained otherwise will not be considered in the awarding of the proposal.

Firms interested in submitting a response should email kcaison@nhcgov.com expressing their intent to submit a statement of qualifications. Doing so will provide information necessary to inform the firm of any changes.

Description

Solicitation includes design and architectural services for preparation of construction documents including utilities system modeling, plans, specifications, cost estimates, record drawings, and review of shop drawings.

Selection Criteria

The architectural firm must demonstrate its competency and each key consultant's qualifications with respect to the published evaluation factors.

Specific evaluation factors include:

(1) Professional qualifications of firm and staff proposed for the design and architectural services for preparation of construction documents including, plans, and specifications using County standards, cost estimates, record drawings, and review of shop drawings in accordance with County standards. **(20%)**

In addition, scheduling professionals and construction contract claim mitigation tasks will be included. Firms will be evaluated in terms of the team's qualifications:

- Active professional registration in North Carolina
- Experience (with present and other firms) and roles of staff members, specifically on the projects listed in the SF330. Each project should clearly indicate the personnel involved and those personnel should be listed by each project.
- Teams consisting of multiple firms are allowed. Demonstrations of past collaborations and team organizational charts are required.

(2) Specialized recent experience demonstrating the technical competence of particular staff members to design the projects addressed in evaluation factor number one. Each project listed should indicate key staff members involved.

Firms will also be evaluated upon:

- specific knowledge of the construction materials and practices of similar projects that meet design requirements of New Hanover County, the City of Wilmington; and the Federal and State of North Carolina laws, regulations, codes, and permits applicable to projects of this nature
- project experience as listed in the SF330 (provide design schedule, estimate vs. bid amount, and design team for each) **(30%)**

(3) Capacity of the proposed design team to accomplish the following schedules: Final design submittal is required within 120 days of contract

award. Project design schedules should be given for the same projects listed above for evaluation factors 1 and 2. **(20%)**

(4) Past performance on the same projects listed above with Government agencies and private industry in terms of the following:

- cost control techniques employed by the firm as demonstrated by the ability to establish an accurate project construction budget and design to this budget as evidenced by the low bid amount
- quality of work as demonstrated by the history of design related change orders issued during construction
- demonstrated long term business relationships and repeat business with Government and private customers
- demonstrated compliance with performance schedules. Project information for this evaluation factor should be for the same projects listed above for evaluation factors 1 and 2 **(15%)**

(5) Specific internal quality control procedures proposed for projects of this nature. Firm will be evaluated on the acceptability of their internal quality control program used to ensure technical accuracy and discipline coordination of plans and specifications. **(15%)**

Selection Process

Phase 1: Each firm initially will be evaluated based upon information provided in the Selection Criteria listed above. From such review, firms receiving the highest ranking will be the firms chosen to participate in Phase 2, the second phase of the selection process. The County reserves the right to reject any and all statements of qualifications. also reserves the right to waive any irregularities in the statements of qualifications.

Phase 2: The firms who are chosen for Phase 2 of the selection process may be required to make a presentation. Firms will be notified if presentations will be required and given the dates and times reserved for the presentations. The County reserves the right to establish additional rules and procedures for the presentations and for the interview process.

Final Selection: The County will negotiate a contract with the top rated firm as selected by the County. If a contract cannot be successfully negotiated with the top rated firm, the County will proceed to the second rated firm. The County reserves the right to reject any and all statements of qualifications.

Submittal Requirements

Firms responding to this Request for Qualifications are requested to submit five (5) copies of the Standard Form 330 or submit electronically to kcaison@nhcgov.com. If submitting electronically, please put **“RFQ-2015-20897-Carolina Courtyard”** in the subject line of the email.

The closing date for this announcement is September 10, 2014 at 4:00 PM EST.

The successful firm must have the capability of receiving and submitting all documents in an electronic format. Also, successful firm must have Internet access for browsing and receipt of electronic documents via Email.

This is not a request for proposal, and there is no solicitation document or package or plans and specifications to be issued as a result of this announcement.

