

## **The Johnson County Public Library: A History and Trajectory**

### **Viewing Library Events in the Context of County-wide Development**

The events and turning points of an organization always have more meaning when viewed in the context of the surrounding environment. If we accept the idea that an organization is organic, that is to say a living thing, then it is true that its growth and development will always be influenced by its surroundings. The environment should impact its size and shape as well as spirit and character as it matures through the years. The following commentary attempts to link steps in the library's journey to changes in Johnson County from 1903 to the present day, dividing the times into eras.

#### **1903 to 1959 – Franklin as the County's Center of Influence**

For the first 60 years of the library's history, the town of Franklin, which is the county seat and home of Franklin College, was singularly the center of decision making and leadership for Johnson County. Beginning even before the year 1903, leading citizens in Franklin gathered together to discuss their desire for a library and finally met with Mayor Dixon in 1903 to discuss the matter of a public library. On May 5, 1911 members of women's clubs in Franklin canvassed the community and raised \$1,850 for a library, which opened that year as one of several services in the old Hulsman block at the southwest corner of Jefferson and Water streets.

In 1916, with a Carnegie grant, Franklin opened a new library on Madison and Home Avenue. By 1929 the Franklin Library was hailed as the busiest in the state in relation to the size of the community. By 1958 it housed a collection of more than 25,000 books which was sizeable for the day, and serviced both Franklin and the surrounding area of farms and smaller towns.

#### **1960-1986 - The Era of Negotiating County-wide Library Services**

The next 25 years in Johnson County was an era of rapid change. The expansion of the suburban areas around Greenwood overtook the growth of the city of Franklin. The development of Greenwood Park Mall, the opening of Interstate 65 and the Greenwood airport development

attracted people from across the county as well as from southern Marion County to the Greenwood area. The growth of Greenwood was further fueled by the advent of school desegregation in Indianapolis. In the library world, state funding became available for bookmobiles and outreach services to smaller rural communities.

In 1964, an addition was opened to the Franklin Library and the Children's Department nearly doubled in size as part of the remodeling. In 1965, Greenwood, Franklin and Edinburgh signed a contract for total service to the county, and the new Franklin bookmobile took to the road in 1966. In 1967, the Johnson County Contractual Library was established. Throughout the decade technologies of the day were added – items such as a duplicating machine and a projection reading machine.

In the 1970's, the first 16mm films were loaned; and services like inter-library loan began. In 1977, the Contractual and the Franklin Library became the Franklin-Johnson County Public Library. In 1979 The Friends of the Franklin-Johnson County Library was incorporated.

The 1980's was a decade of expanding service across the county. In 1980, the White River Library was opened. In 1981, the Library added a computer terminal that was part of a national system for cataloging. That same year the first video collection was launched at the White River Library. In 1982 and 1983 stations were added to serve Bargersville, Trafalgar, Princes Lake, and New Whiteland. In 1984, the first computer was installed for public use and an adult learning center was opened.

### **1987 – 2000 – JCPL Matures to Serve a Growing Population Efficiently**

1990 was a major turning point in the population growth of Johnson County. While the numbers had grown only by a few thousand in each of the preceding decades, the growth from 1990 to 2000 exceeded 30,000. The change was not only in the rate of growth, but also an increase in the diversity of people that it brought to the county – diversity in education levels, work experiences, family structures and ethnicity. Growth continued to be centered more in the northern part of the county with many heads of household commuting to Indianapolis for work.

To accommodate growth, new library buildings were dedicated in White River and in Franklin in 1988. The Clark Elementary station was opened. The new spaces also provided room for a more sophisticated library infrastructure. The Franklin Library now had space to provide centralized cataloging and management services for locations across the county. To recognize the change, the library system was renamed the Johnson County Public Library in 1989. In just a year White River celebrated its 1 millionth customer.

Throughout the 1990's, the library's operating systems were upgraded to match the needs and capabilities of the times. More computers for both public access and staff tasks were added. Franklin and White River Libraries went on-line offering Internet access to the public. In this same era, the Bargersville and Whiteland stations closed as patrons were attracted to libraries with more updated offerings. Then Break-O-Day Branch was added. More technology-based services for the county-wide system were introduced – phone renewal and the website. Programming also increased to include literacy and outreach programs like Baby Talk offered at Johnson Memorial Hospital.

### **2001- NOW – Growth, Uncertainty, and Planning within Limits**

In the new century, Johnson County has continued to grow rapidly, but not at the rate it did in the 1990's, and the development of for-profit businesses has not been anything like the expansion in the 1980's. At the same time, major employers are both coming and going which limits net growth. Both Greenwood and Franklin are in a period of redevelopment in their downtown areas. The new development proposed around new highway ramps west of Bargersville and for the northeast near Interstate 65 is largely "exurban" neighborhoods with mini strip malls and big box stores. These neighborhoods have presented a challenge to leaders when planning future social service models including schools and libraries. In a time of national economic uncertainty, it is difficult to plan. Public needs are going up while public revenue is going down.

JCPL has addressed the challenges of the times by using more demanding strategic planning methods that emphasize balance and accountability. JCPL leaders have been trained to manage both people

and resources responsibly. Open forums have been held to determine the needs of citizens both in their roles as customers to the library and as tax payers.

JCPL, like libraries across the country, continues to use technology to achieve efficiency and keep up with the expectations of readers. EBooks and DVDs became available for check-out. Access to databases expanded. Classes and one-on-one support to use new technologies continues to increase, keeping pace as state government closes offices and directs citizens to link to services through computers in their local public libraries. In 2003 circulation at JCPL exceeded 1 million and continues to grow.

To balance increased services with costs, the Library began to charge fees for use of rooms, to accept credit charges as a way to expedite collection of fines and fees, and to partner with other organizations to share in the costs of providing programming for common audiences.

In 2007, a new library opened in Trafalgar as a way to meet the needs of that town and the large rural population remaining in the southern half of the county. To satisfy the need for space, the JCPL administrative offices and the Learning Center were moved out of the Franklin Library and into a new Library Services Center in downtown Franklin in 2008, creating more room for public services in the Library. In 2009 the Prince's Lake station closed.

In 2012 a referendum on a new library for Franklin was voted down by the citizens of the county. Now, in 2013, JCPL is engaging in a new strategic planning process that will look out over 10 years and project both the needs and the resources available in the county. The challenge is to look with eyes wide open at areas of growth within the county and the areas of stabilization, to determine what services are most needed by each unique community within the county, to optimize opportunities for cost-saving partnerships while avoiding duplication, and to do what is in the common good. The task before the Library now, if we would truly be of service, is to set aside pre-existing assumptions, and take a fresh look at the Library's role within the network of organizations that promote the well-being of the residents of Johnson County.