SUMMARY REPORT
MADISON LIBRARY COMMUNITY CONVERSATION
August 19, 2014

On August 19, 2014, 20 residents of Madison, New Hampshire gathered to engage in a dialogue facilitated by NH Listens focused on the question, *How can our Library best serve the need of residents and visitors to Madison?* The purpose of the conversation was to inform the Madison Library Strategic Planning Committee and the Library Trustees regarding options and preferences for the future of the Library.

Participants met in three small groups, each led by a trained facilitator from NH Listens. The conversations lasted for almost two hours, allowing participants to discuss a range of topics related to the role of the Library in the community, the results of a survey completed by 162 individuals prior to the conversation, and the strategic direction for the Library. A summary of the comments, views, and priorities expressed most often by participants is provided below. The summary is organized around each of the key questions that participants were asked to consider.

What do you value most about this community?
What role should the Library play in helping to make Madison a great place to live and learn?

The rural, friendly nature of Madison. Madison was described as a "real" community, small enough in size for people to know each other and still relying on town hall meetings to conduct business. There was some concern expressed about the aging demographic profile of Madison, with fewer young families moving in lately. Since it is the older residents who bear the brunt of paying property taxes, there was concern about the ability of the town to keep supporting the Library as those residents have limited ability to pay higher taxes. The natural beauty of the town is highly valued, focused on Silver Lake and the surrounding mountains and forests.

Concerns about communication. It is difficult to create a central communication source in Madison, partly because the Conway daily newspaper does not consistently cover Madison news. The three distinct districts in Madison—the town center, Silver Lake, and Edelweiss—are physically separate and are made up of different populations, making it harder to create communication and interactions that bring the whole community together.

The role of the Library in the community. The Library was described as the only social and civic center in Madison, and the only place that has the capacity to disseminate information widely. As a resource for information, literature, and technology, the Library is highly valued and seen as a place that can both respect and sustain the diverse interests, values, and needs of the entire community. As a meeting place, the Library helps to bind the community together. The Library's resources, especially the expertise of the Librarian, are highly valued and seen as responsive to the interests of the town,

especially its older residents who tend to be the biggest users. Participants commented on the ease of access to books and technology and the prompt availability of materials not held in Madison.

How would you describe the Madison Library to a friend?

Participants had very positive views of the Library, its resources and programs, and the Librarian. The Library was described as an "under-utilized great resource" with comprehensive holdings and services and the ability to obtain additional materials promptly. One person said, "This is where I go after a cold rainy week. You know you will be welcome." The staff was described as "creative and eager," willing to try new ideas. The Library is seen as an "anchor" to the community, one of the only places where everyone can go to learn, see friends, and find resources.   There is some sense that the Library is "crammed" in terms of space use, but generally participants find the physical space to be appealing and comfortable.

What do you notice about the results from the survey?

Participants noted the generally older age of those who completed the survey (over one-third were 68 or older, three-quarters were over 46). They wondered what this meant in terms of use and preferences on the part of younger residents and visitors, since there was little input from these groups. People were not aware of how often the Library is used for meetings, presentations, and community gatherings. They expected to see higher rates of computer use for access to the worldwide web. Greater use of the internet at home may partially explain this.

How can the Madison Library best serve the needs of residents and visitors?

Participants in the three small groups generated many ideas for ways that the Library could meet the needs of residents and visitors. These ideas can be organized around three primary topics or themes—school partnerships, financial and resources issues, and community and global connections.

Creating Learning Opportunities

Participants urged the Library to have an emphasis on learning for K-12 students and all ages to promote lifelong learning. Examples could include reading programs throughout the year such as those that currently are provided in the summer, tutorial programs for homework assistance, and other ways to attract students to the Library and support their learning. In general, there appear to be opportunities to increase the interactions between the Madison Library and the school library in order to support student learning and share resources. Likewise, viewing adult users of the Library as learners can help to guide decisions about resources and programs aimed at the whole community.

Resource sharing and finances

Participants thought there would be ways to share resources with other town libraries as a means to save money and expand access to materials. Overall, participants felt that it is important to spend the Library's limited resources on books for pleasure and information.

Participants recognize that there is limited staff time currently, due to funding.   They expressed hope that there will be sufficient staff time to accomplish the goals of the new strategic plan.

Community and global connections

The most discussed topic of the evening, across all three groups, involved the Library's role as a community gathering place and intellectual resource. As noted above, participants place a very high value on the Library as a community hub, a communication center, and a link to the larger world. The Library should fulfill its conventional role, which is still important to many people, and create opportunities for games and entertainment that appeal to all ages. Such activities should be creative, "outside the box," and the source of new ideas and activities in the town. People can use the Library to share hobbies, information, and experiences in ways that support its community connection role. Such programs could be offered during the day in addition to the evening scheduling now typically used. Pot luck meals, coffees, movies, and community meetings are all ways to bring people in and support their use of the Library (and their view of its valuable role in Madison). Participants want "big comfortable chairs and a quiet warm space to read or study."

Concern remains about how to make the Library a resource for all ages. As one group reported, "The library is a wonderful resource and community hub, yet there is concern about how to reach a wider demographic in terms of age and parts of town." Outreach in the form of a book mobile that could serve the Silver Lake community and hosting a Madison community exchange that would support communication on-line were suggested as means to create greater accessibility.

Finally, participants thought about what the Library would look like in ten years. One concern was how to make decisions about technology investments, not knowing what might emerge over the long term. The priority should continue to be on access to books, including audio books, large print books, and picture books. There is concern about overemphasizing electronic vs. traditional print materials. As is the case now, participants expressed hope that in 2024 the staff and volunteers can offer personalized help in relating to the world beyond Madison in terms of information and ideas.