CREATIVE COLLISIONS

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR LEARNING, INNOVATION AND COMMUNITY

A Report of the Stockton-San Joaquin County Dialogue on Public Libraries

Sarah Carpenter and Joaquin Alvarado
Rapporteurs

September 7, 2018
Stockton, California
Creative Collisions: New Directions for Learning, Innovation and Community

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This report is written from the perspective of informed observers at the Stockton-San Joaquin County Dialogue on Public Libraries. Unless attributed to a particular person, none of the comments, ideas or recommendations contain in this report should be taken as embodying the views of carrying the endorsement of any specific participant or affiliated organizations or employers at the Dialogue.

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Stockton-San Joaquin County Dialogue on Public Libraries

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### Stockton-San Joaquin County Dialogue on Public Libraries

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Introduction

The Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries creates unique opportunities for community leaders, innovators and institutional partners to collaborate on developing next generation initiatives for libraries across the country. Libraries play an important role in areas that are priorities for communities, like civic engagement, workforce development, education and democratic discourse. As the nation continues to confront intense polarization, libraries are increasingly serving as third spaces, where diverse populations can coalesce, connect and confront the challenges in their community through open and trusted channels and relationships.

The Aspen Institute, in partnership with the Stockton-San Joaquin County Public Library, convened community leaders from various sectors to align goals across the county and to generate creative and innovative pathways toward addressing those goals at the day-long Stockton-San Joaquin County Dialogue on Public Libraries held at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California on September 7, 2018. The agenda and discussions at the roundtable conference focused on priorities related to learning, economic development, civic development and community wellness. The assembled participants represented a diverse and intergenerational cohort of stakeholders who share a commitment to the residents, institutions and civil society in Stockton and San Joaquin County. Present in the room were a number of long established relationships as well as an important combination of potential new partners.

This report summarizes the key insights, issues and themes discussed by participants at the Stockton-San Joaquin County Dialogue on Public Libraries. It concludes with a set
of recommendations and proposed collaborations to move the ideas into action. This report is not intended to be prescriptive, but to encourage fresh thinking and further dialogue on the role of public libraries in ensuring that every community in Stockton and San Joaquin County is vibrant, prosperous and resilient. The goal is to identify models of innovation and partnerships that are working well, recommendations to strengthen existing initiatives, and proposals to advance development of new partnerships that tap the knowledge and information expertise of public libraries and their networks.

The Stockton-San Joaquin County Context

San Joaquin County embodies many of the complexities of California and the country. Within its borders the urban, suburban and rural coexist. It contributes greatly to and is impacted deeply by the economic forces of the technology driven Bay Area and the agriculturally dominant Central Valley. Its history as a magnet for migrants continues to this day, the deep legacies of which are captured by the great diversity of its people. The University of the Pacific anchors the higher education sector that also includes two junior colleges and has led the important Beyond Our Gates initiative to build cross sector partnerships, particularly to support education. Stockton is also a major transportation hub. For all of its strengths, it is deeply challenged by poverty and ongoing gaps in educational attainment for its people.

Today, San Joaquin County is at a pivotal moment. The City of Stockton, the county’s largest municipality, suffered greatly from the Great Recession and municipal bankruptcy, during which library and recreation full-time staff were reduced by 50 percent, library hours reduced by 48 percent, one library branch was closed, community center hours reduced by 20 percent, and two pools were closed. As the service provider
supporting library services across the county, rollbacks at the Stockton-San Joaquin County Public Library had significant impacts on information access and services across the region.

Six years later, Stockton ranks among the top 20 fiscally healthy cities in the country, according to the Fiscal Times’ analysis of 2015 data. It was considered the healthiest of three large cities recovering from municipal bankruptcy. As the city continues its recovery, it has focused renewed attention to the library system. The city has reopened a closed branch, added 26 new staff members, implemented micro-libraries in community centers and it is now operating an additional 500 hours per week and currently building a combination library and recreation center.

The City of Stockton demonstrated its need and support for increased library services by the passage of Measure M (also known as Strong Communities) in November 2016. Measure M implemented a ¼ cent special transactions and use sales tax for a period of 16 years for the provision of library and recreation services.

Although a division of Stockton’s Department of Community Services, the Stockton-San Joaquin Public Library provides library services to communities across San Joaquin County, including suburban areas and more rural communities. The county government and other jurisdictions also provide funding for the library.

