

Earlier this year, the Newfield Public Library (NPL) was one of 200 libraries to receive the [The American Library Association's Libraries Transforming Communities \(LTC\): Focus on Small and Rural Libraries](#) grant. The initiative is offered in partnership with the Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) and encourages libraries in small and rural communities to apply for grant funding to help them address issues of concern in their communities. Participating libraries receive training in how to lead conversations through a free ALA e-course on basic facilitation skills; host at least one conversation with community members on a chosen topic; and receive \$3,000 to support community engagement efforts. NPL used its award to cover staff hours to facilitate a survey and community conversations, renew virtual meeting license, and to fund a portion of the 2021 Newfield History and Activity Center project.

A key piece of NPL's focus was its Check-In survey and Community Conversation. The library designed a four question survey and distributed it through several channels. Community members could answer it online or in-person and it also went out in water bills to those living in the hamlet. NPL also had many informal conversations with folks in the library and at the Newfield PowerHouse event.

The library's survey happened alongside the Town of Newfield's survey about hamlet revitalization and the two groups have been able to share information. The goal of the library survey was to identify community needs and to inform future library programming that could support these needs. We asked the following questions:

1. What do you like most about living here?
2. What would you change about the community if you could?
3. What programs, activities, and services would you like made available in our community?
4. How do you find out about community events, news, activities, meetings, groups, etc. happening in Newfield?

Based on the survey results, respondents felt strongly about the small town and rural nature of Newfield and viewed that as an asset. Respondents also identified the lack of businesses and recreational activities as areas they would like to change about their community.

An often heard comment is "I wish there was more to do in Newfield." The library decided to explore this by asking community members what programs, activities, and services they would like to see offered. On June 29 the community was invited to attend an in-person Community Conversation at the library to talk more in depth. The evening started by asking attendees how long they have lived in Newfield. The responses ranged from newcomers (6 months) to folks whose family goes back several generations.

Library Director Sue Chaffee then posed the question: "Why is it important to have things to do in Newfield?" The answers revealed several reasons why community events are vital, especially to the overall health and wellness of residents. Local events help residents form connections with each other as well as their "hometown" creating a sense of shared identity. In addition to serving current residents, offering a variety of opportunities and experiences makes the town inviting for new residents as well as businesses, and visitors. Activities can also be sources of revenue for the town and its citizens.

After exploring the idea that activities are more than just something to do, the conversation turned to discussion of possible activities, identifying partnerships and resources in the community, and ways to make some of these ideas happen.

Some highlights of the evening's conversation with the community included:

- Athletic and recreational opportunities (pickleball, golf, archery, fly fishing, roller skating, nature trails).
- Highlighting Newfield's rural character, agriculture, history: building trails, farmers market, flea market.

- Intergenerational and family-friendly activities/events such as outdoor movies, street fairs, bingo, trivia night, community dinners, community gardens, parents night out with childcare, field trips.
- The importance of coordinating with other organizations like the Town, School, Newfield Rec, Masons, Lions, Beautification Committee, Rod and Gun Club, Arnot Forest, TCAT, Ithaca Youth Bureau.
- Better utilize school facilities, especially when school is not in session.
- How to address roadblocks, including naysayers.
- Encouraging folks to volunteer and connecting people with opportunities they are passionate about.
- The need to improve communication including a centralized community calendar, updated directory.
- Many residents have a strong desire to be involved and move ideas forward to improve our community.

The library has started the conversation and is committed to help continue it. In addition to this article, the library will be providing more survey results and opportunities for the community to get involved. “The library is here to serve the community and this initiative is one of the tools we are using to improve and guide our long term plan”. Contact Sue at newfieldlibrary@gmail.com if you would like to join the conversation!