

Mt. Pleasant Public Library

PRE-TEEN SERVICES STEERING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

June 6, 2018 rev.

At a time of rapid change in the ways that Americans acquire and digest information, approach and consume culture and literature, educate themselves and learn in traditional and non-traditional settings, libraries across the United States remain more popular than ever. But the ways that libraries are used by their patrons has changed. And leading libraries have adapted to meet their needs.

Mt. Pleasant Public Library (MPPL) is no exception. The main library and branch are populated with patrons of all ages at all times of day, and throughout the week, reading, perusing, relaxing, learning, interacting, thinking and working. And MPPL has introduced any number of changes to meet contemporary needs, from the organization of its collections, to the kinds of seating available, to the technology offered and the programs on its roster. But the generally smooth flow of patronage and usage is oftentimes jarred by the arrival of many youngsters to the Main Library on weekday afternoons when the nearby schools let out and the Library becomes a locus of activity – some Library-appropriate and some decidedly not. Any library would welcome an influx of children who want or need to be there, for whatever duration. And MPPL staff and board feel this way. But the disruption to patrons who need quiet is hard to square with the boisterous energy of the kids, and some behavior and safety issues have become difficult for Library staff to abide.

With the support of the Library Board, the Library’s Director engaged Plan A Advisors to facilitate a planning process for Mt. Pleasant Public Library over a five-month period to reconsider how Library services are delivered and address the problems that have vexed staff and patrons so that the Library better meets the needs of ALL patrons equitably. The resulting recommendations, built with community input, not only respond to the needs of children in grades 4-6 (referred to as “pre-teens” in this report) but to the needs of all patrons for whom the Library was built to serve.

It’s important to note that MPPL does have a dedicated teen librarian and regularly offers activities for teens and pre-teens. But current staffing and the number of programs are insufficient to handle the volume of students at the Library.

The recommendations contained address issues around staffing, programs, facilities and policy. They should help the Library’s leadership to make key decisions around resource allocation, to make the Library more welcoming and more responsive for these students, and to better manage a balance between the needs of these students and other Library users, particularly during afternoon hours.

Process & Findings



The Planning Process



A Steering Committee was formed with representatives of the Library board and the community. Plan A is grateful to Board members **Marcie Krauss** and **Larry Levine**; community representatives **Nicole Asquith**, **Mary Fox-Alter**, **Erica Kylander-Clark** and **Danielle O'Reilly**; and Library executive leadership **John Fearon** and **Martha Mesiti**. The Steering Committee met four times over the course of the project to guide research, open doors to prospective participants, and to select a direction for Library services and approve the recommendations.

Interviews were conducted with key informants in the community. Plan A is grateful to Principal Peggy Galotti, Police Chief Erik Grutzner, Principal Don Marra, Peter Rogovin, Council Member Laurie Rogers Smalley and Kathleen Williamson for their thoughtful participation.

A public survey yielded a remarkable 215 responses, capturing input and ideas from students, parents, and other Library users. The survey was conducted electronically and was publicized through the Library and the schools.

A series of four roundtable conversations – one with Library staff, one with Library patrons, and two with groups of parents and children in grades 3-6 – were well-attended and brimming with energy and ideas. The roundtables got participants involved in problem-solving (rather than just highlighting the problems!) and provided a set of ideas for the Steering Committee to consider.

Site visits were conducted at two area libraries which have put in place creative and successful programs and services for similar populations that were thought to be worth emulating.

A visioning session was then held with the Steering Committee and invited guests, including other board members, library managers and interviewees, and guest David Vinjamuri, an expert in Library marketing. The recommendations described in the following pages were formulated at the visioning session and a consensus developed around their promise.

The Steering Committee assembled a final time to review and ultimately endorse the recommendations which will next be shared with the entire Board.

What is the Problem?



