

Preparing for Strategic Planning

A BCLTA Resource

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Acknowledgements

This document was developed in conversation with information, input, and learnings gathered over years of interacting with BC library trustees, in particular two facilitated group dialogues with trustees from around BC in the late summer of 2020. The knowledge shared in this document does not belong to any one individual and is not the “one true” resources for preparing for strategic planning. It is meant to gather knowledge and share it to the library trustee community in the hopes of complimenting the immense amount of knowledge that trustees bring to public library governance.

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What is a Strategic Planning Preparation Resource?

This resource is designed for public library boards to use before starting a strategic planning process. It provides a series of reflections, considerations, and good practices to help ensure that strategic planning efforts:

- Draw upon best practices and then are adapted to your realities, making them wise practices;
- Responsibly steward the public resources entrusted to you;
- Are adapted to fit the unique context of your library system; and
- Energize the people involved!

This is not a step-by-step guide to strategic planning. There are myriad tools available to library boards that outline the components of strategic planning. BCLTA's Governance Workbook identifies key elements of a strategic plan and there are many books and guides online, some of which are listed in this source.

Examples of Strategic Planning Tools

- [Building Strong Foundations: Enhancing Organizational Capacity, Strategic Planning Toolkit](#) (Developed by Linda Mollenhauer)
- [Strategic Planning Toolkit](#) (BoardSource)
- [Strategic Planning Done Right](#) (Webinar, Charity Village)
- [Sightline: Strategic Plans That Gather Momentum Not Dust](#) (Rebecca Sutherns)

Resources included in this document are not a comprehensive list of resources for preparing for strategic planning nor for strategic planning itself. Those can be sourced through online searches and through your public library system.

This resource is built on the following assumptions:

- That setting strategy for your public library is good, even if it doesn't take the form of a standard strategic plan;

- That setting strategy for a defined period of time will move your library deeper into some areas within your core purposes and require that you make choices about where to direct attention and resources for that period of time;
- That the output (i.e. a strategic plan) will be better if you prepare for the planning process; and
- That public library boards are accountable to the public and strategic plans have the potential to be a tool of transparency and accountability.

This resource can be used:

- Alongside your mission, vision, values, and public accountabilities under the [Library Act](#) and other relevant legislation;
- As a complement to BCLTA's [BC Public Library Governance: A Quick Guide for Library Trustees](#) and the [BCLTA Governance Workshops and Workbook](#); and
- In alignment with the model of the [BCLTA Discussion Starters](#) but as a deeper dive into preparing for strategic planning.

This resource asks more questions than it answers but the act of boards asking these questions and reflecting upon the purposes and approach to strategic planning are valuable acts of governance.

Why and How This Resource was Developed

This BCLTA resource came out of discussions about how often public library boards head into strategic planning processes without a clear understanding of what kind of process will lead to the best outcome for the system.

Four questions were asked in two focus group conversations with BC public library trustees in the summer of 2020. Their perspectives have been woven into this resource. The questions posed to trustees were:

1. What does it mean to be ready to embark on strategic planning?
2. How do you decide what kind of strategic planning process is right for your library system?

3. What (and who) would your system need to support the development of a Strategic Plan?
4. Are there other options – other than strategic plans - for a “process of defining your strategy, or direction, and making decisions on allocating your resources”?

Who is this For?

This resource is designed primarily for BC’s public library trustees, though it may be useful to others working in governance and planning roles within any library system. It is most likely to be useful for:

- The board of trustees
- A strategic planning committee/working group
- A library director seeking to provide their Board with information prior to strategic planning
- Public library boards who may not be able to use an external contractor for strategic planning and want to be better prepared for a self-guided process
- Public library boards working with an external contractor who want to be more prepared to realize the value of the time with the contractor

Why Do Strategic Planning?

A strategic plan is the output of a process referred to as strategic planning. Through this process an organization defines its strategy - sometimes called its roadmap - makes decisions about allocating resources towards achieving the strategy, and builds a tool for accountability.

BC’s public library boards have an obligation to steward their library systems towards meeting the requirements under the [BC Library Act](#) and towards achieving their vision and missions. The use of public funds entrusted to public library boards is a significant responsibility and a strategic approach (whether

taken through a standard strategic plan or an alternative) is an important part of fulfilling this mandate.

To Serve Your Public Purposes

Strategic planning is a governance activity and should be in service of the purposes of a library under the BC Library Act (Section 2):

- “to encourage the extension and use of public library service throughout British Columbia,”
- “to enable the delivery of public library service in British Columbia,”
- “to support improvements in public library service.”

While the strategic planning process often includes exercises to think boldly and explore aspirations, the development of a strategic plan is a practice of making choices about where to put time, money, and energy. No one library system can possibly do everything and be everything to everyone. The strategic planning process encourages organizations to be accountable for, and transparent about, those necessary choices.