“While we now have these resources, the key ingredient we now need is your expertise,” said John Alita, Director of Community Services, the city agency that includes the Stockton-San Joaquin County Public Library. The Dialogue on Public Libraries assembled leaders in the county who know the community’s diversity, history, challenges and potential. “My hope for today is that you’ll bring all that
knowledge to bear in your conversations and that you can help us understand how the library can best support you and support the community that we so deeply care about,” Alita said.

**A Vision and Goals for Stockton and San Joaquin County**

San Joaquin County Supervisor Kathy Miller led off the morning sessions by providing a vision for the county that aligns with the strengths of the library as a locus of knowledge, information, participation and individual empowerment. This vision includes partnerships and collaborations that can be beneficial for securing funding and leveraging new technologies to expand organizational capacity. All of these items are essential for guiding the community through a complex set of social and economic conditions impacting the county’s current health and prosperity.

Many of the challenges facing the community are exacerbated by decisions in state government that have pushed more responsibility down to counties. These include criminal justice issues like incarceration, recidivism and re-entry; cannabis legalization; and homelessness. Given the fiscal constraints and stressors on public systems, Miller stressed that vision and collaboration are essential to building new resources, bolstering the community’s self-esteem and expanding civic literacy and engagement. Miller observed that the county had not always been a full partner in the public libraries for a variety of reasons, and expressed a desire to correct what she described as missed opportunities to connect vital needs and work in the county to library resources and services.

The county is at a turning point, leading the dialogue participants to ask if this is a moment to re-evaluate county priorities and redefine the county’s identity and future
goals. In exploring together what a strong vision for the city and county would look like, they highlighted specific needs for building literacies, civic self-esteem and environments for engagement. More broadly, participants embraced Supervisor Miller’s vision of a healthy community of critical thinkers investing in one another’s success, aligning goals around greater literacy and equity and building partnerships in which solutions are shared with a more generous spirit. Community leaders were focused on embracing big picture goals with practical steps to realizing them.

The daylong dialogue confirmed the close alignment of community goals with the strategic questions and opportunities for the Stockton-San Joaquin County public libraries. Participants consistently returned to a core set of issues and ideas that privilege the library in its evolving role and service in the region. Participants made critical connections between information access and digital literacy with larger issues of economic development and social justice. The role of civil discourse and civic engagement was also linked to addressing criminal justice and racial equity. Improving the education gap and underdeveloped cradle to career pipeline was identified by participants as key connective tissue with the libraries. Rising expectations supported by the administration of a new mayor have moved Stockton closer to long term momentum. Working in five working groups during the dialogue session, participants collaborated to design initiatives that would carry that momentum into sustained progress for the community, with the library as a catalyst for change.

Library Alignment with Community Goals

Libraries have been a repository of information and social connection since their inception and the way information is obtained, consumed, shared and secured has evolved over time. Libraries have maintained their role as a trusted information access
point by adapting and continuing to adapt to these new modes of information access through internet research, offline research and community engagement. Libraries have deployed their often limited resources in strategic ways to capture new opportunities to serve their communities. This trend is often complicated by the accelerating pace of change in the marketplace in the competition for people’s attention. Key service areas were highlighted by the roundtable participants.

**Trusted Information Services.** Participants identified emerging tensions with the Internet in the age of social media. Although it is an incredibly useful research tool, the internet is overloaded with information, some of which is not factual and purposely misleading. This leads to the internet being as much a source of misinformation as actual information. Libraries are increasingly required to support users in finding credible sources and reliable networks for critically consuming information. The internet has become such a basic research tool that people are increasingly expected to be proficient in gathering information this way. This new domain of information literacy has major implications for libraries in our democratic society. Librarians are curators of credibility throughout Stockton and San Joaquin County.

**A Space for Community.** The library acts as facilitator by providing physical space that allows for community gatherings and fosters awareness of new information. Libraries host classes, meetups, community activities and more. Library branches are in diverse parts of each community, providing more opportunities for participation. Libraries in Stockton-San Joaquin don’t just serve community, they create community by inviting users to engage in new ways around their interests and concerns.

**Support for Literacy.** Along with the many innovative services libraries offer, books remain central to their service. Libraries are often the place young people learn the joys
of reading. It is also where adults can develop literacy skills and stay engaged in new literature and digital media regardless of income.

