



Long-Range Plan October 2022 – September 2027

Northwest Regional Library System
Bay, Gulf and Liberty Counties
Florida



Approved by Bay County Board of County Commissioners September 20, 2022

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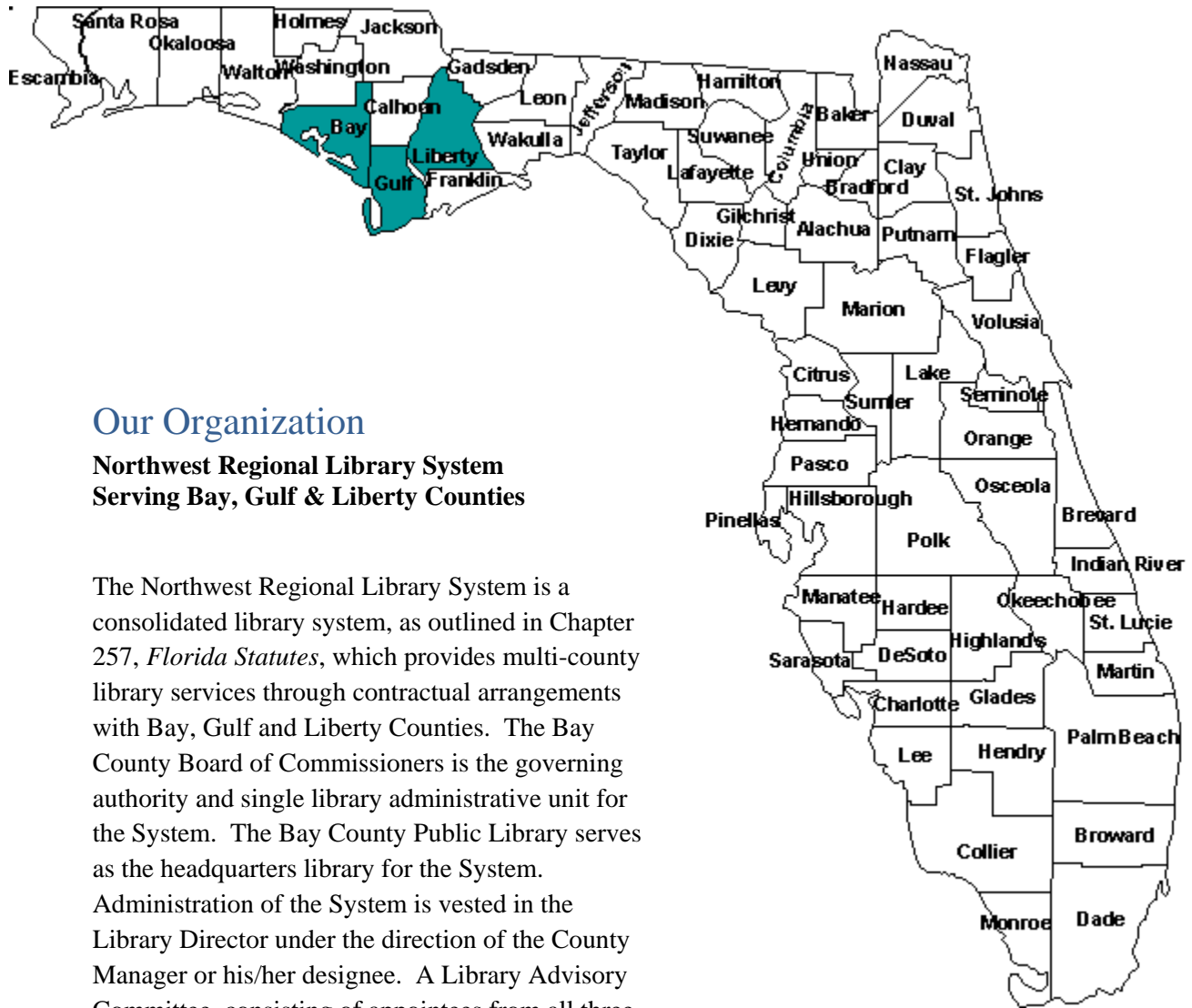
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Our Vision

To build a community where all residents reach their full potential.

Our Mission

The library’s mission is to provide a safe and comfortable space where all visitors can find the books they want to read, access current technology, and locate the resources and assistance needed to support lifelong learning and recreational goals.



