



# MARATHON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

**Strategic Plan**  
2024-2029

## Introduction

Located in Central Wisconsin, Marathon County is home to approximately 140,000 residents and has the largest geographic area of any county in the state. The county offers beautiful natural areas, many recreational opportunities, unique small businesses, a thriving local arts scene, and close-knit communities that sponsor popular events and cultural activities. An important connection point for communities reaching from Spencer to Hatley is the network of nine libraries that make up Marathon County Public Library.



Athens



Edgar



Hatley



Marathon City



Wausau



Mosinee



Spencer



Rothschild



Stratford

Marathon County Public Library embarked on a strategic planning process in 2023 to ensure its offerings across the county are relevant, engaging, and reflective of their communities.

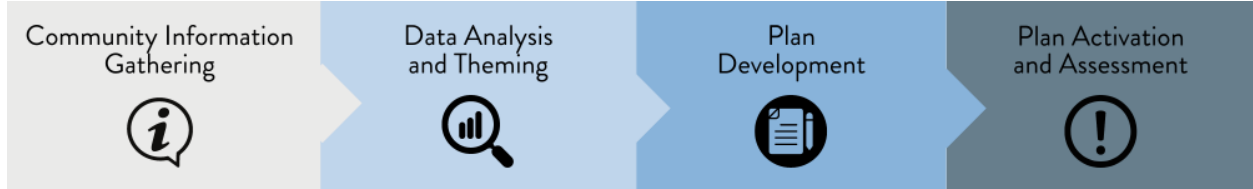
## Dream Big: the Strategic Plan Process

A public library strategic plan helps with decision-making and provides clear direction for the library to pursue within a set period. A thoughtful and thorough strategic planning process ensures the completed plan is data-driven and community-inspired.

Strategic planning for Marathon County Public Library began in the summer of 2023.

Representatives from the library staff, the board of trustees, the library's Friends group, and the wider community formed a Strategic Plan Steering Committee to oversee the process titled "Dream Big with Marathon County Public Library." Consultants from WiLS (Wisconsin Library Services) assisted with process development and coordination.

Dream Big consisted of the following main phases:



The library wanted to seek out and welcome community voices to Dream Big with MCPL. The Strategic Plan Steering Committee was critical in helping identify and connect with communities, groups, organizations, and individuals throughout Marathon County.

Dream Big used several kinds of information-gathering activities to include a diverse group of people. Multiple existing data sets were also consulted. Data sets and information-gathering activities included:

- Community demographic information, using data points from the US Census, American Community Survey, and Marathon County’s LIFE Report.
- Public Library Annual Report information, viewed through a data dashboard that situated Marathon County Public Library among a comparison cohort of similar libraries. MCPL’s comparison cohorts comprised other county library systems in Wisconsin and city libraries across the state.
- The Strategic Plan Steering Committee filled out a Planning Landscape Questionnaire at the beginning of Dream Big with MCPL, answering questions about existing opportunities and challenges they see from their perspectives across the county and about the library.
- A community survey was provided online and in print at all library locations. The survey was disseminated widely and received 450 responses from users and non-users of the library.
- Library staff weighed in through a facilitated meeting and a questionnaire based on the SOAR method (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) and did in-depth work to revise the library’s mission and vision statements.
- Each of the nine library locations hosted a community Q&A board. These boards gave community members an informal opportunity to answer three questions. Responses were transcribed and grouped into categories or themes.
- An in-person community conversation, and an online community questionnaire, engaged 32 community members in total. Participants were asked open-ended questions about the existing strengths, opportunities, and challenges in the wider county community and about their views on the library’s role in leveraging these strengths and working to address challenges.

- Planning consultants conducted nine one-on-one interviews with county and community leaders with various experiences and knowledge about the county and the library's role.

Following eight weeks of information-gathering, the Strategic Plan Steering Committee attended a data webinar presentation by the planning consultants. The presentation included specific data points, overarching themes, and takeaways for the committee.

Using the themes and takeaways from the data and information, committee members collaborated to create a draft strategic plan framework. Marathon County Public Library's strategic plan framework consists of a mission and vision statement, strategic goals that are aspirational and results-oriented, and measurable objectives to help assess the library's progress on the plan goals. Activities to implement the strategic goals and objectives will be developed during the activation phase.