**Connecting to Social Services.** Libraries provide trusted navigation for social services and resources available from government agencies and nonprofits. Roundtable participants highlighted the importance of this function. They also acknowledged that libraries are also basic service providers. The library is a public space equipped with restrooms and temperature control. They also typically have charging stations, computers, and Wi-Fi. All of these resources are crucial to unhoused people—a population participants said utilize the library on a daily basis, sometimes living in the vicinity of the building. In a region that faces housing security issues, the stability and availability of libraries enable workforce development for people who otherwise would not have access to the basic requirements of preparing and applying for employment.

**A Network of Navigators.** Stockton has an important set of trusted institutions providing ongoing support for community members in need of assistance, resources and social services. While these institutions do collaborate, many also serve distinct constituencies based on age (e.g., children), family status (e.g., parents or single mothers), or specific need (e.g., housing, income assistance). Many people have complex needs that extend beyond the scope of one organization, thus making strong networks of services providers important. As critical information providers, public libraries are in a position to help strengthen a network of navigators that can connect people to the help and services they need. As discussed during the conference, some of the most important allies in this network are faith based institutions. They are frequently on the front line when someone needs immediate help and provide a range of important support mechanisms that address the needs of the whole person, not just filling more immediate gaps. Libraries and the faith community can explore ways to
work together more intentionally, along with other parts of the network, to complement and direct people to wider sets of opportunities.

**Digital Literacy and Equitable Access.** The digital divide continues to bedevil communities years after the original framing of the issue in the early days of the Internet. Stockton and San Joaquin County are no exception. Every aspect of work, culture and education has been impacted by ubiquitous connectivity and digitization. Participants highlighted how these factors put particular pressure on minority and low-income citizens. Issues of low education achievement and workforce readiness contribute to a sense that a large percentage of the population in the region was in serious danger of falling significantly behind. This has the potential to lead to further vicious cycles of inequity and displacement if not addressed.

**The Library as a Platform for Community Innovation**

“Innovation is usually a group effort, involving collaboration between visionaries and engineers, and that creativity comes from drawing on many sources. Only in storybooks do inventions come like a thunderbolt, or a lightbulb popping out of the head of a lone individual in a basement or garret or garage.”

- Walter Isaacson, *The Innovators*

Participants highlighted the need for county stakeholders to invest in innovations—big and small—that could spur cultural shifts in the county, creating a more engaged community of civic-minded individuals. An innovative culture is one that embraces new technologies and collaborations and eases barriers to opportunities for ingenuity and advancement.
Growing a Culture of Innovation. Max Vargas, senior policy advisor to Stockton Mayor Michael Tubbs, led off the second morning session by highlighting the ways in which the city is focused on building an ecosystem for innovation to address and solve many of the challenges and goals noted above. He emphasized that a focus on developing human capital is a key element of Stockton’s approach to growing a culture of innovation. Bringing partners together to create a Workforce Development Action Plan, for example, is not only about economic development, but also about building human capital in the community. In the past, efforts to build human capital have left out many populations in the county. Vargas said the city seeks to develop new partnerships with organizations as diverse as Girls Who Code and the county Housing Authority (both reach youth) in order to foster collaboration and creativity that serve as a catalyst for innovation.

Vargas reframed the underlying question about innovation this way: How do you build ecosystems for creative collisions? When thinking specifically about the libraries, Vargas suggested that a playbook for innovation would include the public libraries as incubators, makerspaces, and places of civic engagement and technology training that could micro-size degrees and educational credentials to make these more accessible to more people. Other participants stressed that platforms for innovation require infrastructure, something that libraries, county offices and schools can provide.

Library Strengths. The Stockton-San Joaquin County Public Library has key assets that could be leveraged in the community to advance innovation: people, place and platform.

People. Human capital remains the critical resource in communities and is the critical controlling factor in considering how to move forward in the era of
ubiquitous digitization, dawning artificial intelligence (AI) and economic transformation. Developing and supporting pathways for local residents to build up and support an expanding set of economic and cultural opportunities is essential for libraries to deliver within their missions. So is recognizing people in their wholeness as individuals and not merely as a class of data.

**Place.** Libraries provide physical infrastructure and human capital in a community. They represent investments made over generations that bring people together, help to build community at a time when virtual experience and interactions (often solitary) are on the ascent. Libraries exist within deeply local relationships and histories rooted in their geographies. They reflect the dynamics of their communities and they also struggle with the same issues confronting the rest of the regions they serve. They are also reflections of the strengths and peculiar assets of their locations. For libraries, place is not abstract. It defines their conditions for success.