Our Organization

**Northwest Regional Library System
Serving Bay, Gulf & Liberty Counties**

The Northwest Regional Library System is a consolidated library system, as outlined in Chapter 257, *Florida Statutes*, which provides multi-county library services through contractual arrangements with Bay, Gulf and Liberty Counties. The Bay County Board of Commissioners is the governing authority and single library administrative unit for the System. The Bay County Public Library serves as the headquarters library for the System. Administration of the System is vested in the Library Director under the direction of the County Manager or his/her designee. A Library Advisory Committee, consisting of appointees from all three counties, advises their County Commissioners on library issues.



Northwest Regional Library System

Our communities and our libraries

Community Description

October 10, 2018 changed the lives of many people living in our service area. Hurricane Michael, a category 5 storm, had a devastating impact on the entire region. Our libraries were used as FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers and provided resources which were in great need to the community after the disaster. Staff in all locations, many of whom were struggling with damage to homes and possessions as well as the stress of living through a disaster, were assisting their neighbors from inside the library and from locations throughout our communities. The library facilities with the most damage were the Parker Public Library and the Bay County Public Library. The Springfield Public Library did not receive much damage but, since it was the only city building left standing, it was needed as the temporary home for city hall and other city services. The Springfield Library moved out and has not reopened. The Parker Library was repaired and reopened in August 2019. The Bay County Public Library received over \$1 million dollars in repairs, which were completed in March 2020.

These challenges highlighted the importance of public libraries. People need access to information, technology, and educational and recreational resources.

Bay County: There are seven municipalities in Bay County: Callaway, Lynn Haven, Mexico Beach, Panama City, Panama City Beach, Parker and Springfield. The county seat, Panama City, is approximately halfway between Tallahassee and Pensacola. Bay County is known for its beautiful white sand beaches and is a popular tourist destination. Bay County is home to Tyndall Air Force Base, Naval Support Activity which houses the Naval Surface Warfare Center Panama City and the Naval Experimental Diving Unit, the Northwest Beaches International Airport, and the deep-water Port Panama City.

The July 2021 Census estimate shows a population of 179,168 in Bay County (down from 183,974 in 2016); 5.5% of the population is under the age of five, 20.8% is under the age of 18, and 18.5% of the population is age 65 or older. Census estimates indicate that, within the population of people aged 25 or older, 90.9% are high school graduates or higher and 24.5% have a Bachelor's degree or higher. The U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis reports the per capita personal income in 2020 was \$50,696, which is 91% of the state average income of \$55,675. The largest employers include Naval Support Activity (NSA PC), Tyndall Air Force Base, Bay District Schools, Maximus Federal, and Eastern Shipbuilding Group. The unemployment rate in May 2022 (not seasonally adjusted) was 2.1%, which is less than the state average of 2.8%.

Gulf County: The county seat is Port St. Joe, the birthplace of the Florida Constitution. Wewahitchka, the other incorporated city, is located inland and boasts some of the best bass fishing in the world as well as the world-famous Dead Lakes. The gulf side of the county includes the beautiful beaches of Cape San Blas, Indian Pass, WindMark Beach and St. Joe Beach. Tourism is vital to the economy of Gulf County.

The July 2021 Census estimate shows a population of 14,363 in Gulf County (down from 15,990 in 2016); 4.1% of the population is under the age of five, 18.6% is under the age of 18, and 26% of the population is age 65 or older. Census estimates indicate that, within the population of

people aged 25 or older, 85.4% are high school graduates and 23.2% have a Bachelor's degree or higher. The U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis reports the per capita personal income in 2020 was \$49,666, which is 89% of the state average income of \$55,675. Gulf County has a deep-water port, an abundance of natural resources (such as timber, cattle, and honey) and a thriving seafood industry. Largest employers include Florida Department of Corrections, Gulf County Schools, Ascension Health Ministry Service, Gulf County Board of County Commissioners, and Piggly Wiggly. The unemployment rate (not seasonally adjusted) in May 2022 was 2% -- lower than the state average of 2.8%.

Liberty County: Liberty County is located about halfway between the state capital Tallahassee and the beaches and resort area of Panama City Beach. Bristol is the county seat and the only incorporated city. Liberty County has a very low population density since most of the county is comprised of unpopulated forest. The Apalachicola National Forest accounts for about half the county. Liberty County is bordered by the Apalachicola River on the west and by the Ochlockonee River to the east. Liberty County offers many opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.

