Small Libraries Create Smart Spaces

TRANSFORMATION STORY
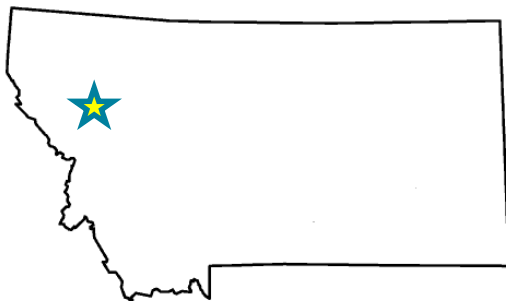
Ronan Library District

Ronan, Montana

The Community

Every community is unique

Ronan, Montana

- **Service population: 8,645**
- **Location:** southwest of Glacier National Park
- **Community:** serves the Flathead Indian Reservation

"Though Ronan is small, everything a person needs exists here. There is a hospital, schools, library, movie theatre, grocery store, farm stores, and more."

Michelle Fenger, Library Director

As picturesque and self-sufficient as the community is, it also has 80% of elementary students qualifying for the free lunch program.

Left: Ronan Park by B. Gutsche, with permission

Above: Ronan Barn by Mr. Jason Hayes on Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0

The community voted!

In the three-and-a-half years since the initiative passed, the Ronan Library District has increased hours, staff, programs, and usage.

69%

The Ronan Community Fought for Its Library

Due to diminishing funding in 2012, the library was on the verge of closing its doors to the community that needed it so desperately. A core group of influential community members formed to attempt the creation of a Library District that would have a stable funding base and be able to continue to serve the community.

They launched a campaign to engage as many people in the community as they could to spread the word of the looming closure:

- Businesses displayed posters and discussed the initiative with customers.
- Radio stations ran ads and interviews.
- Newspapers published stories.

Though this initiative meant an increase in personal taxes, on May 7th, 2013, The Ronan Library District passed with 69% of the vote.
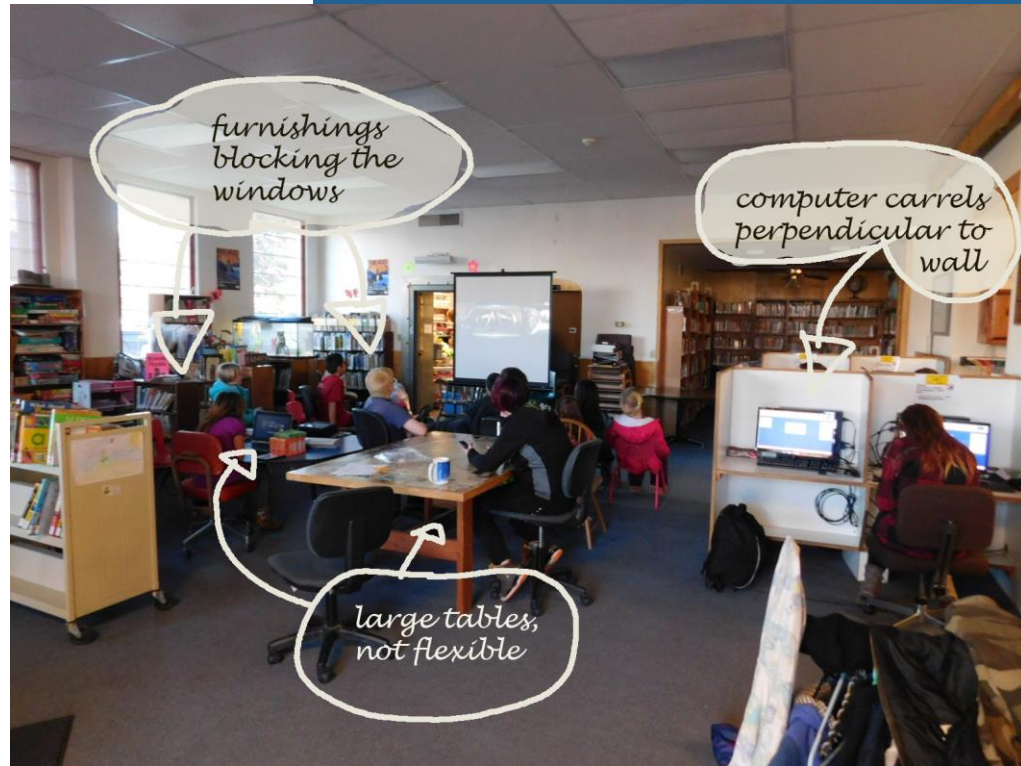
Before the Changes

Small libraries can create smart spaces

Well used, but…

With an average of 180 people entering the library every day and half of those being children, Director Michelle Fenger felt the need to support an active learning space, rather than "just be here."

The space available for learning activities had awkwardly placed furnishings and little flexibility for adjusting to a variety of uses.

Challenge: reconfigure this space for greater flexibility and active learning possibilities

And well loved…

When practically the entire town shows up at the library for the annual Halloween Party, the staff wished even more that they had the flexibility to open up the space.

Halloween Party, Ronan Library District, 2016

"I dream of having easily moveable chairs and tables that can fold up and be moved somewhere else."