Insurance Requirements

A. Commercial General Liability

1. Firm shall maintain Commercial General Liability and if necessary, Commercial Umbrella Liability insurance with a total limit of not less than \$1,000,000 each occurrence for bodily injury and property damage. If such CGL insurance contains a general aggregate limit, it shall apply separately to this project/location or the general aggregate shall be twice the required limit.
2. CGL insurance shall be written on Insurance Services Office (ISO) "occurrence" form CG 00 01 covering Commercial General Liability or its equivalent and shall cover the liability arising from premises, operations, independent contractors, products-completed operations, personal and advertising injury, and liability assumed under an insured contract (including the tort liability of another assumed in a business contract).
3. New Hanover County, its officers, officials, agents, and employees are to be covered as additional insureds under the CGL by endorsement CG 20 26 or an endorsement providing equivalent coverage as respects to liability arising out of activities performed by or on behalf of the vendor and under the commercial umbrella, if any. The coverage shall contain no special limitations on the scope of protection afforded to New Hanover County, its officers, officials, agents, and employees.
4. The firm's Commercial General Liability insurance shall be primary as New Hanover County, its officers, officials, agents, and employees. Any other insurance or self-insurance maintained by the New Hanover County, its officers, officials, and employees shall be excess of and not contribute with the vendor's insurance.

B. Workers' Compensation and Employer's Liability

1. Firm shall maintain Workers' Compensation as required by the general statutes of the State of North Carolina and Employer's Liability Insurance.
2. The Employer's Liability, and if necessary, Commercial Umbrella Liability insurance shall not be less than \$500,000 each accident for bodily injury

by accident, \$500,000 each employee for bodily injury by disease, and \$500,000 policy limit.

3. The insurer shall agree to waive all rights of subrogation against the New Hanover County, its officers, officials, and employees for losses arising from work performed by the contractor for the New Hanover County.

C. Business Auto Liability

1. Firm shall maintain Business Auto Liability and, if necessary, Commercial Umbrella Liability insurance with a limit of not less than \$1,000,000 each accident.
2. Such insurance shall cover liability arising out of any auto, including owned, hired, and non-owned autos.
3. Business Auto coverage shall be written on ISO form CA 00 01, or a substitute form providing equivalent liability coverage. If necessary, the policy shall be endorsed to provide contractual liability coverage equivalent to that provided in ISO form CA 00 01.
4. The firm's Business Auto Liability insurance shall be primary as respects New Hanover County, its officers, officials, agents, and employees. Any other insurance or self-insurance maintained by the New Hanover County, its officers, officials, and employees shall be excess of and not contribute with the vendor's insurance.

D. Professional Liability Insurance

1. Firm shall maintain in force for the duration of this contract professional liability or errors and omissions liability insurance appropriate to the contractor's profession. Coverage as required in this paragraph shall apply to liability for a professional error, act, or omission arising out of the scope of the contractor's services as defined in this contract. Coverage shall be written subject to limits of not less than \$ 1,000,000 per loss.
2. If coverage required in paragraph 1. above is written on a claims-made basis, the firm warrants that any retroactive date applicable to coverage under the policy precedes the effective date of this contract; and that continuous coverage will be maintained or an extended discovery period will be exercised for a period of 2 years beginning from the time that work under the contract is complete.

Firms may submit their Statement of Qualifications **by** emailing kcaison@nhcgov.com **NO later than 4:00 PM on September 10, 2014**. If emailing, please put "**RFQ-2015-20897-Carolina Courtyard**" in the subject line of the email.

The successful firm must have the capability of receiving and submitting all documents in an electronic format. Also, successful firm must have Internet access for browsing and receipt of electronic documents via Email.

E-Verify

Contractors and their subcontractors with 25 or more employees as defined in Article 2 of Chapter 64 of the NC General Statutes must comply with E-Verify requirements to contract with governmental units. E-Verify is a Federal program operated by the United States Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies, or any successor or equivalent program used to verify the work authorization of newly hired employees pursuant to federal law. Please understand that Contractors, as defined above, must use E-Verify. Therefore, all contractors must be in compliance with the E-Verify requirements to enter into contracts with New Hanover County.

Right to Reject

The County reserves the right to reject any and all submittals received in response to this request.

[New Hanover County Public Library](#) seeks proposals for building-ready designs to transform an outdoor courtyard next to Main Library at 3rd and Chestnut Streets in downtown Wilmington into an interactive learning space accessible from our children's room on the library's second floor.