The July 2021 Census estimate shows a population of 7,900 in Liberty County (down from 8,202 in 2016); 4% of the population is under the age of five, 17% is under the age of 18, and 15.9% of the population is age 65 or older. Census estimates indicate that, within the population of people aged 25 or older, 79.6% are high school graduates and 13.6% have a Bachelor's degree or higher. The U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis reports the per capita personal income in 2020 was \$28,496, which is 51% of the state average of \$55,675. Liberty County is located in the Northwest Florida Rural Area of Opportunity, which allows for incentives for new industry through Opportunity Florida. Largest employers include Florida Department of Corrections, Liberty County School District, Twin Oaks Juvenile Development, North Florida Lumber, Inc., and Georgia-Pacific. The unemployment rate (not seasonally adjusted) in May 2022 was 2.6%, slightly less than the state average of 2.8%.

Sources:

Bay County Chamber of Commerce: Guide to Discovering Bay County,

<https://panamacity.org/about/publications/>

Enterprise Florida,

<https://www.enterpriseflorida.com/data-center/florida-communities/florida-counties/>

Florida Insight: Employer Database, <https://floridajobs.org/wser-home/employer-database>

Florida Office of Economic & Demographic Research, <http://edr.state.fl.us/Content/area-profiles/county/index.cfm>

Florida's Great Northwest, <https://www.floridasgreatnorthwest.com/>

U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis,

<https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?reqid=70&step=1&acrdn=6>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://data.bls.gov/map/MapToolServlet>;

<https://www.bls.gov/regions/home.htm>

U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/US>

Library Description

Collection: As of August 1, 2022, there are 350,000 items in the library collection; 1.77 per capita. This includes 326,000 physical and 24,000 digital items. Formats include print books, large print books, movies on DVD and Blu-ray, books on CD and MP3, downloadable Ebooks and Eaudiobooks, and print and digital magazines and newspapers. The library also offers

ukuleles, mountain dulcimers, telescopes, and cake pans. Library materials also include special Local History & Genealogy research collections at the Bay County Public Library in Panama City and the Corinne Costin Gibson Memorial Public Library in Port St. Joe, the Bay County Law Library collection which has been located within the Bay County Public Library since June 2011, and the Mobile Library collection.

Circulation of Library Materials: The number of items borrowed had been on the decline when Hurricane Michael (October 2018) and the COVID-19 pandemic (starting March 2020) drastically impacted library use. In addition to closures related to the hurricane and COVID, the Harrell Memorial Library in Bristol was closed February 28, 2018 in order to move the building to a new location so that the high school could reclaim their property for new school construction. On March 6, 2018 the library reopened to provide limited service at the Veterans Memorial Civic Center in Bristol while the building was moved and renovated. Services ceased at the Civic Center on July 30, 2019. The Harrell Memorial Library in Bristol planned to reopen in its new location in March 2020 but due to COVID delays did not return to regular hours until October 26, 2021. The Springfield Library did not reopen after Hurricane Michael on October 10, 2018.

