

# **The Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, 1998 to 2008**

## **The Final Four Years of a Ten-Year Journey**

### **Revisiting the “Cohen Study” — Redefining B&ECPL’s Future**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In late 1998, Aaron Cohen Associates, Ltd. (ACA) delivered a strategic service proposal to the Board of Trustees of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library (B&ECPL). ACA’s report, *The Buffalo and Erie County Public Library in the Third Millennium*, suggested a roadmap of changes to ensure the relevance and survival of our community’s regional library system as it entered a new era.

The Library Board of Trustees accepted the report and shared it with the community in one preliminary session with the Erie County Legislature and subsequent public meetings conducted at an unprecedented 22 locations across the 1,045 square-miles of B&ECPL’s chartered service area.

Neither elected officials nor the public at large would entertain the consultants’ notions of a leaner, more modern library system, preferring instead to cling to the traditional model, as expensive and antiquated as it might be, and ignore warnings that stated:

*Within its current context of operations, should there be a downturn in Erie County revenues and those cuts are passed on to the Library, services will have to be curtailed. The Board and administration will plan the cuts to minimize the impact, but the reductions will be obvious throughout the System. It will be difficult, if not impossible, to avoid layoffs. (B&ECPL in the Third Millennium; Summary Volume, page 58) Failure to act signals that B&ECPL ... will fall victim to the austerity measures imposed by outside forces... Ultimately there is a choice: fewer outlets that provide good library service or fewer outlets that do not. (ibid., page 79)*

That was seven years ago.

The Library Board performed its due diligence in sharing the recommendations and predictions, and in listening to elected leaders and citizens. In direct response to the nearly universal outpouring of resistance to downsizing or consolidations, the Board issued a revised plan, *Expanding Horizons: Directions for Superior Public Library Service in Erie County* (December 2000), endorsing nearly every element of the ACA plan but agreeing to preserve the 52-library model as long as there were sufficient resources to sustain it. Many of the lessons learned and successes achieved during the three-year period of that planning document led to a subsequent strategic plan in 2004, *Breaking*

*New Ground: A Blueprint for Strengthening a Community Through Exceptional Library Service.*

By the end of 2004, many of the ACA predictions had become reality. The well was running dry, and, as forecast, the Library System would have to change if it hoped to endure.

Today, B&ECPL has no choice but change.

Change means downsizing and living within a smaller operating budget. Change means saying good-bye to conscientious and talented staff who have made library work not only their livelihood but their life. Change means closing the doors of libraries that have introduced children to the wonder of reading, seniors to a tranquil haven that brings the world of information to them on their own terms, and adults to the skills they require to interview successfully for their next job, change the oil filter on their car, learn a second language or manage their personal finances.

As we proceed into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are fewer corner mailboxes and fewer corner stores than many of us remember from days past, fewer firehouses and police precincts, fewer public and parochial schools, and — in the fullness of time — there will be fewer public libraries.

What the B&ECPL must preserve as a System is that which offers the greatest capacity to deliver quality library resources and services to the largest number of Erie County residents within the limits of available funding.

The following document returns, perhaps for the final time, to the seven-year-old ACA planning report, a.k.a. the “Cohen Study.” It will address key elements of the ACA suggestions, illustrating B&ECPL successes in achieving the majority of those recommendations. It will cite changing circumstances or technology that have nullified or mitigated certain recommendations and describe how B&ECPL proposes to deal with those few — but possibly crucial — recommendations that remain unattended.

The Board, staff and administration of the B&ECPL must be commended for their invaluable contributions toward a host of noteworthy accomplishments over the past seven years and for their input in the production of this ACA summary and four-year plan, as requested by Erie County Executive Joel A. Giambra. Given the compressed three-week timeframe in which this document was generated, it does not purport to be exhaustive, but major issues as they are known today are addressed.

*Michael C. Mahaney  
Director, B&ECPL  
July 29, 2005*

## **GOVERNANCE and OPERATIONS: Overseeing Erie County's Most Popular Regional Service**

ACA was openly critical of the complicated and often unwieldy system of governance that is uniquely B&ECPL's. Despite this criticism, ACA cited the grassroots activism of local library boards as a significant strength.

ACA's suggestion that local library boards become purely advisory received a cold shoulder from the trustees who occupy those boards and wield authority over local staffs and facilities. Admittedly, management of a regional library system might be simpler if a single board retained authority over all library personnel and authored operating policies for all locations, but one must ask if the advantages of such centralized and over-arching authority outweigh the liabilities.

Certainly, as we approach a compression of the Library System in the months ahead, alienating and antagonizing those local boards by suggesting they should be relegated to a purely advisory status might be inadvisable.

ACA also proposed that B&ECPL, which is a local government in its own right, should seek taxing authority for its direct benefit. The current framework in which B&ECPL receives public financial support is through an annual process that involves a request by the Library Board of Trustees to the Erie County Executive who, in turn, recommends an amount, which is subject to change, prior to adoption by the Erie County Legislature during the annual budget process.

Historically, this method has served the Library reasonably well. Whether that is still the case or might be the case in years ahead remains to be seen.

In New York State, there are other ways to fund, organize and govern libraries, and B&ECPL staff has begun investigating alternatives to determine whether the current model should be changed and, if so, when. The New York State Library's Division of Library Development (DLD) has been helpful in this pursuit, but a decidedly superior option has not been identified.