The Strategic Plan Steering Committee crafted the following framework for Marathon County Public Library's first five-year strategic plan.

## **Our Dreams: the Strategic Plan Framework**

### **Mission Statement**

To enrich lives by providing access to information, inspiration, and opportunities to connect.

### **Vision Statement**

Connecting people to endless possibilities

# Goal: Increase Awareness

Our community knows there is something for everyone at Marathon County Public Library. The library’s mission and offerings are shared through a robust, adaptable communications and marketing strategy to increase awareness and help community members see the library in their lives.

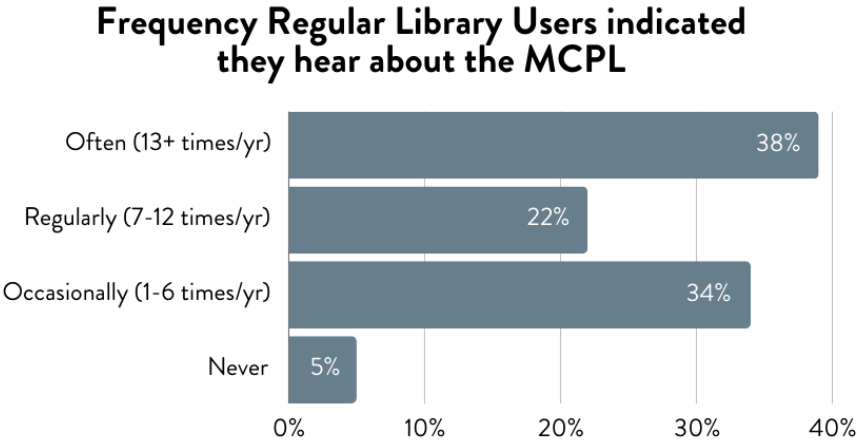
### Measurable objectives:

- 1. Implement a communication campaign to articulate the library’s mission, value, and role throughout the county.
- 2. Improve community awareness of library events and resources through a targeted marketing and outreach campaign highlighting specific aspects of the library’s offerings.

### Why this goal?

Marketing and communications pose an ongoing challenge for public libraries. Libraries offer many things for many audiences, and connecting the right message to the right person takes dedicated time and strategizing.

Marathon County Public Library is starting from a position of strength in communications, with nearly 100% percent of survey takers who are regular library users saying that they heard about the library at least 1-6 times per year. However, certain services are less well known, including resume assistance, homebound services, and online course access.





Marathon County's library visit and circulation data show room for growth compared to similar county libraries. Ideally, if more people know about the experiences and resources they can discover at the library, the more they will use them.

Outreach to library non-users is a key piece of this communications-focused goal. Staff members and community conversation/questionnaire participants identified partnerships and a greater library presence at community events as good ways to connect with people who might not know the library yet.

## Goal: Serve as a Community Hub

Marathon County is full of possibilities. There are many natural and recreational resources, a strong network of community-based organizations, and the region is primed for economic growth. The library is a hub where resources, services, and partnerships combine to elevate Marathon County's opportunities based on surveyed community needs.

### Measurable objectives:

1. Develop data and information-gathering processes and location-specific engagement strategies to ensure services, programming, spaces, and partnerships align with community needs.
2. Develop or refine services, collections, and programs to meet our community's innovation and learning needs.
3. Increase awareness of and engagement with county-wide events and initiatives, using the library's branch network to spread the word.



### Why this goal?

One of Marathon County Public Library's strengths is its reach across a big geographic area. When combined with the range of services, programs, and resources that the library offers, the library is seen by many in Marathon County as a reliable hub where anything is possible.

*“[The most important thing the library offers is] books and resources at no cost, opportunities to connect with others, in-person lectures, and learning opportunities.”*

*- Questionnaire respondent*

The concept of the library as a community hub is a dream shared by many. Participants in the community Q&A boards, conversations, and questionnaires shared the desire for relevant programming and services that support their everyday needs. Interviewees discussed the library’s potential to help spread the word about county-wide events and projects.

To make sure that the library’s services, programs, and resources meet community needs and expectations, there must be consistent and ongoing two-way communication between the library and the community. Partners play a critical role here as collaborators who have a good sense of their communities and can help the library offer fun, relevant experiences and opportunities. A strong network of partnerships also means that the library is aware of services and resources offered elsewhere in the county and can efficiently connect patrons to appropriate services when needed.