Lots of kids in the Mt. Pleasant Public Library after school...that sounds like a problem lots of libraries would like to have! But interviews and other research proved the problem is actually difficult to define. In fact, there are many different *opinions* about what the problem is. Here is a *sampling* of research respondents' perceptions:

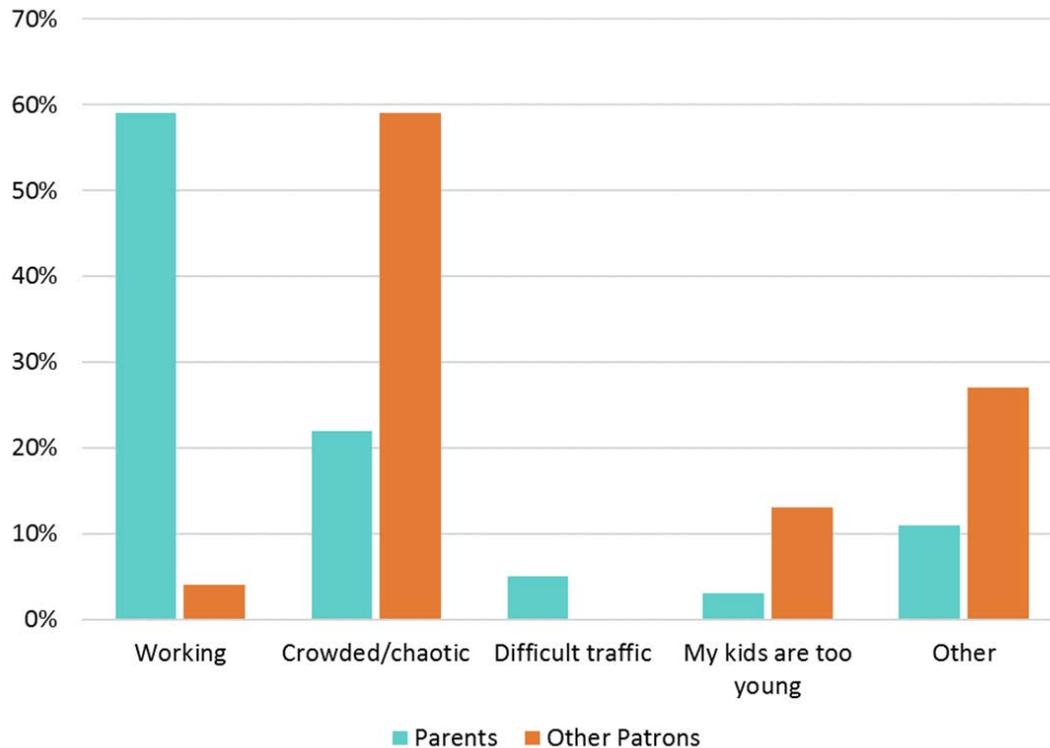
- The Library serves patrons from across the Town of Mt. Pleasant, but overcrowding in the afternoons can make the Main Library unpleasant for some patrons.
- The Village of Pleasantville has no school busing, so the Main Library and grounds provide a natural pathway home.
- The Main Library parking lot is a pick-up spot for kids creating a traffic juggernaut.
- Kids have energy to burn after school...and they have to do it somewhere! The Library becomes the place.
- Some survey respondents think behavioral policies are unreasonable, unclear or unenforced.
- Some feel that parents don't take proper responsibility for their kids afterschool.
- Some think kids act out when they're not engaged; but others point out that not all kids want "engagement."
- The Main Library's layout doesn't separate functions by noise level.
- The Main Library isn't presently staffed to work extensively with pre-teens.

The Village of Pleasantville is, indeed, a "walking community" with no bus pick-up from school; children either make their way home by foot or wait to be picked up by parents. Two blocks from local schools, and *en route* to the village center, the Library becomes a convenient hang-out for many of these kids, or a convenient spot for parents to meet them while avoiding crowded school parking lots. Thus, the Library and its grounds can be overrun with kids expending energy after a long day at school. In short, kids are doing what kids do (and what kids *should* do), it just happens to occur at the Library which is seen as a safe and convenient waystation. The Library has invested in a librarian for this age group, and has offered programs that are age-appropriate, but too few of the kids participate in these formal programs to redirect the noise and energy from the adult area, and the staff spends too much time either disciplining the kids or assisting them when they run into problems, such as providing access to a telephone to call a parent. But at the end of the day, the Library was designed in a way that places adult services in an open area adjacent to the two entrances, and doesn't separate out a place for kids or, specifically, for the pre-teens and teens who arrive in numbers afterschool.