**Platform.** It is often assumed that platforms are inherently technology based. In the age of social media, this is easily a safe assumption. This trend does not exclude the possibility that civil society institutions can also perform the role of a platform for enabling connections and programming that otherwise would not exist. Libraries are this kind of platform and more. They provide an essential layer of trust that is required to bridge many of the divides that challenge community development.

Participants shared a vision of the city and county libraries continuing to evolve into institutions for programmatic and service innovation. They suggested that libraries open themselves to prudent risk-taking. They agreed that innovation often requires
room for failure—something the public sector often does not have the resources to allow. For this reason, participants suggested that new pilot programs could be launched using outside funding streams like the Friends of the Library or grants from foundations.

**Building on Adjacencies and Local Talent.** Stockton and San Joaquin County are located in the shadow of Silicon Valley, a location synonymous with innovation, so it was no surprise that participants discussed the impact of Silicon Valley on their region. While the tech industry has lit up Silicon Valley, participants discussed how to reposition themselves so that they experience some of tech’s economic prosperity and opportunities for upward mobility in their own communities. Silicon Valley lures young creatives away from their hometowns in the county to work in the tech industry. Moreover, as young people with roots in the community leave, wealthier tech workers are moving into the county in search of more affordable housing. The participants had a strong consensus that reversing the loss of local talent and negative impacts of gentrification would require the economic development, community collaboration and civic engagement that participants underscored throughout the dialogue. These are essential to enhancing the factors that drive overall quality of life.

Participants identified specific opportunities to invite more creatives and millennials into active engagement by leveraging the proximity to the creative capital of the Bay Area with the tech depth of Silicon Valley. New projects, such as planned capital improvements and new library construction, offer important onramps for the next generation to hold a stake in the library and its mission. This proactive approach opens up the possibility of attracting more investment and integration with the strong economic and cultural forces to which Stockton is strategically adjacent.
Building Within. In addition to developing a more dynamic relationship with Silicon Valley and the Bay Area, it is also critical for Stockton to build on its many strengths. Participants suggested ways to cultivate identity and boost pride in the county, like preserving historic sites, or appointing volunteer historians to lead walking tours or talks about focused areas and sites within the county. This awareness of place and people was viewed as especially important for connecting ethnic communities.

Moderating the Influence of Technology. The marketplace, particularly in the tech industries, is guiding youth toward reliance on technology. At times, some participants observed, this reliance borders on unhealthy and addictive. They considered the library’s role in developing well-rounded young people who have the critical thinking skills to use the tools of technology prudently.

Pre-K and Early Literacy. Participants explored how the library could serve as host and incubator for new services for very young children and their families. The ongoing exploration of universal pre-K in California is a critical opportunity for libraries to consider an expanded set of services. Several members of the roundtable imagined including pre-K facilities in new library construction in the county and the impact this could have on school readiness. Picking up this idea, participants discussed the creation of a matrix of critical skills and developmental targets that young people entering the education system should have and that public libraries could use to design effective pre-K programming. This matrix would provide criteria for community investment in pre-K and early literacy while also focusing the libraries core resources on the services that are most aligned with the development of cradle to career learning needs and outcomes. Conversations and collaborations with school systems around early learning and school readiness could extend to supporting the smart application of school-based library resources with those of the public library. School libraries were
particularly hard hit during the recession and would benefit from new energy and integration with public libraries focused on broader community goals.

**Convening.** Local businesses can benefit from the library’s role as a convener. Libraries can host innovation meetups where entrepreneurs can talk, network and learn from each other. The same model could extend to other sectors like art, education or nonprofits. Hackathons are another form of innovative programming that benefits industry and education and that libraries are well-positioned to host in partnership with the local tech community.

The physical space of the library can provide an equitable opportunity for participation only if it has maximized accessibility. Library services must reach every part of the county. Sometimes the library can step outside of its physical space to meet the community in areas more accessible to them. The county’s mobile library visits spaces like senior centers, schools or the Valle del Sol Housing Authority. New modes of bringing people to the libraries were also considered as a means of addressing equity and access issues. Subsidized bus access and shuttles were suggested as practical interventions.