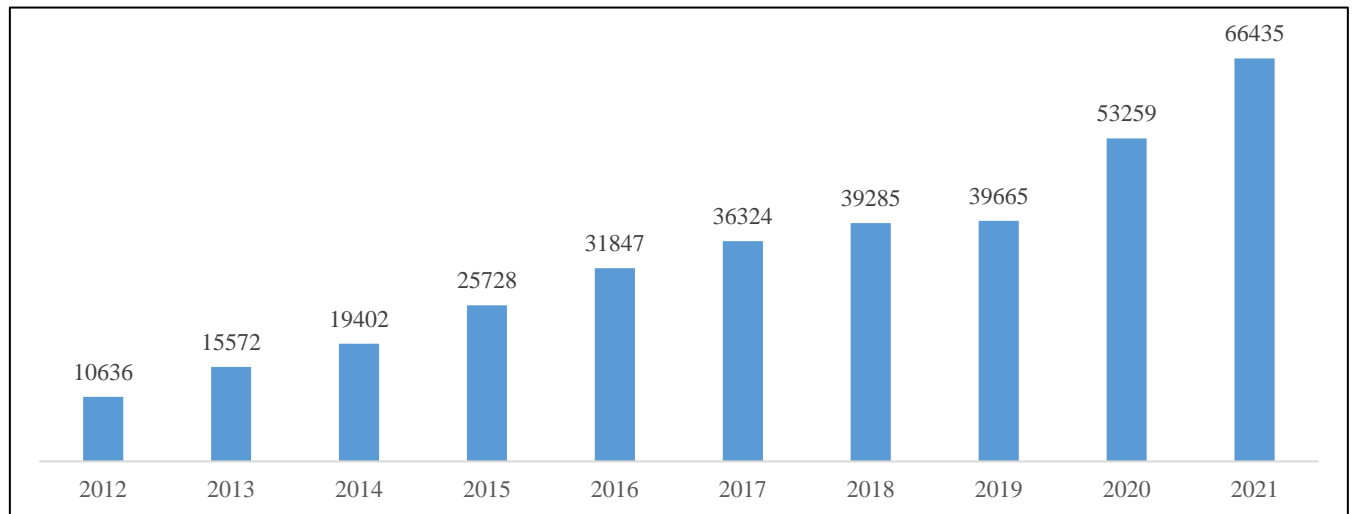
ITEMS BORROWED: FIVE YEAR SUMMARY

FY Ending	BCPL	PCB	PAR	SPR	PSJ	WEWA	LIB	HOS	Mobile Library	Digital Branch*	TOTAL
2017	390,268	128,656	9,746	13,747	33,780	11,842	6,047	3,604	n/a	36,324	634,014
2018	367,530	115,919	9,108	11,559	35,967	11,517	3,005	3,686	n/a	39,285	597,576
2019	248,122	108,970	5,192	239	27,188	8,697	1,333	4,295	n/a	39,665	443,701
2020	174,435	69,979	5,658	CLOSED	18,113	6,304	198	3,851	n/a	53,259	331,797
2021	206,788	72,118	5,781	CLOSED	22,872	9,764	3,554	2,238	932	66,435	390,482

*Digital Branch includes Ebooks, downloadable audio books, and (beginning FY 2021) Emagazines.

Despite the downward trend in items borrowed overall, digital collection use continues to increase – and has been especially popular since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

NWRLS DIGITAL CIRCULATION: FY 2012-2021



Programs and Services: There are currently seven locations plus a Mobile Library. The headquarters library is the Bay County Public Library, located in Panama City.

Bay County Public Library - open 6 days per week, 54 hours
Panama City Beach Public Library (Bay County) - open 6 days per week, 50 hours
Parker Public Library (Bay County) - open 4 days per week, 28 hours
Corinne Costin Gibson Memorial Library, Port St. Joe (Gulf County) – open 5 days, 32 hours
Charles Whitehead Public Library, Wewahitchka (Gulf County) - open 4 days, 32 hours
Harrell Memorial Public Library, Bristol (Liberty County) - open 4 days, 30 hours
Jimmy Weaver Memorial Library, Hosford (Liberty County) - open 3 days, 30 hours (changing to 4 days per week beginning Fall 2022)
Mobile Library (used in Bay, Gulf, and Liberty Counties) – hours vary

All libraries have automated circulation and online catalogs, public computers with Microsoft Office software and internet access, Wi-Fi internet, access to electronic resources including the Florida Electronic Library, online reference help via Ask-A-Librarian, and copiers and printers for public use. Most locations offer copier scanners. Five locations, Bay County Public Library, Panama City Beach Public Library, Corinne Costin Gibson Memorial/Port St. Joe Library, Charles Whitehead Public Library, and the Harrell Memorial Public Library in Bristol have meeting rooms available for public use. The Bay County Public Library has 3D printers which are available per the library’s 3D Printer Use policy. Faxing is offered in Gulf and Liberty County locations, and at the Bay County Public Library.

Classes and events are offered in all locations and include children’s storytimes, STEM programs, computer instruction, book clubs, film screenings, live music performances, crafts for a variety of ages, art displays, and lectures. The library website, www.nwrls.com, contains an events calendar showing programs scheduled in all locations, and printed Event Guides are available in all locations.

Staff: There are 53 staff members (35 full-time and 18 part-time) in the library system; 11 are librarians with a Master’s Degree in Library Science. The Law Librarian is included in the total number of staff, although that position is not funded through the library budget. Although there are branches in three counties, all library staff members are employees of Bay County.

Bay County = 39 staff members, 34.73 FTE
Gulf County = 9 staff members, 4.33 FTE
Liberty County = 5 staff members, 2.95 FTE

Financial Resources: Funding for the library system comes from a combination of local government funds, State Aid to Public Libraries grant funds, other grants, and donations.