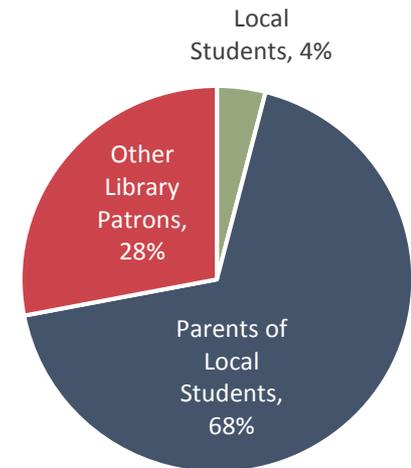
What is the Problem? continued



Not all of the problems listed here can be solved by the Library. Certainly, the geographic challenges – the Main Library’s placement vis-à-vis the schools and within the village layout – cannot realistically be changed. Likewise, the Library can do little to reduce kids’ need to unwind after school – it is a natural stage of development. But defining a problem that is within the power of the Library and its partners to address is crucial to finding effective solutions. The Library is a place for everyone – kids coming home from school and adults using it for any number of purposes – and by its charter it must remain a community resource for all patrons.



Reasons why patrons don't visit in the afternoons



215 Survey Respondents

The research exercises conducted as part of this planning process surfaced a number of findings that helped focus the recommendations of the Steering Committee. Chief among them:

The nature of a walking village with no school busing amplifies our challenges around afterschool Library use and around traffic and safety.

The Library is widely appreciated as a great community asset, but staff, adult patrons and kids all recognize that the building and grounds today are not configured to serve contemporary needs.

The Library is critiqued by those familiar with recently renovated libraries in nearby communities that have spaces designed for different activity and noise levels.

The public and the Library are often at odds over expectations around behavior and responsibility.

While appropriate staffing including volunteers is needed, staff and volunteers need to be trained appropriately to address current challenges.

Mt. Pleasant as a whole is rich in human and cultural resources that might be employed for programs that offer opportunities for engagement. Ideas came in volume from kids, parents, librarians and educators.

These findings, reflecting current conditions, were central to designing recommendations that are outlined in the following section. (More information on research findings, including illustrative quotes from interviews, roundtables and surveys, is available in two mid-process reports to the Steering Committee.)

Vision



In a session on envisioning the afterschool period, the Steering Committee and invited guests were thoughtful in developing the key concepts that might form a vision for the Main Library, and particularly services to pre-teens that could help to improve the experience of all patrons in the afternoons and during all public hours.

They envisioned a transformed experience that meets the developmental needs of pre-teens in a space of their own so that noise levels are no longer in conflict with Library usage by adult patrons. Part of this vision includes engaging pre-teens, their parents and teachers in identifying solutions so that the Library is both a “haven” for them afterschool, and a place that engages them in formal and informal activities.

It’s important to distinguish what is “in the Library’s control” and what’s outside of it. For example, the lack of school busing is certainly one reason why the Library’s grounds are filled with children in good weather, and why the Library building is a quick way-station for children on cold or rainy days as they await pick-up. There’s little the Library can do to change the way children get to and from school! But there are areas of policy, and there are investments in design, program and staffing that could help to realize the vision, and all of those are in the Library’s control. Ideas that emerged in the research and through the visioning included the following, which were further refined by the Steering Committee and are enumerated in the Recommendations section.

Design	Program	Policy	Staffing/Volunteers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Rethink the interior by noise level•Dedicate an afterschool area that pre-teens see as their own•Rethink the design of the grounds for active play	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Offer more library-run programs•Ramp up HS/college tutoring•Offer more professionally-run programs•Invest in kid-only, kid-friendly tech	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Update the library’s age and behavioral expectations policies•Set policies around technology, space use•Create a council of parents to assist in developing and communicating policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Hire more staff trained to work with pre-teens•Hire dedicated afterschool specialists•Increase use of volunteers in the afternoons

Recommendations



Rethink the Library's interior spaces and grounds to better reflect the way they are used by ALL patrons, young and old, today.

