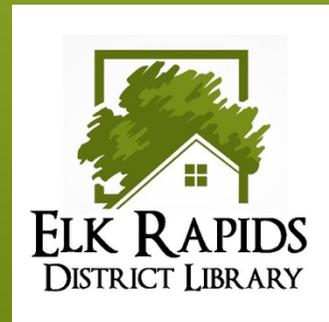


COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT



*Prepared for the Elk Rapids District Library by Midwest Collaborative
for Library Services*

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Table of Contents

Summary of Community Engagement	2
Community Narrative / Public Knowledge Summary	3
Aspirations Word Cloud	8
Concerns Word Cloud	9
How Might the Library Help?	10

Summary of Community Engagement

The Elk Rapids District Library embarked on a new strategic planning process in June 2022, which included engaging members of the community. This report summarizes the engagement process and resulting themes that were identified. “Community” has been defined as the Elk Rapids District Library’s service area. The Library used a combination of a Community Survey, one-on-one interviews, and Community Conversations with a wide variety of community residents and community leaders to identify this information. The interviews were based on The Harwood Institute model of community engagement, which seeks to “Turn Outward” to the community to determine their aspirations, and, in turn, to prioritize services that are in alignment with the true needs of the community.

The Elk Rapids District Library administered a Community Survey in April and May 2022, the members of the Library’s Strategic Planning Committee conducted one-on-one interviews with various community residents and leaders in June and July 2022, and consultants with the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services facilitated six Community Conversations in August 2022. The survey, interviews, and Conversations were opportunities for the residents of Elk Rapids Village, Elk Rapids Township, Torch Lake Township, and Milton Township to discuss their aspirations for the community and the concerns they have about reaching those aspirations, and to identify areas where the Library might help the community reach its aspirations. Of the 460 respondents to the Community Survey, 250 residents responded to the aspirations and concerns questions, 42 community residents and leaders were interviewed by the ERDL Strategic Planning Committee, and 29 residents participated in the Community Conversations.

The notes from the survey responses, interviews, and conversations have been summarized in a blended community narrative and public knowledge summary. The community aspirations and community concerns have also been organized in word cloud illustrations. In addition, information on how people believe the Library might help the community to reach its aspirations has been organized and themed.

Community Narrative

Community members openly shared their aspirations and concerns. The following is a narrative of the information, summarized in a blended form of The Harwood Institute models of the “Community Narrative” and “Public Knowledge Summary.”

It is important to recognize that this was written in a specific time frame and context. Locally and nationally, there is incredible political polarization and division, and there are clearly frustrated people across the community and across the political spectrum. We are also more than two years into a global pandemic which has caused disconnection, isolation, and fear for many. These issues came through clearly in the interviews and are important to consider when using the community narrative and public knowledge summary to guide long-term planning.

Elk Rapids District Library Community Narrative/Public Knowledge Summary

The Elk Rapids District Library’s Community aspires to be a beautiful, small, welcoming, friendly, safe, and supportive community that is accepting, inclusive, diverse, engaged, connected, and involved. They want to be a community that values education and lifelong learning by supporting the schools and library, and to work together toward collective goals to evolve and grow thoughtfully and intentionally.

A small, welcoming, friendly, safe, and supportive community

Most of those that were engaged aspire to live in a small community that is welcoming, friendly, safe, and supportive, and many feel that they already live in such a community. Quite a few appreciate living in a small, “tight-knit” community where people know their neighbors by name and shared that this is the reason the area of Elk Rapids appeals to them as their chosen community. People also shared that they want to live in a friendly community, where people smile and say hello and genuinely care about each other. People want to feel cared for and know that if help is needed, they can count on each other.

While most feel that this is the community they already live in, some expressed concern about not feeling welcomed and supported, especially those that are considered new to the community and seasonal residents. Many feel that everyone is welcoming and friendly to visitors to the area, but that living in the area is a very different experience. There is room to grow in ensuring that all who come to the community - whether a visitor, seasonal resident, or year-round resident - feel welcomed and part of the community.