Facilities: Combined square footage of all branches is 83,250 or 0.42 SF per capita (based on 2020 census figures).

Bay County Public Library – 55,000 SF
Panama City Beach Public Library (Bay County) – 9,400 SF
Parker Public Library (Bay County) – 1,000 SF
Corinne Costin Gibson Memorial/Port St. Joe Library (Gulf County) – 7,600 SF
Charles Whitehead Public Library, Wewahitchka (Gulf County) – 4,700 SF
Harrell Memorial Public Library, Bristol (Liberty County) – 3,800 SF
Jimmy Weaver Memorial Library, Hosford (Liberty County) – 1,750 SF

Long Range Plan: Overview and Process

The Northwest Regional Library System Long Range Plan outlines the Library's operations and development priorities over the next five years. The plan is a tool for Library leadership to use when evaluating current programs and services and considering new projects, in planning budgets, and for evaluating and allocating staff resources.

The current plan began October 1, 2017 and since then the Northwest Regional Library System has improved services to customers in many ways.

- The Library increased the number of digital books available to patrons by joining the Florida Panhandle Libraries shared Ebook, Eaudiobook, and Emagazine collection, coordinated by the Panhandle Library Access Network (PLAN). This “merger” has increased the number of digital titles available by several thousand and has added access to digital magazines. Use of digital books increased by 83% from fiscal years 2017-2021.
- The Library added new digital subscriptions which can be accessed remotely, such as Artist Works instrument lessons, Comics Plus comics and graphic novels, Universal Class educational programs, and Weiss Financial Ratings.
- Library staff has enhanced Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education through programs such as the *Coding Club for Kids* at the Panama City Beach Public Library, sewing classes, Virtual Reality demonstrations, Dash Robot coding classes at the Bay County Public Library, and *Science Seed* and STEM exploration stations in Gulf County Library locations. These projects were funded through grants and donations. All NWRLS locations offer STEM programming.
- Community outreach was expanded by adding a small bookmobile loaded with books, DVDs, books on CD, and STEM activities. A \$198,000 Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant provided the funds for the “Mobile Library” which is used in all three NWRLS counties.
- Outreach services were also expanded through innovative new programs such as *Conversations with Seniors* offered at assisted living facilities and senior centers, services to incarcerated individuals at the Bay County Jail, *Pop-Up Science* programs at local parks, and regular visits to the Boys and Girls Clubs, Girls Inc., Martin Luther King, Jr. Recreation Center, Bay Regional Juvenile Detention Center, and other youth programs.
- A Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant-funded Digital Media Co-Lab was created at the Bay County Public Library, which offers space, creative software, and high-quality equipment for podcast production, 3D printing, video editing, image scanning and editing, and more! The room can also be used as a collaborative work space for up to five people.
- The Parker Public Library was renovated after it was severely damaged when Hurricane Michael removed part of the roof. Grants and donations also helped fund replacements for books, furniture, shelving, and STEM activities. Over \$17,000 was raised to help with the renovation of the Parker Library, which reopened on August 20, 2019.
- New programs and services were introduced such as seed libraries in Gulf County locations, dulcimer instrument lending and jam sessions at the Bay County Public Library, telescope and cake pan lending, and notary services. The Homeschool History program at the Bay County Public Library provided exceptional educational enhancement for local homeschool students.
- Library staff has developed new digital programs including the *Unstacked* podcast, and YouTube and Facebook virtual programs such as story programs, craft sessions, and book discussions.

- The Library has provided educational advancement opportunities by participating in the Career Online High School (COHS) program. COHS is funded by the state legislature or by grants, and provides scholarships to local adults who do not have a high school diploma. Tuition for the accredited, 100% online school is fully-funded through the program. As of August 2022, there have been 31 graduates of the program from our service area. Graduation ceremonies were held in 2020 and 2022.
- A revamped NWRLS website was launched in 2020.
- Library staff continues to strengthen partnerships with community groups to enhance programming. Examples include Gulf County partnerships with IFAS and Master Gardeners to create vegetable and flower gardens outside the libraries, and the (now annual) Wewahitchka Local History Day developed in partnership with many local groups. Collaborative programs with Bay County Boys & Girls Clubs, Girls Inc., and other organizations enhance educational opportunities for youth.
- Library staff continues to develop skills through training. Three librarians participated in the Sunshine State Library Leadership Institute (SLLI), a 10-month leadership training program sponsored by the State Library. Two librarians went on to complete the Next Level Library Leadership Institute program, which concluded in the summer of 2022. Two staff members participated in the SLLI as mentors. Three librarians completed Microsoft Office software certifications, strengthening their skills to enhance one-on-one technology tutoring and group technology instruction.