Short Term

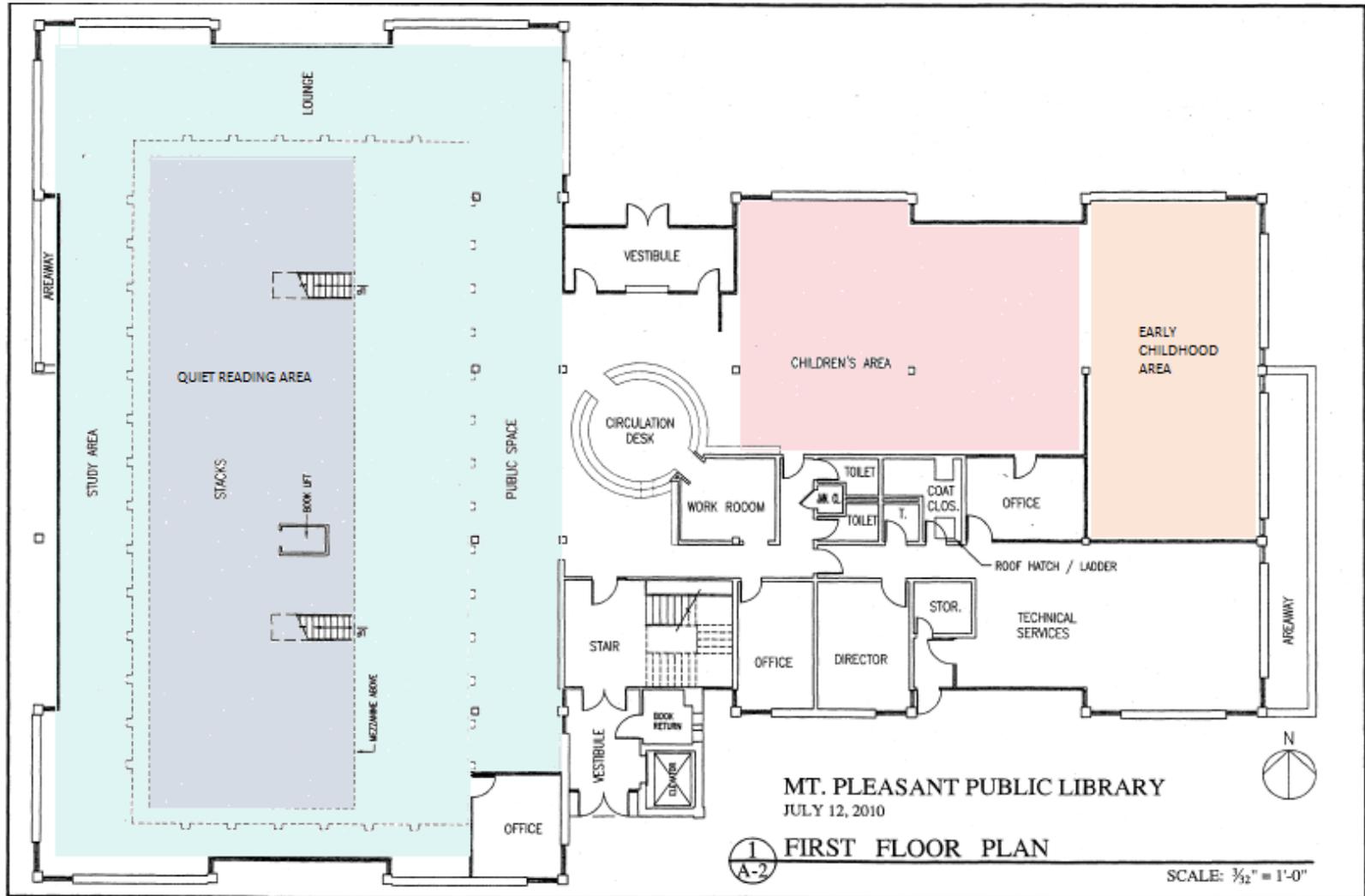
- Re-commission the lower level as pre-teen flex space in the afternoons with portable furnishings, collections on wheels, places for games and other informal activities, chatting and study. Engage pre-teens in the planning.
- Reorganize pre-teen library materials so that they are more easily accessible and highlighted for pre-teen patrons, and introduce other quick fixes that draw pre-teens to age appropriate spaces and resources.