Michelle Fenger, Library Director

**50 Ideas
in 10 Minutes**

Challenge:
how to make the
library space more
flexible

The community of Ronan has been working on a community-wide assessment. They hired a company to hold public meetings to talk to community members about what they do and don't like, and what they want to change. The library has tapped into that, but they encountered a typical response: everyone loves the library and there's nothing that needs to be changed.

Then Fenger turned to her staff to come up with ideas, using the "50 ideas in 10 minutes" exercise. At first her small staff said, "we can't do that!"

But they came up with 51 ideas. Yes they can!

Wish Tree

The library put up a Wish Tree at the community carnival. Ideas (wishes) included:
- Swimming pool
- Pet show-and-tell
- Escape room event
- Job skills
- More activities for families and older teens

Through the community discovery process, the library found that community members believe more youth activities could help reduce drug usage.

Opportunities to learn life skills as well as STEAM skills could keep our young people thinking about life's future possibilities, rather than drugs.

The purpose of the Ronan library project is to create a space that is flexible and modular so community members may learn and teach these vital skills in an open, non-judgmental, participatory, active learning environment.

Purpose statement

Prepare for Change

Making way for transformation

A Whole New Cataloging System – Oh My!

Fenger and her staff are bold in the face of challenge. They decided to revamp the cataloging system for all the children's books, seeking categories that reflect the topical content of the books and that would make more sense to the kids finding them.

They were undaunted by the fact that this meant several weeks of emptying shelves and piling books in topical stacks on the floor, then reviewing and re-sorting the stacks until they made sense.

It might look like chaos but it's a cataloging system taking shape.

Round Up All the Children's Books

All the books on the shelves and book carts had to find their place in the new categorizations. As more books were added to the piles on the floor, new categories—and new piles—emerged.

In the end, the Ronan library developed a system highly customized to their community, a system designed with Ronan's community of children and youth in mind.

Things got more chaotic before it all finally resolved into order.

This cataloging system is particularly sensitive to children (in some cases teens) who are reading far below grade-level. Rather than stigmatize them by sending them to the "early reader" section, the easier-to-read books are classified under "Let's read."
That way, nobody feels shy about browsing these shelves.

Dewey, step aside! The books in the children's section of the library are organized in a way that makes sense to the kids who are using them.

The "Let's read" classification allows children of any age to find books that will help them become more confident readers.

Prototype

Turning ideas into tangible models

The library had plenty of materials on hand for prototyping.

"We're a crafty type of library."

The staff are used to making weekly batches of their own playdough.

From Cardboard to Creative Space Design

Cardboard, tape, cardstock, sticky notes, lots of colored markers, and pens

This configuration did not end up a winner, but you've got to love the green crumpled paper bean bag chairs.

Who doesn't like a cozy reading nook?

And then they asked the community to play with the prototype

The invitation to community contribution:

"Please give us suggestions for redesigning the front library space. You may write a suggestion, give a suggestion to the staff, or create a model (prototype) of your idea. This is YOUR LIBRARY, YOUR SPACE –PLEASE tell us what you want."

Transform

Make it happen!

The Bookshelf Evolution

The new cataloging system is intended to make books more accessible to young readers, so it only made sense to redesign the bookshelves for the same reason. A local cabinet shop manufactured the shelves, and Fenger and staff painted them in bright colors, with horizontal stripes of homemade chalkboard paint for labeling the categories. Previously, all books were shelved spine-out, packed tight. Now they are all face-out in bins. According to Fenger, the kids would walk right by the old shelves, ignoring the books. Now they enter the library and run to the book displays, flipping through the choices. They might even climb inside.

Flexible Furnishings

New tables are lightweight, height-adjustable, and fold and stow easily—just the kind that Fenger dreamed of.

Chairs fold up easily, nest neatly (no hoisting onto a high stack), and roll away to be stored.

Bookshelves on wheels can be rearranged to clear space or create "rooms." Even the kids can move them easily.

Stackable and Playful

Active Seat   Stool   Desk

This versatile seating flips from a chair to a stool to a desk.

But leave it to the kids to come up with creative sitting and playing options.

Learn

Activate the space with people and programming

WebJunction®

OCLC

Making and Learning Together

Brother and sister collaborate on building the gear-driven Crazy Copter.

Making "Dad rocks" Father's Day cards, tapping the artistic side of STEAM.

It takes some engineering skills to fold the paper just right for these "Yoda best dad" pop-up cards and "Darth Vader" corner bookmarks.

"Just do it."

Joey is a regular at the Ronan Library. He may struggle with reading but he's great at working his way through the instructions to build the Crazy Copter.

When he completed the challenge successfully, the librarian said to him, "Now you could use your imagination to build anything out of these gears."

Joey: "I could? COOL!"

Active Storytimes

Director Michelle Fenger gets and keeps the attention of rambunctious two- to five-year-olds with her highly interactive style of storytime reading. When a two-year-old gets too squirmy, Fenger walks up to him, captures his focus, *and* boosts his early literacy skills, without losing the attention of the others.

The library has blocks, mega-blocks, Legos, games for all ages, puzzles, and of course books and coloring available at all times in the smart space.

"There is always something creative and educational waiting for us at the library," said one parent.

The library has seen an increase of parents with small children coming in to just "hang out" in the refreshed space.

One couple who had not been to the library for a while were in awe of how different and "beautiful" the space looks.

For more information on how Small Libraries Create Smart Spaces and more case studies please visit **oc.lc/SmartSpaces.**