When developed collaboratively and executed realistically, strategic plans can also be a tool for relationship building. Ideally, board members, staff, volunteers, and community members see their perspectives and possibilities represented through a strategic plan, while funders and supporters see an organization meeting its commitments. The plan itself may even become a tool to influence decision makers.

What about planning with uncertainty?

Even with the best laid plans we experience changes in our environment that we could not have contemplated in a planning process.

A strong strategic plan – that is closely aligned with the mandate of public libraries – is likely to provide a sound framework under almost any significant change. However, it is important to consider what would drive your board to reassess and then reaffirm or redesign. Don’t let the year selected for the end of your plan be the only reason for going through a new process.

Time of Uncertainty

During the 2020 pandemic, a BC trustee remarked that they went back to look at their strategic plan, expecting it to need to be changed due to COVID-19. What they found was a plan that held up, even if the methods of execution/implementation needed to be adjusted.

Developing some comfort with, or expectation of, uncertainty is a necessary component of looking ahead. Strategic planning may make us feel like we've "made certain" parts of our library's future. No plan can do that, but reviewing your plan and process can help you with the important exercise of weighing options based on what you know now, which may be different from what you knew before.

Why Prepare For Strategic Planning?

Taking time to prepare thoughtfully and realistically can help ensure that a strategic planning process:

- Fulfills its potential and leaves the organization and its board better equipped to provide high quality services;
- Considers the specific capacities and values of a public library system and board, and adapts best practices to become wise practices for your system;
- Is a valuable use of time, money and; and
- Reflects the essence of good governance and the stewardship of public resources.

Can you answer these questions?

1. What are our ambitions?
2. Where is our world going?
3. What is the tension we resolve?
4. Who are we most important to?
5. What experience do we enable?
6. What are we like?
7. What makes us remarkable?
8. What do we fight for?

These questions can also be integrated into strategic planning itself but [BCLTA has adopted them as guiding convictions](#) which means they are available to serve more than one strategic planning cycle.

How To Prepare For Strategic Planning

In strategic planning toolkits you'll find that the first step in strategic planning is a reaffirmation (or development)) of your mission, vision, and values. We want to go further upstream from there and suggest that any strategic planning process will be more successful if a public library system considers some of the following in preparing to enter strategic planning.

The following section takes a deeper dive into this upstream process. By planning to plan, those accountable for guiding strategic planning – trustees and library directors – can ask themselves:

- Do we have the information and support we need to go through this process?
- Do we have the capacity to strategically plan, implement, monitor, adjust, report no matter what priorities are selected?
- In deciding how to allocate resources, how do we make those decisions about resources for the process of strategic planning?
- What is the right strategic planning process for us? One that won't drain our trustees, library director, staff, volunteers, and community and that will leave capacity for implementation.
- Does a system-wide plan make sense? How does that impact (if you are a multi-branch/division system) the operational realities of various components of your library system?
- How will we document/capture the process of the planning? So that we can:
 - Share it with future trustees and staff who join during the lifetime of the plan;
 - Know what we did last time when we get to the next planning opportunity; and
 - We can share our process with other public library systems (though BCLTA!).

Key Areas For Reflection

Why are we developing a strategic plan?

Do you have clarity on why you're developing a strategic plan? Keep that why in mind when determining your process. If you're only doing it to meet a funder requirement, how does that change the process you undertake and the resources you dedicate to the process?

Do you know what problems you're asking your strategic plan to solve? Have you answered "Our strategic planning process will be successful if...?"

Are you making assumptions about what kind of process is required to develop a strategic plan? Do you need a strategic plan or is there another option you can explore?

Who has decision-making authority?

Do you have clarity on how decisions associated with strategic planning will get made, and by whom? It can be easy to assume that a role (e.g. trustee) determines who gets to make a decision or that decisions are made by voting.

The public library board is ultimately entrusted with the public library system so it is critical that the board has a clear decision-making role aligned with their accountabilities. Note that the board does not have to make all the decisions during strategic planning.

Do you want your strategic planning process to be an opportunity for Reimagining Governance and give decision-making power to various parts of the public library system community? Is strategic planning an opportunity to bring different people to the table and empower them through decision-making power?

What is our timeframe?

Decide how you will select the time frame of the strategic plan. Often boards launch a process and assume that the plan will cover the same time span (typically three to five years) as the previous plan. It is valuable for boards to discuss the life span of their plan.

Some considerations when determining the time frame for your plan include:

- What big changes might be coming up in our community that might determine the length of the plan (e.g. a local election might be 3 years away so you may only want a 3-year plan so it can be updated when a new council might set different priorities)?
- Do you want to undertake some strategic planning first, identify priority areas, and then decide how long you need to achieve them and let that determine the timeline?
- How often can your organization go through the strategic planning process itself? What is realistic for the amount of resources used to conduct strategic planning? Consider the capacity of the organization, the time of people involved, and the costs associated.