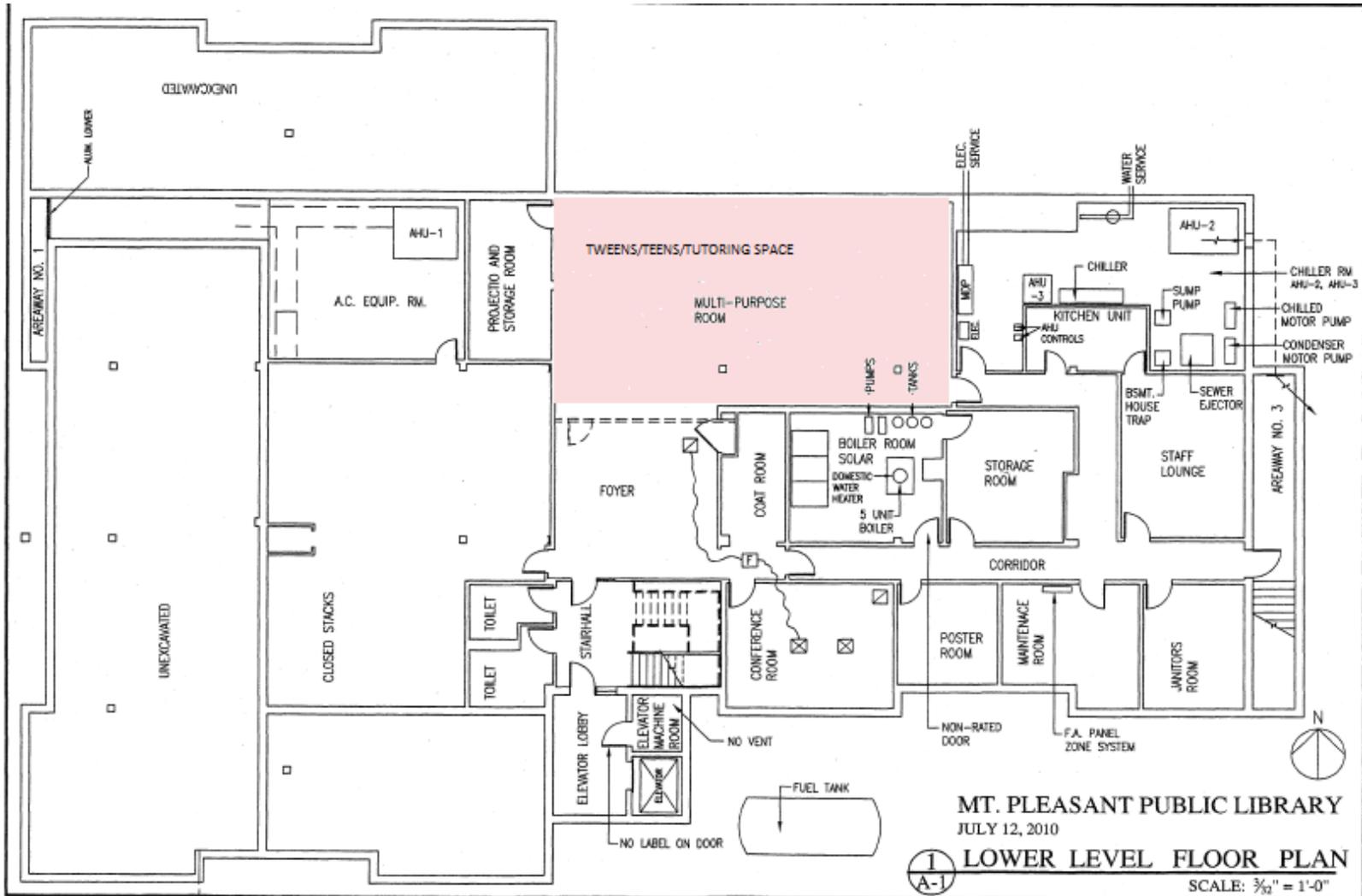
Long Term

- Engage an architect to develop schematic plans to renovate the Library's interior with new age-appropriate and noise-level gradated spaces; begin planning for a major capital project to transform the Library interior as other leading local libraries have done.*
- In partnership with the Village and Town, reimagine the grounds of the Library as space for programs, seating and safe play.

*The following two pages illustrate a sample interior redesign by noise/developmental stage/activity type as conceptualized by pre-teens in one of the research roundtables.