B&ECPL trustees and staff have been loath to propose the closing of any libraries, including the 22 (36 locations) funded by B&ECPL in a contractual relationship. The service excellence assured through System affiliation will be lost should some of these independently chartered contract libraries attempt to go it alone. B&ECPL senior staff will make recommendations to contract library boards related to revised staffing configurations (based on Process Improvement Project analysis) that can result in operating cost reductions. With the assistance of New York State DLD, B&ECPL is prepared to explore alternative funding mechanisms that might sustain some of the contracting libraries the System can no longer fund. It is not possible to forestall all

closings, so System administration will communicate alternative building use strategies under investigation for Buffalo branches.

As the ACA team examined both B&ECPL governance and operations, a recommendation arose to establish “One Hiring Authority,” a means of simplifying the complex structure that results from more than 20 independent employers, each of which administers essentially identical functions. To institute a program that would meet all of the ACA objectives would require an amendment to New York State Education Law and the cooperation of each independent library board chartered to operate in Erie County (currently 23 in number, including the B&ECPL System Board).

To achieve cost control objectives and reduction of liability exposure without the legislative and inter-governmental cooperation necessary to achieve “One Hiring Authority,” B&ECPL created the Centralized Human Resources (CHR) Program. A voluntary program introduced as a pilot in 2001, CHR conveys several of the intended advantages of “One Hiring Authority” without a sweeping overhaul of B&ECPL governance.

CHR affords the following benefits:

- Annual cost savings of funds now paid to independent payroll processing companies;
- Reduced exposure to IRS/State Department of Revenue fines for errors and omissions related to payroll taxes;
- Significantly simplified interactions with the New York State Retirement System, eliminating most paperwork now completed at the local library level;
- Participation/guidance in hiring processes to ensure adherence to fair employment rules, reducing liability exposure from errors made by untrained and inexperienced staff and/or trustees;
- Simplified accounts payable and financial monitoring by eliminating need for quarterly checks and separate cash-flow systems to support payroll, and
- Centralized health benefits for all staff, as well as retirees, eliminating the risk of providers denying Erie County group rates to contracting libraries.

Currently, B&ECPL’s Human Resources (HR) Office, which has only two full-time employees (Assistant Deputy Director and Administrative Clerk) and two full-time vacancies (Senior Library Clerk and Receptionist) is responsible for human resources issues, benefits management, etc., for more than 630 active employees. Of the 630, 167

are CHR library employees. B&ECPL's Payroll Office works closely with the HR Office in handling payroll functions for those same 630 employees.

Today, eight contracting libraries (14 locations) have joined the CHR program.

The following libraries are waiting to join CHR: Orchard Park (53 employees), North Collins (9 employees), Elma (13 employees), Hamburg (30 employees) and Eden (8 employees). The Clarence Public Library (20 employees) has expressed interest.

The remaining contracting libraries employ 237 people.

Under the current 52-library system, if all contracting libraries were to join CHR, B&ECPL's HR and Payroll Offices would be responsible for the human resources and payroll needs of more than 1,000 employees. Under those circumstances, Payroll would require at least one additional part-time position. HR would need to fill one full-time vacancy and add a part-time clerical position for rotation/substitution at the reception desk.

If the Library System were downsized to 75% or less of current operations, both the Payroll and HR Offices might be able to forego the addition of part-time staff. Economies would be realized at the local library level also, enabling position eliminations, downgrades or other savings.

Two suggested advantages of ACA's "One Hiring Authority" that have not been realized under CHR but might attract renewed attention and importance as the Library System downsizes are cross-jurisdictional re-assignment of personnel and a single seniority pool. These features permit greater flexibility in the management of staff and might ensure, in the event of layoffs, that staff with greater seniority would not be furloughed at one location, while employees at another location with less seniority are allowed to retain their jobs.

### **Other Human Resources Initiatives**

In September 2002, a Benefits Committee consisting of B&ECPL trustees and staff, as well as staff and trustees from various contracting libraries, assembled to standardize benefits for contract library personnel who are not represented by any employee bargaining units. This committee identified, defined and revised pertinent terms and conditions and developed an Employee Benefits Package that was transmitted to the B&ECPL Board of Trustees in late 2003. This long awaited and often requested agreement explains various employee benefits afforded to contracting library blue- and white-collar full-time, part-time and regular-part-time employees. Such benefits are funded annually by B&ECPL, but administration of those benefits had been inconsistent

in some locations. In January 2004, the Employee Benefits Package became a part of B&ECPL's annual agreement with all contracting libraries.

### **FUNDING and FINANCES: Focus on Revenue, Cost Containment and Accountability**

In 1976, B&ECPL had 576 full-time employees. Thirty years later, in 2005, the full-time staff has been reduced by 43% to fewer than 330. Meanwhile, the Library System's performance measures (e.g., 2004 circulation) indicate that the Library System has doubled its productivity even as it has introduced a host of new services (e.g., public access computing and web-based reference) during that same 30-year period.

This seems a clear indication that B&ECPL not only manages its resources well but also approaches challenges with innovation and always keeps an eye on economy.

ACA acknowledged B&ECPL's need to control costs even as it seeks new revenues to support standard operations and special programs. Providing a wealth of resources, services and programs, B&ECPL has long represented a tremendous value for the investment of tax dollars. In recent years, the Library has investigated and implemented measures to reduce expenditures and generate income. In 2001, the System retained the services of a collection agency, Unique Management Services, to assist in obtaining outstanding fees that exceed a specified threshold, encourage the prompt return of library materials and manage public funds and property more responsibly. That same year, the Central Library took part in a pilot project applying new technology to monitor utility use. A grant from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) allowed this program to be successfully expanded to larger library facilities in 2003, saving tens of thousands of dollars. E-mail notification and, most recently, telephone notification were introduced to inform patrons when requested materials become available and when borrowed materials are overdue. Correspondingly, B&ECPL was able to discontinue mailing traditional paper notices, an annual expense approaching \$100,000.