What is the budget of time and money?

A strategic planning process uses resources and can take hours, days, or months. Costs can include the use of supplies, food during planning, the use of a consultant/facilitator, etc. As a public board it is critical that the use of public funds, including for developing a strategic plan, are weighed against the options of serving the public.

As an organization, ask yourselves: What is reasonable for our library system?
How much time and money should we dedicate to this process?

The answers do not need to be the same as it is for any other public library, it should match your capacity and your other competing service demands.

What existing or anticipated commitments influence this plan?

Prior to launching a strategic planning process, it is critical that a public library board know what other commitments need to be built into the planning process:

- Have you affirmed the [Truth & Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action](#)? If so, how does that change how you do planning? Similarly for the [BC Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act](#).
- Have you made commitments to psychological health & safety standards for your employees, such adoption of the [National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#)? If so, how does that changes how you do planning?
- Have you stated commitments to being anti-racist? Commitments to BIPOC and LGBTQIA2S+ communities? If so, what does that mean for your process? How might biases, including implicit ones, show up in a planning process? How might the process itself replicate structural, and practical, acts of harm and exclusion?
- What commitments, beyond meeting building code standards, does your public library system make to accessibility? How does that change your process?
- Have you committed to being part of the fight against climate change? How does that inform your process?

These questions will also be applicable when determining the content of your strategic plan but it is recommended that you ask these questions when designing your strategic planning process. The discussions and answers may change, for example, who is involved in designing the process, what constraints the process needs to adhere to, or even how much is asked of staff, trustees, and community members in the design process.

How does this plan connect with staff performance and accountability?

Before diving into strategic planning it is important that a board decides if the performance of a strategic plan is going to be linked to evaluating the performance of senior staff. If so, have you been clear and set those expectations? Is the evaluation of the library director tied into strategic planning? It's important to be clear about these lines of accountability so staff are set up for success and involvement at the outset.

What background information is needed, by whom?

Is there work to be done to distribute knowledge to newer trustees? It is important not to assume that all trustees (or other participants) are entering the strategic planning process with equivalent knowledge about the public library system and the context of public libraries. There may be some pre-work required so that imbalances related to knowledge of the system are addressed and less likely to be wielded (even unintendedly) during the strategic planning process to give some voices more power and influence than others.

Who needs to be involved and how?

Do you have a commitment from the entire board and the library director that the process you're about to undertake is valuable? For elected council liaisons on the board, is their role clear? What about other staff?

What capacity does your library system have to receive and synthesize community input? Stakeholder mapping and outreach/consultation has become a best practice of building a strategic plan but it is also important to realistically assess your capacity to synthesize and respond to this input so that you undertake a strategic planning outreach/consultation process matches your needs and capacity.

These questions are about determining the process to develop the plan itself. Not the actual development of the components of the strategic plan.

What contextual information is needed to inform the strategic plan?

What “unusual” stakeholders may be able to provide you with contextual information that will help you? Are there local researchers or academics who may be able to provide you with data you need? What is emerging in the field of library studies that could inform your perspectives on the role of your public library in your community?

Advice and Tips

The following tips are designed to support public library trustees and boards to learn from past experiences and good practices. Please use them as is appropriate for your context.

Don't reinvent the wheel

Strategic planning processes do not need to be unique. They should match your needs but there is a good chance that many of your needs for the process are similar to those of other BC public library systems.

Your BCLTA network:

- Board Chair list serv
- Workshops and Trustee Meet-ups
- Special events and the AGM

And your library director also has a network through their association the ABCPLD

Use the tools you have

Your library system likely has access to a variety of digital and non-digital methods for gathering information, storing information, and sharing information. These are

all part of a strategic planning process. Make sure you have a list of those tools (e.g. survey platform, public notice boards, shared document access, etc.) so that you can design a strategic planning process around what you have, not what you wish you had.

Double up!

Not every organization can carve off dedicated strategic planning time. Can you build components of your planning process into your existing community, staff, committee, and board meetings? Can you build other work into your strategic planning process? Can you combine development of your strategic plan with an opportunity for outreach to a new partner? Can you advocate for your existing services while also doing outreach about your future directions? Can you make parts of the planning process an opportunity for strengthening team dynamics?

Engage people strategically

It is generally accepted that a strategic planning process should include many groups of people – community members, partners, volunteers, staff, etc. Acknowledge your reasons for engagement such as that it may be for buy-in and attachment to the plan or it may be to build stronger relationships and ongoing community involvement. It is also possible to develop a strong and robust strategic plan that does not involve the time of many individuals. It is important to do what is right for your organization and weigh the upside of broader community buy-in with the downside of potentially burning people out or overcommitting through your planning process.