Sample Design Approach





Defining “programs” broadly as both formal and informal, the Library should provide a wide range of opportunities for pre-teens to engage with each other and with their interests.

Short Term

- Survey pre-teens now, and regularly, to find out what they want.
- Assemble an advisory committee of parents, educators, and kids to involve them all in program planning. Parents can become communicators to other parents this way.
- Offer a range of informal activities and games in a dedicated space for pre-teens during the after-school period, building on successful Homework Help and other programs.
- Investigate and invest in inexpensive mobile technology (e.g. tablets or notebooks) that pre-teens can “sign-out” for use in designated spaces in the Library; designate desktop computers upstairs in the main reading room for adult use only.

Long Term

- Develop a student-driven menu of pre-teen programs offered across the week to strengthen pre-teen and parent relationships with the Library; seek private funding to underwrite programs that are more costly such as partnerships with established regional arts and sciences program providers.

Put policies in place that are practical and contemporary that make expectations clear and easy to communicate.

Short Term

- Assemble a committee that includes several board members (ideally parents of pre-teens), librarians, and perhaps a school representative to develop a philosophy about the afterschool period and review current MPPL policies around children and their use of the library; compare MPPL policies with others from leading libraries; and craft any new or revised policies for adoption by the board.

Long Term

- Regularly review MPPL policies around children's and pre-teens' usage of the Library.

Recognizing that pre-teens may be most responsive to high school and college-aged kids as well as to experts in subjects that interest them, the Library should rethink its staffing structure (professional and voluntary) in the afternoons to better serve pre-teens and to better deploy its own staff.

Short Term

- Use available funds to employ teen specialists (e.g. school aids) to engage with pre-teens around homework help and other activities to complement the Library's professional staff and take responsibility for some programming and engagement.

Long Term

- Explore a partnership with local colleges and others to bring in new, appropriately trained staff, especially those who are pursuing a career in education or libraries.

These recommendations require personnel and financial resources, as well as the support of the Mt. Pleasant Public Library Board and professional leadership in order to enact successfully. Here are proposed next steps:

1. Endorsed by the Steering Committee, the Board should carefully consider and formally accept the recommendations, and then work with the Director to seek and allocate the resources to begin implementation.
2. The Director should thank staff for their participation in the planning process and share this report and recommendations with them.
3. The Director should thank the many community members who were engaged in this planning process and share an outline of the recommendations with them.
4. The Director and staff should share the recommendations with the community as a whole, perhaps through a press release, through the website, or even a public meeting with parents of pre-teens.
5. The Director should put in place a plan of action over a two-to-three year period to realize the vision articulated in this report and implement the recommendations.

Summary of Projects



Area	Recommendation	Cost Range	Timing?
Program	Regular survey of pre-teens	Under \$2,500	Annual
Program	Advisory committee of parents	Under \$2,500	Fall 2018
Policy	Policy committee & philosophy of service	Under \$2,500	Winter 2019
Policy	Policy review - annual	Under \$2,500	Annual
Program	Informal activities and games	Under \$5,000	Fall 2018
Program	Mobile technology	Under \$10,000	Spring 2019
Design	Quick fixes and reorganizing materials	Under \$10,000	2018-19
Staffing	Employ teen specialists	\$10-25,000 annual	Fall 2018
Design	Lower Level flex space	\$10-25,000	2019
Program	Menu of pre-teen programming	\$25-50,000 annual	Begin 2019
Staffing	College partnership	\$25-\$50,000 annual	2019-20
Design	Architectural plans – library interior	\$75-150,000	2019-20
Design	Reimagine outdoors as community asset	\$75-150,000	2019-20



The process of developing the recommendations in this report was facilitated by Plan A Advisors.

www.PlanAAdvisors.com

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Mt. Pleasant Public Library serves the Town of Mt. Pleasant including the incorporated Village of Pleasantville, and a small portion of Briarcliff Manor along with unincorporated areas including the hamlets of Hawthorne, Thornwood, Valhalla and Pocantico Hills.

www.mountpleasantlibrary.org

Main Library
350 Bedford Road
Pleasantville, NY 10570

Branch Library
125 Lozza Drive
Valhalla, NY 10595

Thank you!