Libraries across America face stagnant or declining public funding and must implement a variety of strategies to generate new income. ACA cited B&ECPL's need to explore such avenues, and B&ECPL has done so. In 2003, for the first time in 20 years, the Library System increased its overdue fine rates, essentially doubling the previous schedule, in order to bridge a six-figure budget shortfall. More recently, B&ECPL instituted a new fee, charging non-residents \$40 per year for borrowing privileges. Through the settlement of a price-fixing lawsuit against major record labels and retailers, B&ECPL was awarded 11,000 CDs in a wide range of musical genres. After incorporating appropriate titles into the collection, the Library conducted a liquidation sale, with all proceeds benefiting future music purchases. In recent months, B&ECPL

has partnered with its automation vendor, Sirsi Corporation, and Barnes & Noble.com to offer online book purchasing services for patrons. For every purchase made via the Library's online catalog, Barnes & Noble.com returns a percentage of the proceeds to the Library. In months ahead, it is likely the Library will institute a fee for patrons who wish to request items and have them delivered to their local library. The Central Library has embarked on two innovative revenue-generating opportunities, a specialty gift item store that opened in 2000 and a full-service café that opened in 2005. Both ventures generate revenue to benefit the Library System's bottom line and enhance a visitor's experience.

Established in 1991 to assist B&ECPL in private fundraising, ACA devoted some attention to the Library Foundation of Buffalo and Erie County, Inc., observing:

*When the Foundation was created more than half a decade ago, many staff, trustees and government officials knowledgeable about the Library thought it would become an aggressive philanthropic arm of the institution... Library trustees and staff are disappointed over the lack of Foundation efforts to raise funds that are critical in creating a reasonable future for the Library. (B&ECPL in the Third Millennium; Summary Volume, page 46)*

Many projects await, including ongoing renovations of the Central Library and potential new model library construction in various parts of Erie County. These cannot be left to chance. As public funding dwindles, it becomes increasingly necessary for B&ECPL to assume a more concerted role in its own fundraising destiny.

While the Library Foundation has experienced sporadic success in attracting substantial and appreciated grants (\$718,000 from the John R. Oishei Foundation in 1998 to improve access to rare and special collections and, in 2000, half of a \$400,000 grant shared with the University at Buffalo's Poetry and Rare Books Collection to catalog rare and special collections, as well as \$270,000 from the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation in 2002 for the new Frank E. Merriweather, Jr. Branch Library), B&ECPL staff, either singly or as members of a collective, have achieved noteworthy successes as well. Every member of B&ECPL's staff has demanding job-specific responsibilities and can devote only a small measure of time to the task of grant writing or fundraising, but the Library has managed to attract \$1.5 million through the federal e-Rate program, more than \$500,000 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (1998 and 1999), \$1 million from the Erie County Legislature for an Educational Technology Initiative in 2000, a total of \$105,000 between 2002 and 2004 (with an additional \$35,000 pending in 2005) from Verizon SuperPages, and many other grants and awards that benefit the Library and its patrons, including a substantial bequest from the estates of Richard and Robert Krieger (approximately \$1 million) that has been designated for use in the Central Library Renovation Project.

Many trustees, members of B&ECPL administration and even the current president of the Library Foundation's Board of Directors have, at intervals since the release of the ACA study, suggested that the Library System establish its own development operation to pursue funding for priority projects and services that the Library Foundation considers beyond its mission or its capacity.

Now is the time. Whether through the redirection of a vacant administrative position or the recruitment of a development firm through a personal services contract, the Library must shift its own fundraising operation into higher gear.

Further, it is clear that fundraising and "friend-raising" are related. A new development officer might play a more integral role in recruiting volunteers (and other friends) to serve the Library, perhaps coordinating such efforts to benefit B&ECPL in ways never previously explored.

### **IMPROVING LIBRARY SERVICES: Answering the Question, "Why Are We Here?"**

The ACA team made many recommendations in the "Improving Library Services" section of its report. B&ECPL has implemented most of these recommendations, as well as other quality initiatives, in its quest to fulfill its first priority — superior public service. Immediate action was taken with the formation of the New Services Task Force, which devoted its attentions to multiple areas addressed by ACA. Subsequently, the Service Evaluation and Planning Committee was formed to carry out the recommendations of the Task Force and monitor current situations for new service approaches. It remains in existence today, comprised of members from various B&ECPL libraries and job titles.

Service to children was identified as the lynchpin for the future of the Library System. A Youth Services Planning Group was established and is still active in addressing the needs of children and young adults. With the formation of this group, the creation of an Intranet and the provision of personal e-mail accounts for all youth services personnel, staff no longer work in isolation. In addition, biannual System-wide workshops are offered, and training guidelines have been developed for youth services librarians.

Programming guidelines and standards have been established. As an alternative to programming budgets at each location, centralized tools were purchased and posted on the Intranet. Preschool and toddler programming kits and other aids/services to enhance programs are available on the Intranet, and staff at libraries outside Central routinely utilize these tools. A team-programming model was developed and is being used in the Buffalo branches. In its seventh year, *Battle of the Books* is a successful

summer program that attracts several hundred teens who read prescribed books and compete in a Jeopardy-like competition.