It is important to keep communication channels open directly to the public. The library can build on the energy from Dream Big with MCPL by creating ongoing feedback opportunities for community members.

## **Goal: Enhance User Experience**

Library spaces across the county encourage people to gather, learn something new, connect with neighbors, and accomplish tasks. Visitors can easily find what they’re looking for and feel a sense of belonging at the library.

### **Measurable objectives:**

1. Increase library visits and new visitors through improvements and updates to library spaces.
2. Improve access to library buildings, services, and resources by implementing universal design practices.

3. Utilize technology to streamline frontline services, improve patron experience, and increase organizational efficiency.
4. Conduct a space assessment that engages partners to narrow possibilities for Wausau's third-floor space.

### Why this goal?

A major theme that emerged across many data sets can be summed up as “user experience.” These experiences relate to how library visitors interact with physical or virtual library spaces. A welcoming and barrier-free experience can encourage visitors to return, use additional resources, and share their experiences with their neighbors and family.

Improving and streamlining access to library spaces was a notable takeaway from the staff SOAR. Staff want people to feel comfortable and welcome in library spaces and see opportunities to use spaces and technology to help make the visitor experience efficient and beneficial.





*“[The most important thing the library offers is] a place for everyone to find themselves either in a story or a safe place to come and participate in the larger community.”*

*- Questionnaire respondent*

The third-floor space at the library headquarters in Wausau came up often during Dream Big. Right now, that space is underutilized. Engineering challenges limit how the space can be used. Several community interviewees spoke about the need for the library to be the driver of a conversation, in collaboration with community partners, to determine what can be done with the space and which options best support community priorities and needs.

Community survey findings about library spaces show the need for branch-specific plans rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. People’s priorities changed depending on which branch they visited or used most often. Some branches had lower numbers of survey respondents, but even if more information is needed, this shows that each community may want or expect different things from their library buildings.

## **Goal: Support Our Staff**

The knowledgeable and welcoming staff of Marathon County Public Library can grow professionally, balance their workloads, and feel supported in their work by library colleagues, the library board, and county stakeholders.

### **Measurable objectives:**

1. Improve employee satisfaction through increased staff empowerment and expanded capacity.
2. Increase opportunities for staff to expand job knowledge by offering continuing education on relevant and timely topics.
3. Establish mechanisms to increase the safety and security of library staff.

## Why this goal?



The staff makes the library. This theme came through in many Dream Big data sets, especially the community Q&A boards, where appreciation for the helpful and friendly library staff was a top category.

The SOAR conversation and questionnaire demonstrated that the library's team is seen as an internal strength. Staff see opportunities for growth through professional

development and training; increasing capacity, especially in the branch libraries; and ensuring consistent and accurate communication among the team so that practices and policies are clear and all understand expectations.

*"Best library staff in the entire state!"*

*- Q&A board respondent*

## Dreaming Big into the Future

A strategic plan is not a one-and-done venture. Rather, it is a plan implemented and activated through the library's day-to-day activities and projects. The Plan Activation phase starts with the completion of the plan framework and continues until the end of the plan's timeframe; in Marathon County's case, five years.

In the Plan Activation and Assessment phase, the library sets activity priorities and establishes a process to continuously assess their work, gather input, and make changes.

To stay accountable and transparent about the library's work and progress on the strategic plan, the library will use a communications plan to provide consistent, regular updates and ensure opportunities for two-way conversations with stakeholders.

## **Acknowledgments**

Marathon County Public Library sincerely thanks the hundreds of community members who completed surveys and questionnaires, attended conversations and interviews, and added their ideas and thoughts to the community Q&A boards.

We appreciate the library staff who contributed their expertise as participants in exploring the library's opportunities and as important parts of Dream Big coordination. We are also grateful to the library board of trustees who reviewed the draft mission and vision statements and supported numerous other stages of Dream Big.

We greatly appreciate the many hours spent by the Strategic Plan Steering Committee, who took the time to help develop and execute the process, consider the information gathered, and offer edits and ideas to make the planning framework shine.

Thanks to the consulting team at WiLS for their project coordination and management.

### **Strategic Plan Steering Committee**

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