Overview

The Community

Geographically the 2nd smallest of North Carolina's 100 counties, New Hanover County ranks in the top ten in terms of population and projected growth. Wilmington is a popular tourist destination and a desirable place to live as described by the [Wilmington Chamber of Commerce](#):

Nestled between the Cape Fear River and Atlantic Ocean, Wilmington, North Carolina strikes an enviable balance between a casual lifestyle and global business opportunities...Every day is an opportunity for a beach vacation only minutes away... holding a business meeting in an outdoor cafe... or welcoming a new neighbor and their customs. With the state's largest National Register Historic District, Wilmington has a keen sense of tradition and preservation, as well as a need to push beyond the conventional.

Capitalizing on the rich history and white collar appeal of its downtown district, Wilmington recently completed a North 3rd Street renovation project with paving, curb and median improvements. Responding to BB&T's announced intent to construct and anchor a 5-story office building on North 3rd Street, John Hinnant, a broker at the Maus Warwick Matthews commercial real estate firm said, "Third Street is going to become our civic and financial center" ([StarNewsOnline](#)).

Main Library is the cornerstone of our New Hanover county library system, and the library remains dedicated to serving the downtown Wilmington community at its present location for years to come. In order to do so, we need to create a pleasant and inviting exterior that complements the neighborhood's urban renewal efforts.

The Organization: History

The library has its origins in the 18th century private collections of citizens such as attorney Edward Moseley and Revolutionary statesman William Hooper. Volumes from both collections can still be found in the rare book section of the library's widely known and highly respected Local History collection. By the middle of the 19th century, the area's first library association was created to provide broader access to printed material, and in 1906 with the help of the North Carolina Sorosis, a free public library was established.

Main Library, the library's central facility at 201 Chestnut Street in historic downtown Wilmington, opened at its current location in 1981, occupying a renovated Belk-Beery department store. Today, in

response to demographic and societal changes, the New Hanover County Public Library system has an additional three branch libraries and is recognized as one of North Carolina's strongest library systems.

The Organization (see Appendix A for Strategic Plan)

The mission of New Hanover county Public Library is: *to enrich and enhance the quality of life of each individual we touch. Our vision is: an exciting destination where people gather, ideas flourish, and the information and technology resources needed for a community to prosper are made freely available.*

We share the strategic priorities of New Hanover County Government: Superior Education and Workforce; Superior Public Health & Public Safety; and Intelligent Growth & Economic Development. These priorities drive our decision-making process and inform our planning.

Carolina Courtyard

Located at the corner of 3rd and Chestnut Streets, the Carolina Courtyard adjacent to Main Library should serve as a neighborhood anchor for Wilmington's 3rd Street corridor, attracting families, government employees and business people. Unfortunately, this strategic bit of real estate has yet to achieve its potential.



1981 – 1994: An Eyesore

At the time of Main Library's opening in 1981, a gas station occupied the corner lot. In 1990, the owner proposed expanding the service station and adding a convenience store on the site.

In response, concerned library supporters as well as downtown businesses and residents formed the Urban Park Downtown Advisory Committee. County Commissioners were amenable to buying the property for a park if the group could raise \$150,000 to help in the effort. In February 1993, grading began on the park when Carolina Savings Bank (now Carolina Bank) and BB&T donated \$100,000 to the cause. In 1994, when the Carolina Courtyard was created, the park was a welcome addition to intercity revitalization.

1994 – 2000: A Jewel

Extending from the library entrance on Chestnut Street to the library parking lot on Grace and 3rd Streets, the Courtyard provided community space with an outdoor stage, paved walkways and a garden

of azaleas that bloomed in show-stopping profusion each spring. The stage was used for family entertainment programs, children's programs, and formal presentations. The grounds were set up with tables and chairs for a yearly volunteer recognition event in the spring.



2000 – 2009: A Setback

In the early 2000's when the County constructed a judicial annex, the City of Wilmington required the County to provide sufficient parking to accommodate the new construction. The site chosen for the deck was Main Library's parking lot and a portion of the Carolina Courtyard. When construction finished in 2003, the Courtyard, which lost a quarter of its space, sat in the shadow of the 7-story garage. Soon the space began to exhibit signs of urban decay. Graffiti, loitering and litter became ongoing problems.



2009 – 2012: Focus on Blight Mitigation

In 2009, the Library Advisory Board, concerned about the worsening neglected landscape outside Main Library, created a Grounds Enhancement Committee to study options. In a show of support, in 2010 the Library Foundation sponsored a preliminary design study by B & O Landscape Architects focusing on modest landscaping improvements.