Centralized selection of many children's titles has resulted in the timely arrival of new materials on library shelves. System "Crunch Time Collections" were established, accessible via the Intranet, to accommodate subjects that experience peak demands during the school year. These collections are reserved by a library and delivered to it for a specified period of time, avoiding duplication of titles at each library and the cost and shelving requirements that ensue.

B&ECPL continues to expand partnership opportunities and currently works with multiple school districts, Literacy Volunteers, Every Person Influences Children (EPIC), the Library Foundation, Good Schools for All and the Buffalo Alliance for Education.

### **Target Audiences**

Some training in reading readiness is offered to parents, future teachers and daycare providers. Outreach to children is primarily achieved by visits to classrooms.

Kid's Corner and Teen Space sections appear on the B&ECPL website. A parenting section with pertinent links is included on the children's page. Youth Resource Centers, featuring computers for children, are installed at all libraries. Cyber Trains, Cyber Camp and the LEAD lab at the Central Library are relatively new services used to help train children and teens in all aspects of computer use. Until funding problems forced its cancellation, B&ECPL offered "Live Homework Help" online through tutor.com both remotely and at selected libraries.

Attendance at summer reading programs climbs steadily (up 18% between 2003 to 2004) and has resulted in increased State Aid for this program, enabling the purchase of more and better incentives for participating children. The Library Foundation has secured grant funding to enhance summer events.

Although other youth services recommendations have been explored, lack of financial resources prohibit implementation to date, e.g., those that deal primarily with children's space in libraries and enhanced services to young adults.

Services to adults have been greatly improved through the creation of the B&ECPL website, the availability of the web-based catalog, increased database offerings, broadband Internet connections at all libraries and the ability for patrons to request material online and renew items both online and by phone. New procedures in support services enable the Library to deliver bestseller material to patrons at the same time as bookstores. The Library has established an e-Branch, staffed six days per week, to answer questions by e-mail, phone and fax, from the public as well as staff at all

libraries throughout the B&ECPL. Greatly increased and improved staff training, particularly in technology and electronic resources, has enhanced public service.

Staff conducted a survey of all libraries to evaluate services to senior citizens and persons with disabilities. As a result of that survey, libraries were made aware of minor adjustments that could be made in the physical arrangements at locations to serve both populations better. Some assistive technology (i.e., *ZoomText* screen magnifying software) is available at every location. Selected locations offer *Jaws* screen reading software to assist the visually impaired. Handicapped accessible workstations have been installed. Equipment to enhance the library experience for seniors and persons with disabilities has been recommended for purchase, and grants to acquire them are being researched. Guidelines for creating legible print materials for all users were developed and distributed to all libraries. Sensitivity training sessions for staff have been conducted.

Lacking sufficient capital funds to retrofit buildings, not all libraries are in compliance with the standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Particular attention has been devoted to business services and aiding economic development in Western New York. Courses on business electronic resources were developed and offered to the public and staff. Core business reference collections were established in all libraries and augmented collections were placed at regional locations. Appropriate staff has been trained in the use of all of these materials. New and increased electronic databases are offered at all libraries and remotely through the B&ECPL website. Work continues at the Central Library with business organizations, such as the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) and in the maintenance of collections for small businesses. Staff continues to explore the creation of a site at the Central Library for these businesses and agencies to meet with clients and access B&ECPL resources.

### **Outreach and Virtual Services**

2005 budget constraints severely affected outreach services, especially mobile library operations, which have been essentially curtailed. Ironically, this occurred after a two-year study intended to right-size that operation for target populations was completed. Establishment of an outreach coordinator position has been postponed.

Enormous strides have been made in the area of virtual services, as noted above in the summary of adult services. B&ECPL has established a Network Support department and a viable electronic network connecting all libraries. The Library website provides access to its web-based catalog with the ability for patrons to request and renew materials, an expanded offering of electronic databases with MultiSearch capability, an e-mail reference service, information about the libraries and current library programs, a

reference desk with useful Internet links, a Kid's Corner, Teen Space and a digital exhibit developed and mounted in-house.

The number of networked computers at every library has grown. Three computer-training labs have been created (two at the Central Library and one at the East Delavan Branch) and a fourth is due to open at the new Merriweather Library in the fall of 2005. Technology training for staff and the public has become a staple of the System. Due to budget cuts, on-site public training has been severely reduced or suspended throughout the System, but tutorials are available on the Library's website. As mentioned elsewhere, a remote reference center (e-Branch) was established in the Central Library to consolidate phone, fax and e-mail reference services, available to both the public and staff.

### **A Central Library to Serve the System**

In its report ACA noted, "... a well done Central Library space analysis and redesign would increase visitation commensurate with the size of the building, its valuable collections and current levels of staffing." In 2001, with support from the Library Foundation, B&ECPL hired Habiterria Associates to conduct a redesign feasibility study. Working with senior management, a multi-phase, multi-year plan was the result.

Phase I of construction, completed in April 2005, provided a dramatic new entrance and staff-efficient circulation area that includes patron self check-out equipment. A successful revenue-generating café has been added and the store has been updated. The revamped Popular Materials Department and "Ring of Knowledge" program and exhibition area will open in a renovated space in the fall of 2005. Later phases of the proposed renovations would address ACA criticism related to security, wasted space, and recouping costs of operation, including further co-tenancy or multi-use opportunities similar to the café. Last year, some service points were combined, for example, the three-to-one reference consolidation of Music, Microform and Special Collections Departments into the Grosvenor Room. Plans are in place to create a ready reference desk in a reconfigured circulating non-fiction department. Considerable cost savings should be derived through this consolidation and realignment of staff. No additional costs would result from the formation of a single "reference only" department. Adding to the flexibility and efficiency of Central's operation, increased cross training of staff began in 2003.