An accepting, respectful, inclusive, and diverse community

People also shared they aspire to live in an accepting, respectful, inclusive, and diverse community. They want to live where people are open-minded and look to the strengths of the community and its people, as well as remain optimistic about the future. They want to feel accepted, that the community “values all,” that people are participating and speaking up with the best of intentions, and that others are actively listening and striving to understand the views of others. Many shared a desire to see all areas of the community, from local leadership to residents and visitors, intentionally seeking diversity of thoughts and input on issues while respecting that viewpoints may differ. No one expects to agree with everything going on, but many feel that a balance could be reached with work, compromise, and cooperation. People expressed a feeling of “we’re all in this together,” and want to see more opportunities for community-building and engaging with each other respectfully.

People also want to live in a community that is inclusive by being sure to intentionally seek feedback and input from all areas of the community, including a diversity of ages, ethnicities, location, etc. People want all viewpoints and experiences to be included and valued. Division was the biggest concern expressed by those engaged. This division is felt widely and was expressed throughout several of the themes in this report. Concerns include perceiving a different level of inclusion dependent on whether people are new residents, returning residents, long-time residents, year-round residents, or seasonal residents. Working together towards the collective good is important, while understanding that compromises will need to be made.

People also shared that they want to live in a community that is diverse, and this was talked about in a few ways. One way is that people want to see a wider range of ages in the community. They want to see multigenerational growth and a community that is family-oriented and youth-friendly. Many felt the age diversity in the area year-round is limited as it is considered more of a retirement or seasonal community, and many feel that having job opportunities at all socio-economic levels and more housing options will help to diversify the age demographics in the community.

A community working towards collective goals with an eye towards intentional evolution and growth

People also want to live in a community that is vibrant and thriving. This includes working towards a shared vision and collective goals while thoughtfully and intentionally evolving and growing. Division was again felt and expressed; while some feel the community already matches their ideal, many are concerned that without proactive and intentional change, the community will become stagnant, resulting in a continued population decrease and widening the division felt in the community. To work towards these efforts, community members want leadership that is representative of the diverse community and its distinct needs, that works

hard to seek broad input, and that communicates widely. The community would like leadership to create a shared vision in collaboration with other townships and local organizations that can help lead the way and be the roadmap. People want a community that is proactive and open-minded in listening and innovating, collaborative and cooperative in working with others, that seeks to compromise where needed, and that approaches everything with transparency and working towards the good of the whole. Many feel that new ideas or innovations are often not given enough consideration because it goes against “the way we’ve always done things,” and that “every change in the area is a big deal.” A specific example asked for examination and evaluation of initiatives and agreements that have been in place for many years to make sure they are still useful and relevant. People shared they feel division has increased in part because of the global pandemic and the disruptions it has caused. They feel this is the time to take a step back, re-evaluate, and press the “reset button.”

In sharing about intentional progress in the community, people reiterated that they like the small community atmosphere, but many feel that without economic diversity the gaps and feeling of division will just continue to widen. One of the biggest concerns around this was the affordability of living in the community. Many feel that the move towards more short-term rentals and a seasonal economy will continue to widen the gap for affordable housing and make it more difficult to encourage year-round residents to move into the area. Many feel that having access to local shopping and amenities to meet their needs would help to support those living in the area year-round, and would be beneficial in attracting other full-time residents. Some of the services suggested included closer or easier access to medical services such as a hospital or emergency room, more convenient access to shopping options or larger chain stores nearby, and more access and availability to workers in trade professions, such as people who will perform cosmetic or repair work for residential homes or service for vehicles. With more diverse economic options, people feel there will be more diverse job options at varying socio-economic levels; more diverse housing options would be needed to support this evolution.

Many feel that housing, businesses, and events cater to visitors and seasonal tourism, so the community loses many of those amenities in the winter months. Residents expressed a desire to have more focus on opportunities that meet their needs, such as restaurants or shops open year-round and year-round events and activities, especially those that include families and youth. Many shared that it shouldn’t all be about the tourists; they want the community and leadership to have a plan and goals that drive year-round support as well.