**Focus on Inclusion.** It is important to community leaders throughout the county that members of diverse communities feel included in a sense of pride and belonging. Currently, many do not feel included. In a small but telling example, one participant noted that characters in children’s books do not adequately represent people of color. Children are not regularly seeing kids who look like them in their story books. Details like this can make certain populations feel excluded from the larger community. Those at the roundtable agreed that an investment in diversity and equitable representation would boost civic health, civic pride and engagement. Moreover, they advised that
reaching milestones for success on any of these goals may look different for different parts of the community.

**Creative Collisions**

After the morning sessions, participants were assigned to one of five working groups: Youth and Learning, Adult Learning and Enrichment, Civic Engagement, Economic and Workforce Development, Health and Wellness. Each group was asked to identify opportunities for partnerships that align with priorities in the county that were discussed in the morning. The proposals from each working group were charged with strengthening the community and supporting resilience and innovation, and identifying library strengths that could be leveraged in partnerships to address county-wide goals. Participants were asked to pay particular attention to how the proposals address the needs of vulnerable and diverse populations. Leaders from different sectors of the community were encouraged to consider their existing networks to forge creative collisions across sectors.

**Youth and Learning Working Group**

This working group was tasked with supporting learning for the county’s youth. Since schools already act as their primary learning environment, the group suggested that libraries and other organizations could play a role in preparing young people for school. With that in mind, the working group conceived a specific, ambitious goal for the county: Enroll 10,000 more kids in Pre-K by 2022 through an initiative the group branded 10-4 San Joaquin.
The county has state funding for qualified kids from low-income families to enroll in Pre-K. Currently, only one-third of eligible children are enrolled. There is also a lack of capacity in existing facilities and organizations to serve a significant increase in enrollment. The goals of the group could be captured by adding capacity—thereby also adding jobs—while increasing awareness and access to the expanded services underwritten by the untapped state funding.

10-4 San Joaquin could accelerate closing the equity gap and enable thousands of children to access the benefits of Pre-K. To accomplish this the needs of parents and families have to be centered in the design. The working group identified a number of possible reasons for the enrollment gap including ineffective marketing to parents, a possibly confusing enrollment process for some to navigate, transportation challenges, language barriers, etc.

Members of the working group called out the need to invest early in developing a stronger pipeline for education achievement. In Stockton currently, only 25 percent of high school graduates enter a four-year university. 10-4 San Joaquin was designed to bring multiple stakeholders in existing networks together to concentrate engagement and marketing efforts to recruiting the additional 10,000 children into Pre-K.

The group suggested a pop-up space be designated in a central location to serve as mission control for the initiative. This space would allow organizers to convene participants regularly and also bridge the technology divide to leverage social media and mobile technologies to achieve the goals of the initiative. Parents and family members would work side by side with library staff and civic leaders to rapidly iterate the development of the project plan.
Areas of campaign recruitment include entrepreneurs, educators, parents, librarians, city officials, business leaders and MBA students from University of the Pacific. The first action step identified by the working group was to host a policy lab in which all sectors of the community embed a set of values into the initiative, example: every family should be able to get their kids to preschool even if it means providing support with transportation or language barriers. The next action step is to create a communications campaign to address any gaps in understanding and basic information related to the value and accessibility of Pre-K.

Potential partnerships identified were faith-based organizations, which have strong relationships of trust in the community, and could provide Pre-K programs. The Regional Transit District was also suggested, as they may be able to provide financial help with transportation for parents taking their kids to pre-K. The Community Foundation of San Joaquin could be tapped for its donor development and fiscal sponsorship. Schools and youth education nonprofits like Head Start and First 5 are already focusing on early literacy—partnerships with them could spur cross-pollination leading to growth for all programs.

**Adult Learning Working Group**

This working group addressed ways to make the library a place to learn throughout a community member’s adult life. The group asked what elements of place-making go into making learning fun as well as enriching for adults, and how the library can position itself to expand the opportunities for learning and enrichment for adult residents of the county.
The group proposed a pilot program to launch a learning salon at the library. The learning salon environment should be attractive for all adult ages. The group observed that “fun” adult gatherings often center on food and beverage. “Books and Brews” programs at other libraries were cited as an example. Participants proposed a plan to take some of the issues surrounding prosperity, peace and knowledge and host salons in each library in the county to discuss those issues.

Looking to existing expertise in the community, the working group suggested partnering with the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at University of the Pacific. OLLI offers noncredit courses with no assignments or grades to adults over 50. A partnership with OLLI could bring some of those courses into the library, or OLLI courses could serve as a model for library courses offered to all ages.