Match your process with staff capacity

Staff are often pulled in two directions during strategic planning. The day-to-day functions of the library do not stop for the development of a new strategic plan. It is critical that a library board does not embark on a strategic planning process that is beyond the capacity of staff. Without staff capacity, the process will struggle.

Do what is right for your library system.

A strategic planning process will be “right” for your system when it does not detract from, but actually contributes to, your library system’s ability to deliver on your purposes.

Do you need to hire a consultant?

For some processes, a consultant will be a great resource. But, like any decisions about this process, the decision to allocate funds towards a strategic planning facilitator should be made by reflecting on your library’s needs and resources.

Some questions to consider are:

- How much money is reasonable for your library system?
- What, if any, are the risks of allocating these funds?
- Are there greater needs that could be served with these resources?
- Can we get what we need without hiring a consultant?
- What would we need to see/receive/gain in order for this contract be a good use of public funds?
- How much staff time do we expect the process utilize?
- How much volunteer trustee time do we expect the process to utilize?
- Do we have all the skills we need or do we need to find additional help?
Volunteer help? Paid help?
- If we use external support, who will be their liaison(s) and what decision-making authority (about the process) do they have?
- How will timely communication about the process take place?

it is important to assess your existing internal knowledge for a process of this kind, particularly for smaller public library systems. You may be able to draw on skills from within your trustees or community volunteers. This may require a process, not unlike board recruitment, of developing a matrix of skills and knowledge needed for strategic planning (e.g. critical thinking, creativity, lived experiences, project management, etc.) and then assessing who from within your internal resources could provide them. Even if you end up hiring an external consultant this matrix will help to scope their contract around the gaps you need to fill.

Additional questions you may want to consider:

- What is the crossroads at which you find yourself as an organization? What are the critical questions you're dealing with?
- If this process is successful, what would be different? More clear?
- What time is it in the organization's life story? What is your [lifecycle stage](#)?
- Who are you becoming? Who is the public library within your community?
- What do you know for sure? What do you wonder?
- What external factors are most important to pay attention to?
- Strengths? Changes? Key tensions? What are you pretending not to know?

These additional questions, if answered internally, will increase the value of your time with an external consultant as they will be able to provide you with more refined services for your strategic planning needs.

Is a Strategic Plan Your Only Option?

For decades, there has been increased reflection about setting strategic directions and about the need for a specific, time-bound strategic plan. This comes, in part, due to the number of strategic plans that are developed and then sit on the proverbial shelf.

You can certainly find various arguments from folks who propose alterations to the standard strategic plan. These might be called strategic frameworks or a strategic learning agenda or agile strategy.

Some perspectives argue that a strategic plan isn't flexible and adaptable enough and locks organizations into a path that is too rigid. Some perspectives argue that standard strategic planning is too short-term focused and organizations will do better to look out to a decades-long perspective; that true strategy cannot be achieved in 3-5 years.

Whatever you decide for your library system: Don't let the strategic plan control you. Watch for changes in the environment and make course corrections as

needed. You can extend a plan's timeframe if needed. You can also end a plan before the previously determined date. Maybe it's not the whole plan that needs changes, maybe it is only components of the plan.

Your strategic plan sits at the intersection of your governance of a public system and your accountability for public dollars, it is important that if your community changes that your plan changes with it.

Spotlight: An Alternative

BCLTA's board of directors decided that regular 3 or 5-year strategic planning was not the right fit for the organization. In 2018, the board developed a 7-year [Strategic Framework](#) with annual operational plans. This provides the organization with a strategic container but lessens the amount of resources put into the strategic planning process allowing those resources to be focused on serving BCLTA's members.

The Skeptics

There is no shortage of content when you search the web for *alternatives to strategic planning*. Here are a few that may be useful if your organization is interested in diving into strategic planning skepticism!

- [How to Do Strategic Planning Like a Futurist](#) (Amy Webb, Harvard Business Review)
- [The Big Lie of Strategic Planning](#) (Roger L. Martin, Harvard Business Review)
- [Alternatives to Strategic Planning](#) (Blue Avocado)
- [Nonprofit AF](#) (Vu Le). Vu Le's site includes various perspectives across a variety of posts; including [this whimsical one](#) that includes questioning strategic planning.
- [Zoom out/zoom in: An alternative approach to strategy in a world that defies prediction](#) (Deloitte)
- [The Strategic Plan is Dead. Long Live Strategy](#) (Standard Social Innovation Review)

Time to Plan

BCLTA is committed to supporting trustees and boards with common issues of common concern and strategic planning is a common undertaking of BC public library boards. This resource, used regularly and revisited as new trustees join your board, can build the capacity of your board to engage in regular strategic direction setting – whatever format that takes for your organization. Working through this resource, in whole or in parts, will assist a public library board to embark upon a process that is not only strategic but robust, appropriate for your public library system, and resource-aligned for your current circumstances.

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