Some feel that US Highway 31 has become a literal division in the community that makes it difficult to traverse to the downtown area and marina. Some shared the need for a safe walkable and bikeable way to cross US Highway 31. The danger of crossing the highway makes it difficult for young people, especially, to access these areas safely. Some shared that it is difficult to meet in the Rotary Park area or to visit the farmer’s market because it feels unsafe to walk around and because of the noise from the traffic.

Another concern was that not everyone has internet connectivity in the area. The towns seem to be covered well, but out in the townships and more rural areas the lack of internet connectivity has become a barrier for many.

An aware, engaged, connected, and involved community

People also shared that they want to live in an aware and engaged community. Community members want to know what’s happening locally and have plenty of opportunities to be involved and engaged. How people hear about information and events seems to be a point of confusion for individuals. Some within Elk Rapids Village seem to receive some communication (either by email or by mail) automatically because of where they live, while some who live in Elk Rapids Township, Milton Township, or Torch Lake Township don’t receive the same information. There are a variety of places people get their information from: the local newspaper and the Traverse City newspaper, local television stations, social media, mailings from specific villages or townships, and electronic newsletters from various locations and organizations. Information is often not being shared widely between all these outlets and is often not being shared far enough ahead of time for people to take advantage of events or participate. People want to be more aware of how to find relevant and timely news and information important to the community so they can be more involved.

People in the community also want to be engaged and to engage with others. They want plenty of year-round opportunities for all ages to meet people and feel connected to others in the community. Young people and young families especially want ways that are easy for them to be involved, taking in into account the busyness of their lives. One of the biggest concerns expressed was around a lack of places to gather in the community informally and formally. People want places to take part in learning and recreational activities; to gather with others, such as a coffee shop or juice bar where they can meet early in the morning or later in the evening; and collaborative and co-working spaces with internet connectivity and technology. Many expressed the need to have more of these gathering spaces in the community, but also to be able to utilize more of the spaces that already exist, such as local organizations and government centers.

People want local businesses and organizations to engage with them to find out what they want and to seek feedback from them around initiatives and ideas. They also want spaces where they can engage in respectful dialogue around issues and concerns important to the community.

A beautiful, walkable community with plenty of outdoor activities that maintains environmental awareness

Living in a beautiful and aesthetically pleasing community is important to the people we engaged. All we heard from feel like they already live in a beautiful community, but many shared that people need to remain environmentally aware so that it's sustained for future generations. Water is important and a focal point for the community. People want to maintain water fronts and lakes, and expect responsible use of the lakes and beaches. People hope for responsibility in creating access to water and sewage (drilling for well water/sewage access or utilizing the lakes for water) in order to ensure there will be future access to water for residential purposes. Many also shared that adopting environmentally friendly practices - such as limiting or eliminating Styrofoam and plastic single use products and responsibly disposing of trash - should be a priority in helping maintain the beauty of the community.

Outdoor activities are an important part of people's lives, and creating and maintaining a community that is walkable and bikeable that people can access from a variety of directions safely is important to those who were engaged. Maintaining the natural environment is important to maintaining the lake lifestyle that is a large part of this community's identity.

A community that supports education, the schools, and the library

People aspire to live in a community that values and supports education and lifelong learning. They feel that supporting education of all types for all ages helps people remain open to new ideas and varying perspectives. People also want to ensure that the community supports and invests in the schools as they work with the youth, who are the future of the community.

People feel the library is important in providing opportunities for all, and many view the library as a point of pride. While there are many differing opinions on what the library should do about the building, all agree that the library needs to move forward and continue to provide necessary services for the entire community. People expressed a desire for library leadership to create a plan for moving forward, and to be sure to communicate and seek input from the community routinely. While many feel the issue of the building became a catalyst in bringing to light much of the division felt in the community, they also feel that the library can be the example for the community as they navigate what is next. Specific ideas are shared in the section "How might the Library help?"