The group discussed what enrichment means for adults, and assessed that while learning new skills and knowledge is a big part of adult enrichment, so is giving back to one’s community. In approaching enrichment this way, the group conceived of an idea to engage retired persons to teach their various expertise’s at a learning salon. Not yet retired community members in the business sector may also be willing to volunteer their time and knowledge to enrich the lives of others as well as their own. There is a hunger in the community for experiences that are new and novel; the library can tap into its relationships with the community and its own skill set to expand opportunities for adults across all age groups.

**Civic Engagement Working Group**

This working group conceptualized ways to boost civic literacy and provide pathways for civic engagement. Participants in the roundtable discussion described low civic
esteem as a problem for the Stockton-San Joaquin County region. The working group focused on a unified goal for the county: to cultivate the next generation of change agents invested in the community who can help to change the narrative of the region. They asked how the library could serve as a source of information as well as a facilitator and forum for civic engagement.

The group presented an array of potential programs that could be held in libraries as they are neutral, trusted, public spaces. Participants recommended a series of events focused on lifting the voices of marginalized communities in local government, like forums, debates, or speakers. The library could also implement interactive programs similar to the California Listens Digital Storytelling Workshop, in which the Stockton-San Joaquin County Public Library participated in the summer of 2018. The workshop taught about storytelling while collecting stories for a state archive of what it means to be a Californian. The group agreed that a county-wide effort to document the area’s stories could create a platform where a diverse array of people in the county come together, in a space where their stories are safe, respected and heard.

Creating a safe space is of utmost importance when assessing accessibility of public services. The group considered that some minority communities may not feel comfortable entering a government-run institution, particularly immigrant communities whose fear of deportation may be heightened by recent ICE crackdowns and family separations at the border. Robust civic engagement includes participation from all populations in the community, the group agreed. If the programs are successful, they will be well-attended, meaningful connections will be made, and the public will know what it means to be civically engaged and how to get involved when they are ready.
The Civic Engagement working group identified potential partnerships in the community to reach underserved communities. Little Manila is an enclave of Filipino American culture and history in the Stockton area. It had the largest population of Filipinos outside of the Philippines from the 1920s to 1940s. There has been a movement to preserve the Little Manila Historic Site in Stockton, most of which has already been destroyed—an act contributing to the erasure of the histories of people of color. The Little Manila Foundation encourages minority populations to take pride in their background, a practice that aligns well with the library for a larger county goal of boosting civic self-esteem. Another suggested partnership was with the Housing Authority of the County of San Joaquin, a longstanding organization ensuring affordable housing for low income families. Participants suggested such a partnership could leverage existing Housing Authorities properties and library technology, resources and staff to address digital access and equity challenges.

*Economic and Workforce Development Working Group*

This working group focused on ways to build skills that are helpful for people trying to enter the workforce, transition careers, or grow their entrepreneurial venture. They identified workforce skills, such as digital literacy, not necessarily addressed during school. The group agreed that hands-on experience is vital to success in the workforce. They also highlighted a desire to reinvigorate efforts for people to seek vocational or skilled trade careers.

The working group considered the library as the backbone collaborator because it is a trusted convener and partner. They suggested the library partner with the County of San Joaquin and its Office of Education, all higher education institutions and school districts in the county, trade unions and local businesses for the purposes of identifying
the skills that are needed by employers. The libraries were seen as capable of carrying forward an ongoing conversation to facilitate collaboration. These conversations could help to yield a wide array of programs that leverage the library’s people, place and platform resources like technology, information resources and meeting rooms. And using the library as a convener can create an important forum to resolve more complex problems surrounding workforce development in Stockton and the surrounding county, including issues like the targets for 30 percent local workers on construction projects that Peter Ragsdale, director of the county Housing Authority, said cannot currently be filled due to lack of workers prepared to fill these positions.

The library can play a role in certifying new skills that residents learn. The group suggested that classes held in the library offer alternative certificates or badges to recognize skills acquired—skills like typing or leadership. This would benefit young people build their resumes as they go into the job market. Lessons would be taught by volunteer instructors, which could be acquired through further partnerships, like the School of Business at Stockton University or San Joaquin Valley College, where advanced students could potentially receive credit for teaching courses at the libraries.

The library could also be a key provider of skills development for those who are re-entering the workforce, including moving from welfare to work. Often, not having a high school diploma or GED creates a barrier. This is a barrier that the Stockton-San Joaquin County Public Library can address through expanding its initial experimentation with offering high school equivalency programs.