Over the next two years the Grounds Enhancement Committee, which included library staff, Board members and stakeholders, met with B & O to consider affordable landscape design options. Environmentally responsible options such as rainwater capture and native plantings were considered, as well as artistic features such as mosaics highlighting local history and murals by local artists. Unfortunately, after two years of regular meetings and B & O's completion of design sketches, no further action was taken due to a lack of funds.

2013 – 2014: Addressing Strategic Priorities with Library and Community Space

In 2013, with the economy in an upswing, County management committed to partial funding for Courtyard renovations out of a County park bond referendum passed in 2006. With the prospect of attracting donors to supplement County support, the Library invited B & O Design to consider more ambitious design concepts for converting the Courtyard into library space limited to library customers and accessible only during open hours.

Once again, a team of library staff and stakeholders was assembled to brainstorm options. This time, City of Wilmington Urban Designer, Allen Davis and County Long Range Planner, Jennifer Rigby, contributed. With their expertise, early concepts of a walled outdoor library room were quickly discarded in favor of a more welcoming and open community space with minimal visual barriers.

New Hanover County strategic priorities of education and intelligent growth became a focal point of team discussions, and by the time the planning process ended, design options included a deck and outdoor stairway from the 2nd floor children's room leading to an interactive outdoor learning and performance space. Landscaped reading and study areas were suggested for adult use, and streetside parklets were added for outdoor exhibits or community gardens.

Context

National and Local Focus: Early Childhood Literacy

President Barack Obama, in the State of the Union address, February 12, 2013, said that “In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children...studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own.”

Locally, New Hanover County is committed to providing a rich learning environment for all young children. During the kickoff for the 2014-2015 budget planning process, County Manager Chris Coudriet announced six 5-year strategic goals. One of those goals is to ensure that at least 80% of children enter kindergarten ready to read. NHCPL is actively engaged in providing programs and services geared to early literacy, including an outreach initiative (NHC Ready to Read), interactive Story Places at all branches, and a range of organized activities for young children. The Carolina Courtyard design will bring these efforts outdoors with a protected environment for interactive learning and an alternative venue for children’s programs.

National and Local Focus: Childhood Obesity

The Centers for Disease Control reports that the rate of childhood obesity in the United States has doubled in the past 30 years. As part of the effort to change that trend, Michele Obama’s Let’s Move campaign encourages children to engage in outdoor activity, which “helps kids maintain a healthy weight, boosts their immunity and bone health and lowers stress.”

New Hanover County is targeting this national health issue with a 5-year strategic goal of an 8% reduction in childhood obesity. According to the Let’s Move website, “one of the easiest and most enjoyable ways to meet a goal of 60 minutes of active and vigorous play each day is by playing outside.” The Carolina Courtyard design will include space for children and families to enjoy outdoor play.

A Worldwide Trend: Libraries as Maker Spaces

The Maker Culture, which started as a grassroots movement (“Tinkering Makes Comeback Amid Crisis” *Wall Street Journal* 11/13/2009), was identified early on as model for learning. President Obama, in his remarks on the Educate to Innovate campaign, said that makers “see the promise of being the makers of things, and not just the consumers of things” (Obama, 2009). Libraries, already in the business of providing space and resources for communities with diverse interests, quickly embraced the concept. Brian Kenney writes, “Based on the idea that libraries are for creation, not just consumption, maker spaces don’t just upend the normal programming model -- they have the potential to reinvent the public library” (*Publisher’s Weekly* 4/1/2013). Lauren Britton writes that “Maker spaces support learning in an informal, play-focused environment that can cultivate an interest in science, technology, and design.” She goes on to say that “someone who wants to do something because it is fun is more likely to find an activity to be meaningful than someone who is doing something for a reward or to learn something” (*Library Journal*, 10/1/12).”

At NHCPL, we are designing children’s spaces and children’s programs around the maker model. Main Library’s Story Place features a do-it-yourself puppet theater, a green screen and video equipment, and

a tablet with story-making software. Library programs include Lego-building, film and rap clubs, and preschool math and science.

Set in the Carolina Courtyard, Story Park will be an outdoor story and exploration space encouraging physical activity and stimulating literacy through interactive play--the ultimate maker space experience for young children.

Basic Design Scope of Services

The Carolina Courtyard project has been divided into 3 phases to clarify the expectations for separate parts of the project.

We are interested in proposals for one or all of the phases at this time.