Community Aspirations

family oriented transparency future thinking
active listening housing diversity gathering space
progressive optimistic respectful dialog
small community opportunities for younger people engaged
opportunities for all ages **supportive**
trustworthy appreciation of nature
diverse know your neighbors **open-minded**
respectful forward thinking trails healthy
lifelong learning opportunities **library**
evolving aesthetically pleasing co-working space reciprocity
helpful **welcoming** water community-building
growth economic diversity quiet value all
common goals balance **kind** leadership
safe friendly vibrant civility caring reset cooperative
intentional growth try new things **accepting**
active tight knit multigenerational informed
education educated participation thriving
compromise good stewardship awareness
collaborative diversity of thought
walkable community age diversity meets needs
beautiful youth friendly coffee shop
environmentally aware sustainability
collaborative space collective good
connected **inclusive** communication
transportation local resources involved
outdoor activities diverse workforce
community pride year-round residents
responsible affordable housing



Community Concerns



How might the Library help?

Those that participated in the Library's engagement process were asked how the Library might help achieve community aspirations and address community concerns. The responses have been compiled and loosely themed, and are listed below, followed by some of the specific suggestions under each category. The themes are listed in the order of most mentioned. Some suggestions could fall under more than one category. **It is important to note that these ideas and suggestions from the community reflect how they see the Library in the community and what they would like to see. Some suggestions could be services or activities the Library already offers or could be ideas for new or aspirational activities and services.**

Be a positive example

People feel that the Library can and should be an appreciative and positive example in the community in multiple ways. The Library can and should accept and acknowledge the criticisms that have been voiced, and then create a vision and goals to move forward. This moment can be an opportunity to craft the story of the Library learning and growing. The Library can model behaviors such as using respectful dialog, community-building, compromising, and cooperating that help move beyond barriers. People want the Library to be the center of the community, but this does not just mean physically; people also want the Library to be on everyone's mind in a positive way.

Many feel the current Library building is important (specifics about the building and location are outlined at the end of this report), but feel that the Library is more than just the building, and that leadership and staff should move beyond talking about the Library as a physical space only and begin thinking about the Library beyond its walls. People feel the Library should be the place to access information and resources of all types, but also goes above and beyond - listening to what people want, then providing more than they ask for. Staff should be friendly and open and seek to remove barriers and provide services equitably. Some shared they appreciate that there are no fees associated with the Library's services.

Most shared that the Library is seen as a safe and neutral location that is available and open to everyone, and that they want the Library to make efforts to remove politics from its operations where possible. The Library Board of Trustees, Library leadership, and Library staff need to do the hard work to improve the Library's reputation and rebuild relationships within the community it serves. Some specifically suggested the Library Board of Trustees should reflect the diverse community, and shared high expectations that the new Library Director will be active in the community and working to rebuild relationships.

People want the Library to be connected to issues and concerns throughout the whole service area and work collaboratively towards solutions that work for the collective good. They also want the Library to continue to facilitate listening sessions around Library services or initiatives, as well as to benchmark the Library's services with libraries of similar size and funding. The

Library should gather data from benchmarking and input from the community, and then move forward with decisions after considering all input and needs. Those engaged would like the Library to create a new mission, vision, and goals so the community can get behind them and support the Library. Many specifically requested that the Community Engagement Report be shared widely with the community. Another suggestion was to create transparency about the Library's decision-making process, and to be proactive by providing information (possibly videos) that inform people about how the Library works, the "life" of a book in the Library, how to access and use services, how people can give input or ask questions, how the Library Board of Trustees operates, etc. People shared that in 5 years, they hope the Library will be so busy that it will need to be open more hours, and that services were going so well that the Library will campaign to increase its millage by demonstrating value.

Some shared that the Library expansion project seemed to bring some of the issues facing the community to light, which has since sparked multiple planning processes in the area. The Library should continue to learn and grow, be proactive, and model collaborative partnerships within the community. People want the Library Board of Trustees, administration, and staff to be involved in the community, to "show up and speak up."