Satisfaction Survey Results

In order to determine customer satisfaction and to learn which services our customers most value, a customer satisfaction survey was conducted from February through mid-March 2022. The survey was available in electronic form via our website and in paper form in all library locations and in outreach locations, in both English and Spanish. We received 416 completed surveys.

There was an overall satisfaction rate of 95% among library users. When asked whether the library provides a valuable service to the community, 98% of respondents agreed. Ninety-one percent of respondents believe library events and services improve the quality of their lives.

The survey revealed that the top five most important library services to our customers are: (1) print books to borrow; (2) Interlibrary loan (the ability to borrow items from other library systems); (3) Digital books (Ebooks and Eaudiobooks); (4) a comfortable, welcoming place to read, study, or attend meetings; and (5) Children’s programs: Activities that inspire children to read and learn.

Library services with the highest satisfaction ratings were: Staff helpfulness & knowledge (94% of respondents rated as either “Extremely satisfied” or “Somewhat satisfied”), Quality of Building (93%), and Hours of Operation (88%).

Services with the lowest ratings were: Computer Access (75% were extremely or somewhat satisfied), Library programs (74%), and Wait time for requested materials (58%). While these are certainly areas where improvement is needed, a significant factor in patron dissatisfaction may be explained by service limits due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Computer access was limited, if available at all, for several months after the start of the pandemic. There was also a delay in replacing computers, so equipment malfunctions were more frequent. Public computers began being replaced in July 2022. That, coupled with computer use time limits (1 hour per day,

eventually increased to 2 hours per day) and reduced number of computers available due to COVID social distancing requirements, certainly contributed to lower customer satisfaction.

Likewise, satisfaction with library programs was rated significantly lower than during the 2017 survey. For several months prior to the release of the customer satisfaction survey, library access had been limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Library facilities had reduced hours and were not providing any in-person programming. These limits certainly impacted customer satisfaction. Comments from the 2022 survey included:

- “Would like to see more classes & things like “in person” summer reading program return.”
- “Lack of storytime for young children is discouraging. Time to get back to normal.”
- “I’m disappointed about the lack of in person activities for children and adults.”
- “Need in person Children’s programs to start again.”

There were many comments in the survey about the desire for a return to in-person programming for children. Since the survey, many in-person programs have returned.

Books are the most important service provided by the public library and so it is not surprising that customers would like to have a wider selection and shorter wait time. Comments about wait time for requested materials included:

- “Wait times are a little longer than expected.”
- “If you are #60 on the wait list...should have more books.”
- “I have a hard time finding books to download. New arrivals require a hold.”
- “I wish there were more digital books available and more digital copies so the wait for popular books wasn’t so long.”

Customers were very clear about their desire to have more programs, shorter wait times for selected titles, and more access in general. We did receive many comments about what patrons would like to see improved (because we asked) but we also received many positive comments about the library. Here are some comments received in the 2022 survey:

- “I enjoy the monthly events. My youngest child loves going to the library. He also loves watching your YouTube videos.”
- “I visit this library often. And there hasn’t been one visit that the staff wasn’t friendly or helpful or professional.”
- “I have mentioned things I think our library is lacking based on the questions. However, please know I think our library is great! I very much appreciate the offerings that are available to use and believe our libraries are a very important part of our community.”
- “I have been an avid user of the library since elementary school. I did not realize until Hurricane Michael and the Pandemic how vital it is to my mental and physical health. Thank you for being there.”
- “Thank you for making our community a better place through your service.”
- “I really appreciate the variety of programs, and friendly/knowledgeable staff. The library resources rival those of much larger metropolitan areas. Great job!”
- “The staff is wonderful. Every single one of you! Thanks for a pleasant experience always.”
- “The library is an essential part of my connection to community. I am grateful for the excellent staff...”
- “They were a career saver after the storm when I lost my office, computer, fax, and copier.”

- “I love our library. During the virus lockdown, when we were staying home all the time, I don’t think I could have made it without our library. They brought my books to me in the car and always had a smile on their face.”

