

# Singleton Public Library: the journey

Robyn Tonks, manager library

The new Singleton Public Library opened in August 2004. It is 1785 m<sup>2</sup>, more than three times the size of the old library. It is a landmark building, signalling the Council's commitment to excellence in its library services. Positioned in front of the Council administration building, it is highly visible and accessible. The design is interesting and forward-looking, yet blends with the older Council building.

Striking features of the library include the use of natural light and the civic art collection that is displayed throughout the building. The influence of John Stanley Associates is evident in the way stock is displayed in power spots and on shelf ends as well as on face-out shelving in many collections. The main entrance (see this month's cover) was especially designed to impress and entice customers. The opening line for the regional television news was "It is not often you associate libraries with the 'wow' factor but the new Singleton Library..."

Staff are proud of their new library and find it a pleasure to work in. Other council staff and councillors are also proud of it. It has been the main feature in advertisements for tourism. It is on the Economic Development officer's tour for potential clients and visiting dignitaries rarely leave without a tour of the new library. Most importantly, the community is proud of it. Frequently we see our customers giving visiting family or friends tours of 'their new library'. One visiting mother sent her son home for a camera. She wanted a photograph to take back to her hometown in Queensland that showed her drinking coffee in one of the many lounges that are scattered throughout the library.

We have had dignitaries from California, Ireland and China; a library manager from New Zealand; and numerous council and library staff from NSW visit

for tours of the new library. A number of visitors have said how lucky we are to have such a wonderful library. It is a wonderful library, especially for a rural town serving a population just under 22 000. However, luck has nothing to do with it. It takes real effort to build a new library. It is the culmination of planning, consultation and hard work.

Looking back, it has been a long journey. Hopefully those who are starting towards a similar destination will find a faster route, but if your journey is destined to be a long one, take heart: it is worth it in the end and difficulties may result in better outcomes. The journey itself can be a rich experience.

## Passion, vision and planning

Passion was the start of our journey. We had a passionate belief in the value of public libraries and were excited by the changes taking place. New technologies were allowing smaller libraries to deliver services that were never possible before. Rural residents could, and should, have library services comparable to those in the cities.

Vision took the passion and matched it to the specific community of Singleton. We looked at the past and present of Singleton and its library service, compared ourselves with others, examined trends and then projected our desired future. The vision was full of images that were not quite within reach but they were achievable. The vision was never out of sight and was shared at every opportunity.

Planning contained the detail and path to the vision. It was dynamic, constantly revised and updated, with each version better than the last. It was re-



This view of the library attracts comments from many travellers on the New England Highway. West-facing windows are double-glazed.

visited whenever we suffered a set back or delay. We started with a Forward Management Plan in 1991. Financial constraints mean that ours would be a long-term program. Initially, the plan was to expand the existing building by approximately 200 m<sup>2</sup>. It was less than was needed but it was a start. It opened the door for the involvement of the State Library's building consultant, Dr David Jones. With David's advice and the assistance of *People Places*, the State Library's guidelines for library buildings, the plan eventually led to the new library.

## Engagement and consultation

Engagement was a key component. We involved everyone who might influence the journey and our ability to reach our destination. This included library staff, councillors, executive management, other council staff, State Library staff, Friends of the Library, other library users and community groups. Some departed and their replacements were quickly engaged in the journey. Others were introduced at different stages of the journey. They ranged from consultants, the architect and the builder to furniture and equipment suppliers. They not only shared our vision but enriched it. The breakthrough came when key stakeholders took ownership of the 'the vision' with strong support coming from

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several councillors and administrative staff. I capitalised on this by developing a 'Brief for Councillors' outlining the history of the project. This resulted in full council support of the project and a commitment to funding it. Ownership of the project by key stakeholders led to a commitment to excellence. There were no cutbacks even when the initial estimate of \$2.8 million blew out to \$4.5 million due to the delays.

Consultation embraced all stakeholders and acted as a checklist to ensure the vision and our planning were based on fact and would best meet current and future needs. It helped mould revisions and most importantly it assisted in raising revenue. For funding bodies it is essential. Our consultations included many different formats: scenario planning, user needs analysis, focus groups, surveys and interviews. The focus groups were particularly fruitful. We had 20 of these; each one targeted specific users such as youth, aboriginal, businesses, parents. They formed part of the User Needs Analysis conducted by the consultant Dr Veronica Lunn and the design brief, developed by Dr David Jones, was based on the outcomes of her analysis.

Throughout the journey (and even before it began) we were constantly focused on raising the value of the li-

brary in the eyes of both Council and the community. Our success in this laid the path to the new library. In 1986 Singleton library had 3 staff, a stock of 29 845 items, an Apple IIe computer and 93 180 loans per annum. By 1999 it had 9.14 full-time equivalent staff, a stock of 47 015, a network of 23 PCs and server, 5 printers, a scanner and an Internet Service Providers Point of Presence and 185 711 loans per annum. It was evident that the old building, even with the proposed extensions, could not support this growth.

The new library celebrated its first birthday in August 2005. As expected, it has seen a new growth period. Opening hours extended from 51 to 58 per week. There are 12.27 full time equivalent staff and a stock of 51 289. Public access PCs increased from 8 to 17 plus 11 in the training room. In addition there are 4 OPACs located in different sections of the library and the Quiet Study Room has 5 data outlets for personal laptops to access the internet without charge. Loans have increased by almost 28 per cent and visitors by more than 42 per



Large windows allow natural light to flow throughout the library

cent. Computer usage has increased by almost 75 per cent and new members by almost 103 per cent.

The future is bright and plans are in place to capitalise on the opportunities our new facility offers.

*Note: Robyn can e-mail copies of the Brief for Councillors, the Design Brief, the calculations for shelving (very detailed, with 10 and 20 year projections) and the grant application (includes calculations for size of library). She can also lend a copy of the User Needs Analysis. E-mail contact: rtonks@singleton.nsw.gov.au.*

*A presentation Robyn gave in October 2005 is now available online at <http://www.slsw.gov.au/professional/publiclibrarybuildings05.cfm>.*



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