Be present in the entire area served

People expressed several different ways they want the Library to be seen throughout the entire service area. First, those living in areas outside of Elk Rapids Village or Township feel that the Library doesn't provide services for them unless they come into the Library building. They want the Library to be out and visible throughout the whole area served. Suggestions included a bookmobile or mobile Library services that would provide access to resources and services in various locations throughout the area. People suggested the mobile services should include events and programs, internet connectivity, and the ability to check out materials. Some suggested that rather than a bookmobile, the Library could partner with other organizations (the schools, township or government buildings, assisted living facilities, etc.) in order to provide these mobile services. Making an effort to provide services to the schools, the migrant worker population, local indigenous tribes, and those out in the townships was mentioned often. People suggested the Library investigate if volunteers might be able to assist with outreach efforts. Another idea is to provide a way for people to return Library materials throughout the community by providing Library return drop boxes or by partnering with organizations so people can return materials closer to home. The townships outside of Elk Rapids Village and Township want to feel like the Library is for them, as well, and want to see an effort, especially initially, that the Library is meeting them where they are rather than expecting people to always come to the Library building.

People also shared that they want to see the Library participating in local events and in local groups. Library staff could help serve on planning groups for local events, partner with others to provide local events, or serve on local planning groups or committees. People want to see the

Library participating in local festivals and events by providing a Library booth/tent/table with activities, information, and resources.

Be creative and flexible to provide up-to-date and innovative services

Most people understood that there are limitations to the services the Library can offer because of limited facilities and resources, but shared they want the library to be creative and flexible in providing up-to-date and innovative services. Some specifically suggested partnering with other libraries in the region and local organizations and businesses to bring more services and opportunities to the area. Other thoughts were to look for creative funding ideas, such as grants, that could provide supplemental funding, or to partner with the Friends group to facilitate fundraising events (for example, a costume party.)

People want to see the Library prioritize collaborating with the school district. Some shared the schools are staffed with volunteers only; is there a way the Library could provide services to students and teachers to help fill that gap? Another suggestion is to investigate if it would be beneficial for the Library to be a school drop-off or pick-up location for students.

Other suggestions from the community around services include providing opportunities, events, and information that support local needs or causes (for example, bringing yarn and making hats for people who need them); providing increased access to eResources such as digital magazines, newspapers, and business databases; and providing resources and information to residents who are new to the area (like a “welcome to the community” packet.) People also want to see updated technology at the Library including access to more computers or devices, access to maker equipment such as a 3D printer, up-to-date digital services that include the ability to view and register for events online, and a Library catalog that is more user-friendly.

Create more awareness for the Library and services offered

People shared they want to be aware of what is happening at the Library and what resources are available to them. As shared in the Aspirations/Concerns section, people find and receive their news from multiple sources, and people want the Library to publicize events and services widely and across many different sources. Many shared that it feels like information is still mostly shared by “word of mouth” and they would like to see other publicity efforts being made. They also want communication far enough ahead of time that people can adequately plan to participate. Another suggestion was to share the information frequently and multiple times; if information is only shared once, many people miss it. It was suggested to make sure to go beyond social media as many people don’t utilize social media platforms to get news. The Library could include “Did you know?” articles and information about what the Friends of the

Library is doing in the Library's newsletter and other local publications. They want the Library to be consistent in their publicity about events and resources.

People also suggested the Library get creative in publicizing information, including creating flyers with QR codes that lead to the Library's eNewsletter sign-up page that can be shared in the building and throughout the community. Other suggestions include placing flyers for children's events in the adult section as well as the youth section, so parents see them both places.

Opportunities to engage and for lifelong learning

People also feel that the Library has a role in creating opportunities for the community to engage and for learning throughout all stages of life, and feels this is one of the main roles the Library should have in the community. People want the Library to reach out to local residents, business owners, and members of local organizations to invite them to share about specific topics or issues as a way to give back to the community and increase the knowledge-sharing.

