Did you know that you can check out a bike from the Georgetown Public Library?

Georgetown Public Library partnered with their local Convention and Visitor’s Bureau (CVB) in 2014 to purchase bikes to support tourism in their historic downtown square and community hiking trails. Anyone can check out bikes for the day from the library or the Visitor’s Center. The program aligns with the CVB’s interest in highlighting Georgetown’s “life in balance” brand, as well as the City’s commitment to becoming a national leader in green and renewable energy. “Our bike program has been extremely successful. It’s great to see our bikes around town being enjoyed by visitors and residents alike,” says Library Director Eric P. Lashley.

Like Eric, Texas librarians have embraced community engagement wholeheartedly. With a rich tradition of providing information to all, libraries have become community hubs offering technology-rich resources and 21st century tools. Public libraries are where your local residents go to create resumes, complete online job applications, study for the GED, access free WiFi on their personal devices, obtain online homework assistance, create objects with 3-D printers, and build literacy skills at all ages.

Addressing Community Needs in Wolfforth

Increasingly, you will find your public librarian outside the library building, creating partnerships that meet a community’s most critical needs. For example, in Wolfforth, Texas, Library Director Kimberly Brown worked with City Manager Darrell Newsom to address underemployment and unemployment in the small town just outside Lubbock. As partners, they received grant funding from the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) to create a Job Resource Center in the library. Now, Wolfforth residents have access to dedicated terminals for job searching and technology training, resume building resources, technical assistance for interviewing and completing applications, GED testing, and classes for job hunters.

“We believed this was so important that we were prepared to use Economic Development funding to launch this project. It was important that we were able to give the staff the training and confidence they needed to assist job seekers. Whether a city knows that people are using the library as a job resource center or not, they are,” says Darrell.
Daring to Get to Know Plano

The Plano Public Library System has used community engagement to forge connections across city departments. Suburban Dare is a summer program that engages citizens by “daring” them to get to know Plano. The library collaborates with fourteen other city departments including police, fire-rescue, parks and recreation, planning, animal services and more to promote “dares” that citizens can take on to learn more about services in their city, get more involved as a resident, and enjoy their community.

Statewide Support for Community Engagement

Through a grant from the United States Institute of Museum and Library Services, TSLAC prioritized community engagement by creating a staff position to lead initiatives that provide opportunities for libraries to discern community needs and build partnerships.

“We welcome the opportunity to work with libraries to shift their thinking, planning, and services to more directly resonate with the aspirations of community leaders and residents. Community engagement offers a path for libraries to integrate with local planning and take a lead role in creating livable, sustainable cities,” says Mark Smith, TSLAC Director and Librarian.

TSLAC brought The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to Texas in May 2015. The Harwood Institute is an internationally-recognized, nonpartisan organization that teaches people and organizations to solve community problems and change how communities work together through its “turned outward” model. With TSLAC financial support, staff from 119 public libraries from all parts of the state learned how to recognize community needs and initiate local dialogues to address them.

Other community engagement initiatives include developing workforce-library partnerships, and promotion of the Edge library assessment.

**Edge**

Edge is a nationally recognized management and leadership tool that helps libraries and local governments work together to achieve community goals. With this professional tool, libraries are better positioned to address community issues, like creating a stronger economy, ensuring workforce development, and leading lifelong learning.

The Edge was initially funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Two key partners in the tool’s development were the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and TSLAC. The Edge measures national benchmarks relating to public access technology. The indicators in the benchmarks can be used to prioritize issues such as broadband speed, technology services, community engagement, and organizational capacity. Libraries can also compare their results to libraries serving similar population sizes around the country. The Edge offers free training and tools that can help libraries better serve their communities.

Through funding provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, TSLAC provides free access to the Edge toolkit to public libraries. More than 200 libraries completed the assessment last year. Your library may be one of them.

**What You Can Do**

Visit your local library and talk to the library director about community goals and priorities. Your library director may have insights that surprise you. Libraries are trusted anchor institutions, and can be a valuable partner in community engagement. ★