Stepped up programming at the Central Library has attracted new users. Capitalizing on the Library's exceptional rare book holdings, grant-funded programs highlight specific items or noteworthy collections. From *Frankenstein* to *Alexander Hamilton*, the American Library Association, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Library of Medicine and others have selected B&ECPL as a prime site for several of

their touring exhibits. Later phases of the renovation – not yet funded – would address the shortcomings of storage and exhibition capacity of these collections.

There are many other areas worthy of mention. The Central Library has banks of public access computers. A collections-on-loan program was introduced to share the wealth of Central's collections with other libraries in the System. Retrospective conversion of "closed stacks" materials continues, adding thousands of titles to the online catalog. As noted elsewhere, two computer-training labs are housed at the Central Library.

### **Process Improvement Project: Service Efficiency and Cost Effectiveness**

Two projects under the Service Evaluation and Planning Committee's purview addressed the need for increased efficiency and effectiveness in delivering public library services. The Process Improvement Project (PIP) was launched to determine which activities are being performed by which public service titles and the amount of time staff spends on each activity. The goal has been to streamline processes and procedures, allocate resources to optimum benefit and establish System-wide job descriptions. More than 1,000 public service employees in all locations and departments participated. An imposing quantity of valid data has been collected, and the initial analyses are complete.

In upcoming months and years, PIP data will be utilized to realign staff assignments and improve operational efficiency at all locations. (An important by-product of PIP is the recognition that volunteers play a significant role at certain B&ECPL locations. Policies, job descriptions and training guidelines on the use of volunteers in ancillary roles throughout the System are in development. While the roles of paid employees within the System are invaluable, areas where volunteers can be used, without jeopardizing service quality or infringing on "bargained work," are being studied and will be implemented.)

The Performance Measures Committee, formed to monitor the effectiveness of library services, conducted a System-wide satisfaction survey of library patrons, as well as numerous single-point surveys. The committee worked with the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning to use GIS (Geographic Information System) to plot the System's libraries and match them with 2000 U.S. Census data for their surrounding communities. The satisfaction survey results and Census data are included in PIP information compilations to present a coherent picture of each B&ECPL public service department and community library.

B&ECPL has come a long way since the ACA report was released. An overwhelming number of positive changes have been successfully implemented. The System was poised to enter into an era of state-of-the-art service delivered in an efficient and streamlined manner when the 2005 budget crisis arrived.

## **COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING: How the Message Supports the Mission**

ACA's vision for the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library emphasized generating greater awareness for the System as a whole as well as its individual services, resources, treasures, events and initiatives. B&ECPL has made strides in marketing itself to the community in recent years.

In 2000, a public relations professional was hired to fill an administrative vacancy in the Office of Community Relations, and in 2001, a full-time webmaster position was created through the reclassification of a vacant position elsewhere in the B&ECPL operation.

The ACA Study stressed the need for a public relations campaign to be implemented during the final stages of the planning process as well as for the public to view B&ECPL as a unified System rather than disjointed units across the county. B&ECPL conducted 22 community meetings in the first half of 2002 to present ACA's strategic planning proposal and gather feedback. During the second half of the year, the Library communicated with staff and trustees, patrons, public officials and the media throughout the process of adopting the new plan, *Expanding Horizons*, which endorsed almost all of the ACA recommendations with the exception of a System-wide consolidation program, which elected officials and the public had almost universally rejected.

Also in 2000 and 2001, the Library accomplished the first step in creating and maintaining a consistent, uniform image with the introduction of a vibrant, new logo and identity. B&ECPL developed a comprehensive System brochure, initiated a re-registration campaign, formed an internal publications panel, developed standards for print materials and produced a video highlighting the advantages of replacing antiquated library buildings with new libraries throughout Erie County.

The ACA report also advocated more special programs, enhanced services, new technologies and partnerships. Through print materials, media relations, online content, mailings and cross-promotion with other organizations, B&ECPL has been successful in marketing these initiatives. Examples include promoting the Educational Technology Initiative's *Youth Resource Centers* and *Cyber Trains*, *Summer Cyber Camp*, the *East Delavan* and *LEAD (Libraries Expand Access for Discovery) Computer Training Labs*, *Battle of the Books*, online book clubs, summer reading programs, *Seniors Connect*, *Librarian Life* campaign, the updated *Catalog* and *My Account* service, *Live Homework Help*, electronic databases, e-mail reference and online requests. To assist in communication efforts, B&ECPL launched its official website on December 21, 1998. In 2001, the website, originally designed by a staff committee in a largely volunteer effort at essentially no cost to County taxpayers, was re-released with a completely new look and layout.

In 2004, B&ECPL's website had more than 1,818,146 visitors, providing valuable services as well as timely information. In addition, print materials were updated and created for targeted departments and services, and an internal marketing committee was created.