New Hanover County will provide a full survey of the Carolina Courtyard parcel with property boundaries, utility locations and spot elevations as a basis for design work.

PHASE I Building Exterior

- A. Opening in the east side of the Library building at the main floor to provide access to enclosed children's Story Park
- B. Opening in the east side of the Library building at the second floor level
- C. Second floor outdoor deck for reading and study
- D. Stairway from the deck down to the Carolina Courtyard
- E. Enclosure compatible with PHASE III Landscape Improvements to accommodate PHASE II Story Park

PHASE II Children's Story Park

- A. Outdoor space (Story Park) adjacent to the building of approximately 4500-6000 square feet enclosed for safety but aesthetically integrated into the Carolina Courtyard
- B. Layout of children's Story Park in the above space to include maker space and performance space

PHASE III Landscape Improvements

- C. Space outside the Story Park as a zone for adult reading and conversation
- D. Sections of Courtyard perimeter divided into parklets with potential for community group "adoption"

Each design phase to include:

Schematic Design

Conceptual design: section and elevation studies.

Deliverables: schematic plan and sections

Design Development

Development of detailed design drawings: plan, section and elevation.

Deliverables: design development plan and sections

Construction Documents

Development of documents for permits and construction: plans, sections, elevations, details and specifications to use for permitting, bid negotiation and construction.

Deliverables: Construction drawings and project specifications as required for permit and construction.

Desired Features

PHASE I Building Exterior



- Outdoor deck at the second story level. Available for reading and study, the deck would provide shaded seating areas



- Outdoor stairway access from the second story to an interactive children's space in the Courtyard



- Ground level access from the library's first floor to the Courtyard

PHASE II Story Park



- Fence or other protective feature to separate the children's area from the surrounding outdoor space



- Maker Space





➤ Performance Space



PHASE III Landscape Improvements



➤ Space for reading, study and conversation



➤ Shared community parklets

Appendix A: Library Strategic Plan

Our Mission

To enrich and enhance the quality of life of each individual we touch.

We are passionate about:

- Creating a caring, inviting and welcoming place
- Developing the technology and information resources needed for people of all ages to Learn, Grow and Prosper
- Preserving and making accessible our rich history and diverse cultural heritage



Strategic Process and Alignment

In 2010, New Hanover County Public Library engaged in a strategy design and planning process. Representatives from the Library Advisory Board, Friends of the Library, Library Foundation, Staff and Community set out to:

- Define a bold and compelling vision of the future
- Decide on strategic priorities to strengthen library resources and exceed community expectations
- Ensure that the Library's Mission and Vision remain vitally relevant by reviewing the Strategy Map on a regular basis

Today, this process continues to inform our decision-making as we align our priorities with those of New Hanover County, developing facilities and services to meet the needs of our community in a rapidly changing world.

Strategic Result

Creating Library Experiences that Matter!



Strategic Priorities

With adequate and committed staff, library advocates and volunteers, we will manage library operations efficiently and effectively by leveraging resources to serve the priorities of our community.

Committed staff

- Recruit and Place the Right Talent
- Effectively Train and Engage the Workforce
- Build an Effective Organization

Manage library operations

- Continuously Improve Facilities
- Provide Exceptional Customer Service
- Review Strategic Alignment
- Maximize Library Operations
- Strengthen Stakeholder Relationships

Leveraging resources

- Provide Cutting Edge Technology
- Develop Sustainable Funding
- Build Strong Partnerships
- Develop Quality Information Resources and Collections
- Add Facilities and Staff to Meet Growth

Serve the priorities of our community

- Be a Welcoming and Dynamic Destination
- Provide a Wealth of Resources
- Foster Literacy and Technology Competency
- Deliver Exceptional Services and Experiences

For more information

New Hanover County Public Library www.nhclibrary.org

Harry Tuchmajer, Library Director / 910-798-6309 / tuchmajer@nhcpol.com

New Hanover County Government www.nhcpol.com

New Hanover County Public Library

Creating Library Experiences that Matter!