All of the above information was considered and has been incorporated into the following plan of goals, objectives and activities for the period October 1, 2022 through September 30, 2027. The plan is designed to be flexible, and if the activities we have planned to make improvements do not yield results we will discard them and try something else. Customers are encouraged to share their ideas about how the library can better meet their needs. There are many ways to submit comments: by email via the *Contact Us* page of the NWRLS website, www.nwrls.com, by phone to the branch manager or Library Director, through library Facebook pages, by letter or in person. We welcome your feedback.

System Goals, Objectives and Activities

Goal 1 – The Library offers a current, well maintained collection in the formats and quantities necessary to meet the informational, educational, and recreational needs of our communities.

Objective 1.1 – Use of library materials will increase by 1% annually in each library location.

- Activity 1.1.1 – Check for gaps in series fiction and purchase missing titles.
- Activity 1.1.2 – Adjust physical/digital collection spending to match demand of these formats.
- Activity 1.1.3 – Implement a holds ratio. (Purchase additional copies of popular titles as funding allows.)
- Activity 1.1.4 – Seek patron recommendations for titles and subjects to be purchased by the library.
- Activity 1.1.5 – Use survey results to adjust book/materials purchasing. (more mystery, large print, etc.)
- Activity 1.1.6 – Ensure collections are representative of our diverse communities by reviewing census data, usage statistics, and customer comments and suggestions.

Objective 1.2 – NWRLS will expend a minimum of 10% of the total operating budget annually on books, digital materials, and other collection resources.

- Activity 1.2.1 – Seek grants and donations to supplement book and collection purchases.

Goal 2 – The Library provides a welcoming and safe community space.

Objective 2.1 – Library staff reviews library policies at least once annually.

- Activity 2.1.1 - Review and present recommended revisions of the Library Customer Code of Conduct to the Bay County Board of County Commissioners by December 2022.
- Activity 2.1.2 – Incorporate inclusive language into library policies.

Objective 2.2 – A minimum of one staff training each year will address safety and security issues.

Objective 2.3 – Visits to library locations will increase by 1% annually.

- Activity 2.3.1 - Pursue the *Autism-Friendly Business* designation through Florida State University.

Goal 3 – The Library is committed to continuous improvement.

Objective 3.1 – An amount equivalent to 1% of the multicounty grant will be reserved for conference attendance and/or training.

Activity 3.1.1 – Reimburse staff who complete MS Office certification classes in order to enhance the quality of library instruction and improve staff productivity.

Activity 3.1.2 – Apply for scholarships from the Panhandle Library Access Network to help fund conference attendance.

Activity 3.1.3 – Seek grants and donations to increase training opportunities for staff and volunteers.

Objective 3.2 – All staff will work with their supervisor to identify and make progress towards a minimum of one professional development goal each year.

Objective 3.3 – An employee satisfaction survey will be conducted at least once every two years, with results reported to staff and incorporated into staff training and procedures.

Goal 4 – The Library offers classes and events that educate, inspire, and entertain members of our community throughout their lives.

Objective 4.1 - Each NWRLS library will offer a minimum of one program for school-aged children, per month, that teaches STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) concepts to encourage an interest and understanding of these subjects.

Objective 4.2 - Post-technology class surveys indicate a minimum average satisfaction rating of 85%.

Objective 4.3 – Attendance for library programs will increase by 1% each year.

Activity 4.3.1 – Continue successful online and hybrid (both in-person and online) programs in order to make programs accessible to patrons who may not be able to attend in-person.

Goal 5 – Expand the reach of the Library.

Objective 5.1 – Each NWRLS county will provide a minimum of two outreach events per month targeting at-risk and underserved areas of the community.

Activity 5.1.1 – Utilize the Mobile Library to bring library collections and services to locations far from library facilities.

Objective 5.2 – Library staff will conduct a minimum of one outreach presentation to a civic group in each NWRLS county per quarter.

Activity 5.2.1 – Market resources to organizations that might benefit from its use. Example: Send a letter to the Chamber of Commerce in each county to highlight certain remote resources.

Activity 5.2.2 – Continue to partner with community groups including the Friends of the Library and Library Foundations on projects where we have shared goals.

Objective 5.3 – Library staff shares statistical reports of library use to local funders each quarter.

Objective 5.4 – The number of library card holders in each branch will increase by 1% annually.