ACA also encouraged sharing B&ECPL's treasures with wider audiences. The Library has worked diligently on this objective, often in collaboration with the Library Foundation, by sponsoring the international Mark Twain Writing Competition; publishing *The Forgotten "Negro Exhibit," African American Involvement in Buffalo's Pan American Exposition, 1901*; producing the fully illustrated CD-ROM, *Huck Finn: The Complete Buffalo and Erie County Public Library Manuscript – Teaching and Research Digital Edition*, and completing the video, audio and website productions of the "Milestones of Science" collection. Regrettably, these efforts have yet to generate the revenue ACA believed they might, but opportunities await and the Library will pursue them.

ACA recommended marketing the Central Library as a downtown destination. The Central Library hosts and promotes many entertaining and informative events, including author visits, a colloquia series, recurring lunchtime book discussions, national traveling exhibits and programs, the ongoing series of popular Bistro Bookers programs and an annual art show in conjunction with the Buffalo Public Schools. The used book outlet was revitalized, and a gift store opened.

Articulating goals and activities to B&ECPL staff in an effective, timely manner was addressed in the ACA study. The Library introduced a staff Intranet in 2001, subsequently redesigned with more information, resources and tools. Staff also receive regular communication through both e-mail and memoranda.

Since 1998, almost all of ACA's communications and marketing recommendations have been achieved. Among the few that remain unaddressed, B&ECPL might wish to pursue the following:

- A public relations campaign aimed specifically at children and parents
- More aggressive marketing and services targeting the Library's young adult constituency, and
- Publishing a comprehensive calendar of events in print form.

As B&ECPL proceeds with downsizing and re-engineering, public information exchange assumes an even higher priority. B&ECPL must use every medium at its disposal to maintain its positive image in the community, keeping both patrons and non-patrons advised of changes in the System.

## **POLICY DEVELOPMENT: Addressing Access, Accountability, Consistency and Communication**

Over the course of its examination and evaluation of the Library System, ACA consultants became aware that B&ECL had been remiss or deliberately averse to developing and implementing board-approved policies. Today, defining how the Library delivers services, makes itself accessible and responds to user needs, policies are in place and subject to continual review. Concurrently, new policies are generated in a proactive manner to address changing circumstances. In 1999, a committee of staff from contract libraries, Extension Services, the Central Library and B&ECPL administration was established to address policy development and ongoing review. Since that time, this staff committee has worked with the B&ECPL Board's Policy Committee to amend the following policies: Circulation, Rules of Conduct and Guidelines and Procedures for Approval of New Library Construction. In addition, B&ECPL's Collection Development, Cooperation with Organizations and Agencies, Gift and Donor Recognition and Loan and External Exhibition of Rare and Unique Materials policies have been developed and adopted. In 2003, B&ECPL's Access to Internet and Personal Computing Resources Policy was amended to comply with the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) as interpreted by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Policies addressing Volunteer Services, Exhibits, Bulletin Boards and Distribution of Community Information are in development and will be presented to the B&ECPL Board of Trustees for adoption before the end of 2005.

## **TECHNOLOGY: Tools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Library**

Between 1998 and 2005, B&ECPL completed every recommended technological improvement proposed in the ACA study — with the sole exception of implementing “smart cards,” a technology that has more attractive alternatives available today.

To achieve these goals, it was necessary for B&ECPL to build an infrastructure at the Central Library and at each of the contracting libraries and Buffalo branches to support the programs. With this critical foundation in place, B&ECPL has been able to expand the initial set of objectives for improved virtual services, encompassing much more than the ACA consulting team ever imagined.

The significant accomplishments of the past seven years have allowed B&ECPL to become a leader in library information technology. This trend must not lose momentum, but continue to keep pace with the needs of patrons and staff in a fast-paced, dynamic, technology-reliant world.

The following represent some of these technology improvements:

- In 1999, B&ECPL completed its basic electronic network so that all locations have equal access to the online catalog. Through this catalog, both staff and patrons can determine: 1) whether the System owns a particular item, 2) precisely where it is located and 3) if it is available at that time. Patrons also receive the option to place a reserve for the item if it is not available at their location, so it can be shipped from another site to their library of choice.
- Network reliability and response time improved dramatically in 2002 when all 56K Frame Relay circuits were replaced with point-to-point T1 lines. (A dedicated T1 circuit is at least 28 times faster than the 56K Frame Relay communication line.)
- More than 700 networked computers have been deployed to all B&ECPL locations, providing public access to a powerful array of electronic resources and services, as well as the Internet and all it entails. Further, more than 300 workstations were configured and deployed for Library staff to conduct circulation transactions, reference services, office tasks and many other functions.
- In 1999, all B&ECPL locations received access to a wide range of electronic periodical databases with full-text content. Remote access for patrons in school, at home or in the workplace was also made possible to anyone with a valid library card.
- B&ECPL offers access to much more than electronic reference databases that include everything from encyclopedias for children to highly specialized databases used most often by college students pursuing advanced or graduate studies. B&ECPL staff review and evaluate useful and reliable websites and post those sites as recommended sources of information for the public.
- The use of Local Area Networks (LANs) at each library location throughout the county and B&ECPL's Wide Area Network (WAN) allow access to an expanded portfolio of electronic resources at lowest possible costs.
- Personal computers in children's areas have been configured with software that is age-graded to help students become more successful in school. Programs have been selected to help kids improve motor skills (manipulation of the mouse and keyboard), pre-reading readiness, reading and math ability. With the initial roll-out of public access computing (1998-1999), a special "profile" for children was developed. It included *Encarta* and valuable programs for younger children, as identified by the Bill and Melinda Gates Library Foundation.