Our Vision

An exciting destination where people gather, ideas flourish, and the information and technology resources needed for a community to prosper are made freely available

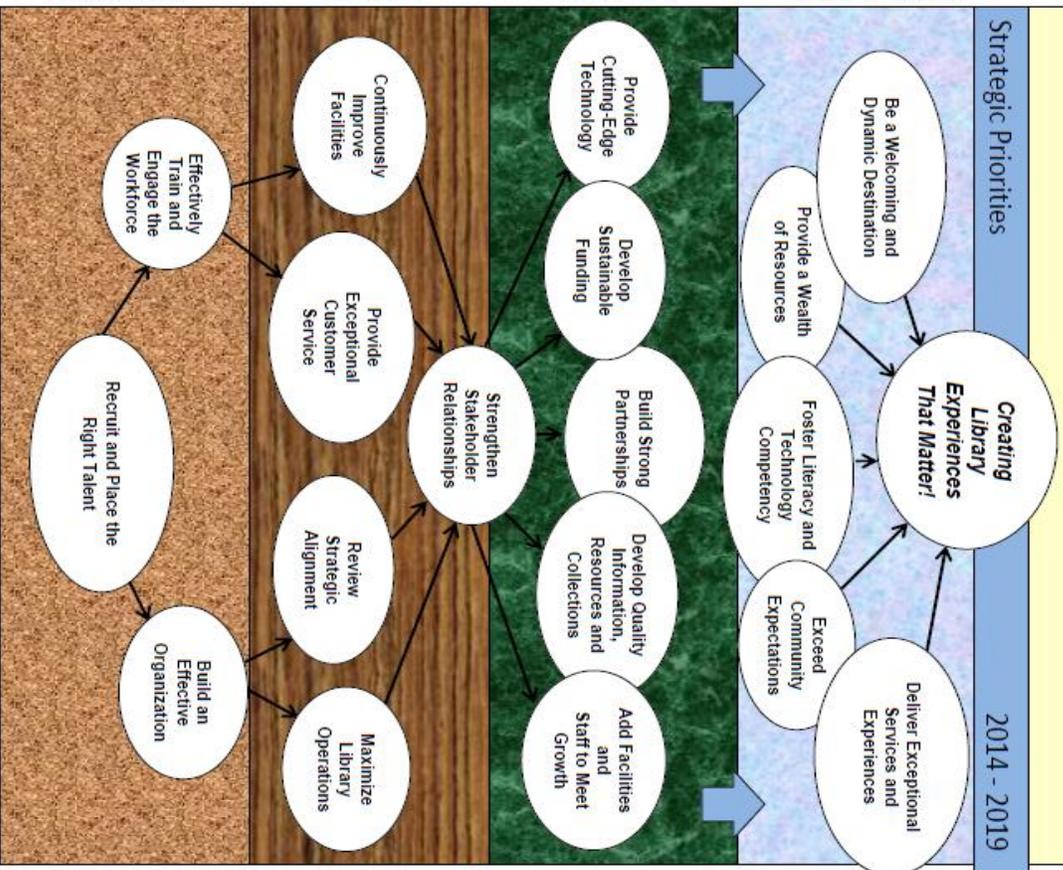
Our Shared Values

Professionalism ▲ Integrity ▲ Innovation
Stewardship ▲ Accountability

Our Mission: To enrich and enhance the quality of life of each individual we touch.

Strategic Priorities

2014 - 2019



Our Shared Values: Professionalism, Integrity, Innovation, Stewardship and Accountability

Our Vision: An exciting destination where people gather, ideas flourish, and the information and technology resources needed for a community to prosper are made freely available.

Key Performance Indicators

Strategic Alignment

Customer Experience

- Circulation
- Number of library visits
- Library visits per capita
- Number of adult and children's programs
- Number of internet sessions
- Visits to the Library webpage

Superior Education & Workforce

Preparing students to be successful in a 21st century world / enhancing the self-sufficiency of individuals and families / improving community literacy and workforce readiness skills

- Story Place
- NHC Ready to Read
- LEGO League Grant
- Teacher request service
- PNC Grow up Great

Outcome: More New Hanover County children enter kindergarten ready to learn

Stewardship

- Use of online databases
- Number of reference transactions
- Reference transactions per capita
- Circulation per capita
- Percent of budget funded locally

Superior Public Health & Public Safety

Reduce and prevent crime / increase the safety and security of the community / reduce health risks and diseases

- Seed Library
- Consumer Health programs and resources
- Story Walk
- Fire Services collection

Outcome: New Hanover County's rate of obesity is reduced and healthy living practices increase

Intelligent Growth & Economic Development

Promote a strong diverse economy and high quality job growth / create and support a vibrant and culturally diverse community that encourages private investment / support a planned environment that enhances community and preserves and protects our natural resources