Because the ideas shared were specific, they are shared here in list format:

- Resources and support for people looking to start a small business or current small business owners
- Highlight local business owners
- Events that allow people a chance to engage with each other and "meet your neighbors"
- Programs that promote diversity and highlight different viewpoints (such as a Human Library program)
- Programs for seniors, especially on technology and how to use digital or virtual services
- Multigenerational programming where all ages can participate together
- Provide space for teenagers to gather and space for them to work collaboratively in small groups (with technology)
- More programs and opportunities for youth
 - Crafts
 - STEM
 - Reading challenges
 - Cooking and healthy cooking
 - Study programs (especially SAT & AP test preparation)
 - Career assessment or programs that explore various career options (especially for teenagers)
 - Techniques or activities to help manage anxiety (especially for teenagers)
 - Collaborate with the schools to offer field trip opportunities to the Library or visit the schools to share resources and information with students
 - After school activities, such as Chess Club
 - Interactive virtual college visits at the Library (partner with universities)

- Civic education programs, resources, and information, including “How to register to vote” programs
- Opportunities for younger parents and professionals to engage
- Opportunities for parents to engage after school drop-off time or later in the evening
 - A mom’s group
- Youth programs and adult programs simultaneously so adults can engage with others while the youth are in a program
- Proactive information around how people can access other libraries in the area, especially how to access genealogical, historical, and archival collections
 - Partner with regional genealogists, archivists, or historians for programs
- Other specific program ideas:
 - Watercolor painting/other art classes
 - Travel planning
 - Hobbies
 - Community gift wrapping night (bring your gifts and wrap together)
 - Chamber music group
 - Classical guitarist
 - Shakespeare on the lawn
 - Author events
 - Job fair
 - Community organization fair
 - Shared art/art exhibits
 - Gardening
 - Reading groups at various times so more people can participate
 - Nature (partner with parks and recreation, nature centers, etc.)
 - Cooking/food
 - Financial literacy
 - Outdoor concerts
 - Outdoor movies
 - Miniature golf in the Library
- Programs that promote engagement and people coming together
 - Community forums
 - Community dialog/conversations
- Opportunities that support homeschooled youth and families
- Hobby clubs or groups (such as knitting or other crafts)
- Tutoring programs
- Resources that promote information literacy
- Resources, materials, and programs that highlight diversity and promote inclusion

Space for people to gather and meet

One of the most talked about aspirations and concerns for the community was the need for community meeting and collaborative spaces. People want access to meeting spaces equipped with up-to-date technology for both large and small groups. People also shared a need for space that supports remote workers, including private space for virtual workshops or meetings, that incorporates updated technology. People would like to see a larger children's area and more space for teens. They want a place where youth can be noisy, "hang out," and work together, as well as space for parents and families to be together. People want to encourage the Library to continue to use outdoor space for events and programs.

Specific to the current library building/location

It is important to note that many shared thoughts or ideas around the Library's current building or location. It is recognized that the status of the current Library building is still not determined; however, the ideas, thoughts, and concerns from the community regarding the current building and location are captured here as part of the report:

- Many shared they want to leave the Library at its current location and keep it as it is.
- Many want to honor what the community has in the current Library building and location but want more options and opportunities than what is available with current limitations.
- Many feel that if the Library is able/going to move forward with building renovations, new plans aren't necessarily needed, but they do need to continue to build relationships, communicate, and gather input.
- Many shared that if the Library were to leave the current building/location they want to see the space repurposed for the community.
- Residents of the townships are finding the conflict and conversations about the Library difficult because the focus is mainly on the Village of Elk Rapids. Those in the townships feel they aren't getting as much benefit from Library services.
- Accessibility limitations at the Library make the current building and location difficult for many people. The basement is difficult for people to access. The building in general is difficult for older people to access.
- Some feel the stairs up to the building are a hazard and need to be repaired. Others pointed out that the building is getting older and needs attention, specifically issues with the plumbing, constant moisture in the basement, issues in the restrooms, and holes in the foundation.
- To be a true gathering place, more parking is needed.