- In late 2001, with funds from the Erie County Legislature’s Educational Technology Initiative (ETI), additional computers, designed specifically to assist students in grades four through eight in meeting the new New York State Standards, were deployed to all B&ECPL locations. In 2003, the public access model was updated to include many new age-appropriate educational programs.
- Formal technology training for staff began in a new Central Library computer training lab in 1998. The curriculum emphasized core competencies necessary for B&ECPL employees to do their jobs (prior to the introduction of public access computing). This training, for both staff and public, emphasized: 1) basic computer familiarity, 2) B&ECPL catalog access, 3) Internet navigation and reference skills, 4) use of electronic reference and children’s programs and 5) application operation. Since the introduction of technology training, more than 1,000 staff have received basic or specialized (depending on job-related responsibilities) training or re-training.
- Another public service priority (curtailed in 2005 as the result of budget cuts) has been training in computer and network use, including Internet navigation, for children and adults of every age. In 2000, a formal training facility was added at the East Delavan Branch in the City of Buffalo, with funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2003, a second training lab was opened at the Central Library for staff and patrons with generous funds from Verizon SuperPages.
- “Train the Trainer” courses were developed and provided to staff from all locations for use in conjunction with three “Cyber Trains” — traveling computer labs made up of 8 to 10 laptop computers with wireless equipment and a digital projector. With the “Cyber Train,” virtually any meeting room can be turned into a formal classroom for a technology training session. Network Support works with each library to provide equipment setup and classroom monitoring.

The only ACA technology recommendation B&ECPL has not addressed is the introduction of “smart cards” to enhance customer ability to use library services that involve financial transactions. While B&ECPL has chosen not to institute a library-specific “smart card,” the infrastructure has been developed to incorporate an easier-to-use and less expensive e-Commerce solution — debit and credit card processing. In the future, Library patrons will be able to pay fines and fees for printing and placing online requests using existing options that do not require a major investment in equipment and materials.

Neither ACA nor any professional prognosticator can enumerate every technological advance or necessity far beyond a very near horizon. B&ECPL continues to monitor

progress in information technology and completed the following projects and upgrades that were not envisioned by ACA:

- Migration to Sirsi Unicorn from the obsolete “DRA Classic” Library Automation System;
- Participation in the federal “e-Rate” program to maximize discounts and underwrite important programs and services;
- Compliance with the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) to ensure the continued receipt of federal e-Rate (\$1.5 million received to date) discounts by implementing a filtering solution on all staff and public access workstations;
- Implementation of Citrix to extend the life of the existing hardware and reduce staff support costs;
- Addition of “Enhanced Content” (i.e., cover art, book summaries and reviews) to the online Web2 Catalog;
- Replacement of OCR Wands and “Date Due” cards with Bar Code Scanners and Receipt Printers;
- Preparation for “Y2K;”
- Implementation of “Touch and Go” finger-imaging pilot project;
- Completion of B&ECPL’s first Digital Imaging Project – *The New York to Paris Race*;
- Incorporation of WebFeat, a federated search engine that allows patrons to search multiple electronic reference databases simultaneously and staff to tabulate the activity of individual databases, so they can make informed decisions about retention or cancellation;
- Replacement of costly paper patron notices with a voice automation system, SVA;
- Installation of Self-Charge Machines at four B&ECPL locations, and
- Design and deployment of “Cyber Camp,” traveling computer training labs.

History has shown that it is impossible to continue to implement new systems without protecting the current collection and investing in its support and development. The

infrastructure must be maintained and enhanced, and the existing technology must be constantly evaluated, sustained and “weeded” as necessary. To remain a leader, B&ECPL must work hard to maintain these advances by preserving and replacing components as necessary and introducing new elements as required.

In particular, the following technology projects are required within 24 to 36 months to reduce operating costs, increase efficiencies and improve public service:

- Patron self-authentication and automated printer cost recovery;
- Voice communication (Telephone) system upgrade;
- Productivity improvements including additional Self-Charge Machines;
- Wireless access for patrons at the Central Library and most libraries, and
- e-Commerce to fulfill and exceed the ACA “smart card” proposal.

### **FACILITIES and INFRASTRUCTURE: Breaking New Ground for Erie County’s Next Library System**

Of all the ACA recommendations, the one that attracted the greatest attention and generated the most controversy and open resistance was the call for “fewer, better libraries.” The ACA proposal for new, state-of-the-art libraries that serve regions, not just neighborhoods, that offer better services and collections in more appealing environments was lost in the public outcry to sustain “what we have” at the expense of “what might be.”

In 2005, reduced financial support from Erie County resulted in staffing and service cuts throughout the B&ECPL, but every library building and every local library’s charter was preserved. This was achieved by cutting staff and lowering many libraries’ operating schedule to New York State’s minimum service standard. Use of this approach might be viewed as arbitrary, but it had the advantage of objectivity and relative equity, applying factors that are not generated or influenced locally.

No library was spared the pain, but multi-branch libraries bore a heavier share of reductions because of their ability to meet minimum standards by assigning open hours discretely among two or more locations.

All B&ECPL locations now operate at the lowest level possible for the continued maintenance of State charters and registrations. Further cuts jeopardize not only those charters and registrations, but the ability to receive public funding of any kind.

In light of static or declining revenue in 2006, B&ECPL can no longer trim hours at individual locations but must acknowledge that some libraries will not be funded beyond 2005.