- Veterans' Workforce Solutions
- Local History preservation and access
- Job labs
- Gale Courses
- Foundation Center
- Facility enhancement
- Smart Investing@Your Library

Outcome: A stronger tax base is created resulting in better jobs for New Hanover County residents

Operations

- Cost of reference transactions
- Cost to circulate an item
- Cost of materials per capita
- Percent of circulation transactions performed by the customer
- Average attendance at children's programs

The Organization

- Material and information fill rate
- Customer turnover rate
- Customer satisfaction rate
- Per capita expenditure

Appendix B: Sample B & O Design Schematic



Appendix C: Middle Country Public Library Nature Explorium

“Exposure to natural environments through play leads to exploration and discovery, engaging a child’s physical and mental abilities in a holistic approach to learning and literacy.”

Discovering the Nature Explorium

Posted Wednesday, February 23, 2011 - 08:50

Learning in the out-of-doors as part of a library visit

By Tracy Delgado-LaStella and Sandra Feinberg



Libraries, which are always searching for new ways to connect with their communities, have offered reading gardens and outdoor storytelling to foster a connection with nature and the environment. Today, via a library’s outdoor learning space, librarians are participating in the growing movement to connect children with the environment. The [Nature Explorium](#) at the Middle Country Public Library (MCPL) in Centereach, New York, is just such a space.

There’s a growing awareness that children need access to public places and outdoor learning opportunities that enhance their health and well-being, provide educationally appropriate formal and informal play activities, promote a direct experience with nature, and foster a sense of community and responsibility for the environment. Exposure to natural environments through play leads to exploration and discovery, engaging a child’s physical and mental abilities in a holistic approach to learning and literacy. The hope is that linking early education and nature literacy will lead to an understanding of and appreciation for the natural world.

A visual, hands-on, multisensory approach to literacy reaches an audience of diverse learners. A recent article in *Museum* notes that “most students . . . are visual learners who learn best by seeing . . . The rest are tactile or kinesthetic learners, and they’re the ones who start smiling in a discovery room. They learn best by touching, feeling, and experiencing.” Learning in the out-of-doors provides an opportunity for children to learn and reinforce valuable life experiences, including the development of observation, visual, spatial, and social skills.

But access and informal learning are not enough. Based on research conducted by the Dimensions Educational Research Foundation (Dimensions), the value of comprehensive nature education for young children goes beyond simply having well-designed outdoor spaces. Children benefit most in programs that have educators (including librarians) who are knowledgeable about how to use these types of spaces as an integral part of daily learning.

Public libraries as local community institutions can bring together early learning, family-centered practice, nature literacy, and sustainable communities and, at the same time, stay true to their mission of sharing local resources for the common good. For the past half-century, librarians have consciously expanded their community role and increased services for children and teens, including the creation of specially designed spaces that are developmentally and educationally appropriate. A children’s outdoor learning environment that is contiguous with the library becomes another learning space that takes advantage of the library’s public accessibility, trained public service staff, and inclusive approach to serving the recreational and educational needs of *all* families.

Creating the learning space

In 2007, MCPL staff became involved with the Long Island Nature Collaborative for Kids (LINCK)—a group of early childhood, museum, and library professionals who actively promote the development of parks, outdoor classrooms, and community places for nature education. To introduce the concept to Long Island, LINCK invited Dimensions to conduct an introductory seminar on creating outdoor classrooms for children under its [Nature Explore](#) project. During this session,

the idea was born that libraries—like childcare centers, youth centers, churches, and schools—could provide a community place for outdoor classrooms.

In March 2008, Dimensions conducted a two-day hands-on workshop at the library for landscape professionals, architects, LINCK members, and library staff. Participants became knowledgeable about the field-tested guiding principles and recommended areas of exploration within a nature classroom. They created idea boards and plans, which resulted in the initial concept design for the Nature Explorium. Shortly after, the library convened a design team, including a landscape architect from the U.S. Forest Service, that completed the schematic plan and formed an advisory committee that helped with program development. On June 23, 2010, the Nature Explorium officially opened to the public.