In addition to skills development, the library could create opportunities for connections between job candidates and employers so that individuals—especially youth—can get the experience that they need. Without discounting the need for basic career readiness
skills, working group members suggested that perhaps the greatest need is for opportunities to gain experience. The working group suggested the library partner with local businesses and invite panels of employers to discuss what hiring managers look for in candidates and to help candidates understand how to find opportunities to gain the experience that they need.

Community Health and Wellness Working Group

This working group took a focused look at healthy eating as a key component in building health and community wellness across the city and county. Participants considered the benefits of developing, with partners, a pop-up kitchen in the library. The City of Stockton already supports a commercial kitchen space and a new pop up could leverage the learnings from it. Possible locations included the new library facility and community center.

Learning to cook is a life skill, and learning to cook healthy meals is extremely important for a good quality of life. The Community Health and Wellness working group envisioned that the pop-up kitchen would allow classes about how to cook particular recipes as well as more theory-focused classes like nutrition for athletes. Classes that involve actual cooking could also partner with food banks and use their ingredients to feed hungry people in the county warm and/or fresh meals.

The group also discussed the opportunity for a commercial kitchen to overlap with workforce development. The Economic and Workforce Development working group suggested programs that offer badges or unofficial certificates for skills taught in the library. Cooking skills like being a line cook, server or chef could be among the skills taught in that potential program.
The working group considered partnerships with several organizations that could teach aspects of healthy eating. The farmers markets were tagged as a potential partner who could benefit from advertising their markets while teaching a lesson on selecting quality produce, for example. They also suggested partnering with culinary arts programs in colleges and vocational schools, and reaching out to students who need experience in a commercial kitchen to offer a chance to teach a course about what they’ve learned.

Receiving enough funding for a commercial kitchen space was identified as a challenge by participants. The working group listed multiple partners that could assist with funding—Community Foundation of San Joaquin, Library and Literacy Foundation for San Joaquin County, and the California State Library.

Conclusion

The people of Stockton and San Joaquin County stand at a crossroads. Before them a healthy and growing community seems tantalizingly achievable given the remarkable pace of change since reaching the nadir of economic distress a few short years ago. Youth, diversity and vitality describe so many changing forces at play in their lives. Yet the challenges of their recent history are not dormant. They continue to surround too many community members who are struggling to meet basic economic needs. Children still face inequitable chances for basic education, to say nothing of higher education. The workforce is increasingly exposed to the pressures of automation and service sector fluctuations that keep wages low and opportunities limited. On either side of it, Stockton-San Joaquin County has to confront the Bay Area’s technological overdrive and entrenched agricultural forces that dominate the verdant Central Valley.
Stockton-San Joaquin County is many things. Naive is not one of them. The people and institutions of the community demonstrate tremendous tenacity and resiliency in all parts of their lives. They find innovative ways to survive and thrive despite a lack of capital and social mobility. The region continues to serve as a major hub and landing zone for new Americans and entrepreneurs from its diverse communities. Stockton-San Joaquin County is not sitting on the sidelines as the future accelerates ahead of them. It is working hard and it is finding ways to keep pace. It is producing new leaders and new alliances that have propelled it into a social laboratory for meeting the great challenges facing Americans. Standing with it is the library, a vital part of the community in its own staff and services, reflecting back the things that make Stockton and San Joaquin County worth fighting for.

The Stockton-San Joaquin County Dialogue on Public Libraries gave communities a chance to reflect on their strengths and unique identity as they imagined the role of the 21st century library in achieving a holistic and healthy future for the communities of Stockton and San Joaquin County. The Dialogue provided a forum to ask questions in a collaborative and collegial space, questions that confront efforts to transform the region. Participants contributed insights and responses that expressed a healthy realism alongside a clear sense of hope for making things better for everyone who lives and works in the city and county. The daylong exploration revealed a deep sense of concern about the entrenched issues of poverty and racism. It also surfaced the need for greater collaboration across sectors. The participants made it clear that the library was a critical institution of civil society with a major role to play moving forward.

Communities can find innovative pathways toward their own definitions of success when they embrace new technologies, new insights and new connections. This report, full of progressive ideas and potential partnerships, was generated from a convening
that lasted one day. Stockton-San Joaquin County has the innovators it needs to grow a culture of innovation and not only reach the goals outlined in this dialogue, but develop and reach newer, loftier goals in time and into the future.