Many considered the ACA concept of a “Third Millennium Fund” — \$45 to \$50 million assembled to underwrite a new B&ECPL infrastructure — unrealistic, at the very least. In Erie County’s struggling economic environment, the suggested sums appeared beyond almost anyone’s wildest dreams. Certainly, in light of the past 10 months, the notion seems farfetched, even preposterous.

What might appear more conceivable today is a smaller commitment, between \$2 and \$3 million per year from the Erie County Fiscal Stability Authority — perhaps with other matching funds — to engineer a more reasonable overture to a long-range rebuilding of the Library System.

The sheer magnitude and scope of ACA’s “Third Millennium Fund” might be, at least in part, what spelled its disaster. It collapsed under its own weight before it left the gate. With a more modest sum, model library demonstration projects could be developed and advanced, setting the stage for others to follow.

***Design it. Build it. Prove it.***

The most frustrating aspect of what comes next is that some libraries must close before such projects even begin. ACA and the B&ECPL Board of Trustees hoped that no library would close before its replacement was ready to open. Under today’s fiscal realities, that no longer applies.

Some libraries will close within a matter of months, but it will be at least two years before the first of the “next generation” of libraries is ready to open.

That does not mean, however, that a new framework can’t be constructed, one that is neither patchwork nor piecemeal — nor inherited from previous generations. A new system can be designed to reflect Erie County’s shifting demographics, to anticipate growth and decline, to cross municipal boundaries, bridging communities, not dividing them.

There will be fewer, no doubt, but with imagination and commitment they could be far better than what we have today.

To prepare for these new libraries, B&ECPL’s Board of Trustees revised and adopted Guidelines and Procedures for New Library Construction in April 2002. By October 2005, the B&ECPL Board will receive a staff-generated Generic Building Program,

which can be customized for any new library construction project and can expedite the process of designing state-of-the-art libraries without re-inventing the wheel.

Further, it is the hope of B&ECPL staff that a true “model library” can be designed in a modular form, so a basic plan can be utilized multiple times, reducing overall design costs but allowing for reasonable modifications to accommodate variable size/shape building lots and facades that complement unique street-scapes.

As noted elsewhere, B&ECPL as a System operates many libraries, which represents both a strength and a weakness. Within the City of Buffalo, 15 unique neighborhoods have enjoyed the presence of libraries, enhancing the quality of life in some otherwise depressed areas. B&ECPL officials share the concern of residents that the closing of a library will leave another vacant building to compound the decline in certain parts of the city. To mitigate this, the Library Board and B&ECPL senior staff are prepared to work with the Common Council and Mayor to explore alternative uses of former library buildings. Many possibilities exist including reading rooms, community meeting or homework centers staffed with volunteers, perhaps utilizing book collections and computers transferred by B&ECPL. Such centers might be sponsored by a local business, school or other community organization. With the City’s permission (Buffalo owns all structures except the Martin Luther King Branch, which is leased), buildings could be offered on a bid basis to other non-profit organizations for use as a headquarters or service outlet.

## **2005-2008 : Summary and Targets**

As indicated above, most recommendations of the 1998 ACA study have been endorsed and executed. It is time to set the ACA study aside and press onward with new insights and new vision.

The preceding narrative identifies many tasks and objectives to be addressed between now and the end of 2008. The following brief project list represents B&ECPL’s primary targets over the identified four-year planning period, 2005 to 2008. Only one of these (New Model Library Construction) requires a significant financial investment. The others are intended to control costs, reduce costs or generate new revenues to support operations, special programs or new services.

### **1. Design and Construction of New Model Libraries**

Of all the ACA recommendations, the one that attracted the greatest attention and generated the most heat and open resistance was the call for: “fewer, better libraries.” The ACA proposal for new state-of-the-art libraries that serve regions, not just neighborhoods, that offer better services and collections in more

appealing environments was lost in the public outcry to sustain “what we have” at the expense of “what might be.” The goal is to site such facilities in optimal locations, emphasizing (a) multi-municipal partnerships that cross traditional boundaries, bridging communities, not dividing them or (b) areas where consolidations of multiple libraries can achieve genuine cost control and expanded community access. A true “model library” must be designed in modular form, so a single plan can be utilized multiple times, reducing overall design costs but allowing for reasonable modifications to accommodate variable size/shape building lots and facades that complement unique street-scapes. Three (3) projects should be developed over the planning period, with a **minimum investment of \$2 to \$3 million dollars annually through 2008**. Matching funds from interested partners must be encouraged to maximize regional impact and local “ownership.”

## 2. **Centralized Human Resources Program**

B&ECPL’s Centralized Human Resources Program must be extended across the breadth of the System, incorporating **every** contracting library **before the end of 2008**. Other elements of the ACA “One Hiring Authority” concept must be investigated to achieve greater management flexibility and cost containment throughout the county.

## 3. **B&ECPL Development Office**

B&ECPL must establish its own development operation or enlist corporate counsel under a personal services contract to pursue funding for priority projects, programs and services that the Library Foundation of Buffalo and Erie County, Inc. considers beyond its mission or its capacity. This function must be established and operational **in 2006, if not before**.

## 4. **Process Improvement Project**

The Process Improvement Project (PIP) was launched to determine which activities are being performed by which public service titles and the amount of time staff spends on each activity. The goal has been to streamline processes and procedures, allocate resources to optimum benefit and establish system-wide job descriptions. PIP data must be utilized to realign staff assignments and improve operational efficiency at all locations **before the end of 2008**.

From today forward, Erie County’s leadership should focus not on how far we must fall before we strike bottom but on how high we should set our sights to attain the excellence our community deserves.