Features

The library was fortunate to have a fenced-in 5,000-square-foot area adjacent to the children's room, which was used sporadically for programming. This available space set the parameters for the Explorium. It was decided early on that the library would adopt the Dimensions-recommended learning areas, including a climbing/crawling area, messy materials area, building area, nature art area, music and performance area, planting area, gathering/conversation place, reading area, and water feature. Transitioning visitors from the library into the Explorium required creating a welcoming entry as well.

For the Explorium, the library also had to consider naming and identification, visibility, variety, durability, visual appeal, and the regional significance of construction materials and programmatic elements. To make the Explorium mesh with the library setting, staff identified certain features that could be localized and were “institutionally significant.” Climb It, Dig It, Plant It, Read It, Create It, Play It, and Splash It became the Explorium area identifiers. Instead of a traditional brick path (listing donor names), our Book Path allows donors to select their favorite children's book or quote. The Friends Bench (sponsored by our Friends group) displays native Long Island animals. READ plaques, hung creatively around the space, display donors' favorite quotes about Reading, Environment, Adventure, and Discovery. Donors' names are permanently exhibited in the entryway.

Programs and staffing

Staff immersed themselves in the underlying principles and practices of nature literacy and focused on age-appropriate activities in the Explorium. Educational programs, both group-oriented (formal) and self-directed (informal), focus on preschool and elementary-age children and their caregivers. A staff member—a page or clerk—is assigned every hour the space is open for use, and additional staff help when group programs are offered. Young children are not allowed in the area without caregivers, who provide many extra (and happy) hands to help keep order. Activities are devised to entice the child, but with an eye toward the adult caregiver as well. Some of the special issues that need to be managed include the balance of formal and informal activities and inclement weather conditions.

Programming is one of the most powerful elements of the Explorium's mission. It holds the most hope for libraries that wish to be part of this movement. For libraries that have little or no outdoor space—though an outdoor classroom can be created out of a parking lot—programming offers a pathway to the Nature Explore movement. Engaging children and caregivers in nature literacy can be done simply by:

- Educating staff and providing programs on basic nature literacy facts, e.g., how water works, how plants grow, what library resources can help children understand nature.
- Developing a temporary outdoor space that can be used for programming. (Before the Explorium was created, MCPL purchased easily erected canopies and offered outdoor programs periodically.)
- Organizing a parent/teacher collection of books that provide ideas on outdoor activities for use in a childcare, community, or home setting.
- Conducting storytime programs that focus on books about the environment or natural settings, e.g., planting, growing, farming, parks.

The budget for the first two years of design and operation was \$340,000, which includes design development and construction, project management, and initial programming. The library spent \$180,000 to complete the design development, initial space preparation, and basic construction. The balance was raised by the MCPL Foundation and Friends. It is important to note that many past and new donors stepped up to the plate in support of the Explorium. Whatever the reason, it struck a chord with many supporters and, most importantly, for the staff. The Book Path brick

campaign was particularly appealing to those who love books or were affected by stories or poems as parents or when they were growing up.

Results

After three years of planning and construction and a year of fundraising and program development, the Nature Explorium opened to an immediate and resounding success. Children and caregivers took to it naturally. Favorite spaces—the Splash It and Dig It areas—engage children in water play and good old-fashioned digging dirt. Caregivers comment regularly that they are so grateful that the library created the Explorium and they enjoy being in the out-of-doors with their children.

Statistics demonstrate our success:

- 70 children's programs were held, with 1,800 attendees from June through October.
- 840 children and their parents attended Universal Pre-K class visits during the month of October.
- 12 tours for staff from other libraries and youth services centers were provided.
- 340 participants attended Celebrate It! the official donor-recognition event.

Judging from our initial season, the Nature Explorium provides a new and exciting dimension to the library landscape of services. It connects library staff with nature literacy and environmental concerns and engages children in exploration, discovery, and multisensory learning. By providing this outdoor area for the community, the library offers a unique way to connect literacy, learning, and an appreciation for nature as a regular part of the library visit.

TRACY DELGADO-LaSTELLA, coordinator of Youth Services and Museum Corner at Middle Country Public Library in Centereach, New York, and member of the steering committee of the Long Island Nature Collaborative for Kids, was instrumental in the development of the Nature Explorium and currently administers it.

SANDRA FEINBERG, director of the Middle Country Public Library and author of eight books on libraries, has overseen the creation of innovative projects including the Nature Explorium.

Appendix D: Additional Photos

Nature Explorium

Middle County Public Library

<http://www.natureexplorium.org/photos-explorium.html>

