

Welland Public Library Strategic Plan (2026–2030)

What's Possible at the Library

Prepared for: Welland Public Library

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Chair's Message

As Chair of the Welland Public Library Board, I am pleased to present the Library's Strategic Plan for 2026–2030: ***What's Possible at the Library***. This plan reflects the Board's strong commitment to the Library's future and its vision of opening doors to knowledge, ideas, and opportunity for everyone.

Throughout the planning process, we heard from staff, community members, and partners across Welland. Many shared their thoughts through surveys, conversations, and roundtables, offering valuable insights into how the Library supports their lives and how it can continue to grow. On behalf of the Board, I extend thanks to everyone who contributed their time, ideas, and enthusiasm. We would also like to acknowledge Nordicity for facilitating a thoughtful, evidence-based process that helped bring community perspectives to light.

The result is a plan that captures the very best of WPL: its dedication to service, its creativity and care, and its commitment to continued growth. The Board is proud to stand behind this plan and confident that it will guide the Library well in the years ahead.

With this plan, we reaffirm our confidence in the Welland Public Library and its vital role in the life of our city.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Bryan
Chair, Welland Public Library Board



Executive Summary

Over the past five years, the Welland Public Library (WPL) has experienced remarkable growth – a clear reflection of its deepening relevance, impact, and value to the community. From record-high card registrations and program attendance to expanded use across the system, WPL continues to thrive with participation higher than ever. ***What's Possible at the Library***, builds on this momentum, charting a clear course for the next five years.

As Welland grows and diversifies, the Library's role as an accessible, welcoming, and trusted public space has never been more vital. WPL is evolving alongside the city, ensuring its programs, collections, and spaces continue to meet the needs of today while preparing for the community of tomorrow.

Developed through extensive engagement, research, and collaboration, the plan reflects input from more than 400 participants, including residents, partners, staff, and the Library Board. It affirms WPL's alignment with the City's priorities of Health and Well-being, Livability, Economic Growth, and Environmental Stewardship, reinforcing the Library's role as an essential civic and community resource.

Looking ahead, *What's Possible at the Library* sets a clear path for the next five years while keeping sight of the longer horizon beyond 2030 – helping WPL continue building a library system that is responsive, future-focused, and a lasting asset for the community. Grounded in the Library's updated vision, mission, and values, it offers a balanced and achievable framework that sustains what residents value most while embracing new opportunities for learning, connection, and growth.



Vision, Mission, Values

These statements serve as WPL's north star, guiding its development over the next five years. Together, they articulate the Library's aspirations for the community, its core purpose, and its guiding principles.

Vision – *our aspiration for the community*

A welcoming, connected community that can grow, learn, and thrive.

Mission – *what we do*

Opening doors to knowledge, ideas, and opportunity for everyone.

Values – *what guides our work*

Inclusion: We make sure everyone belongs here, with equitable access and inclusive services.

Collaboration: We work with one another and our partners, building relationships that strengthen our community.

Curiosity: We spark curiosity and support learning at every stage of life.

Innovation: We adapt and grow with creativity, experimentation, and openness to new ideas.

Integrity: We act with honesty, accountability, and respect in everything we do.

Intellectual Freedom: We uphold the right to read, learn, and exchange ideas freely.

Strategic Priorities

Three strategic priorities form the foundation of WPL's strategic plan:

1. **Inspire Curiosity and Learning**
2. **Enhance Experience and Engagement**
3. **Invest in People and Places**

These priorities are mutually reinforcing, each supporting the Library's vision and mission. Taken together, they provide a balanced and achievable framework for strengthening what patrons already value while laying the groundwork for future needs.



Priority 1: Inspire Curiosity and Learning

This priority focuses on **what the Library will offer** through inclusive programs, collections, and services that encourage discovery and skill-building.

To advance this priority, WPL will:

- Build collections that reflect Welland's diversity, history, and evolving interests, and support their discovery and use across the system.
- Deliver inclusive programs that foster creativity, skill-building, and lifelong learning.
- Champion community-wide digital literacy and access, preparing the community for the demands of tomorrow.

Priority 2: Enhance Experience and Engagement

This priority focuses on **how the Library will connect** with residents through partnerships, outreach, and welcoming patron experience.

To advance this priority, WPL will:

- Expand targeted outreach and engagement with underserved and new residents.
- Strengthen awareness, perceptions, and support for WPL.
- Ensure consistent, accessible, and welcoming patron experiences across all service points.
- Connect residents to community supports that enrich their library experience and wellbeing.

Priority 3: Invest in People and Places

This priority focuses on **how the Library will deliver** by strengthening staff capacity, organizational culture, technology, and facilities.

To advance this priority, WPL will:

- Optimize and plan library spaces and service points to support access, safety, and growth.
- Strengthen digital infrastructure to improve operational efficiency and innovation.
- Build staff capacity, skills, and wellbeing.
- Foster a collaborative, transparent, and future-ready organizational culture.



Looking Ahead

What's Possible at the Library reaffirms WPL's role as a trusted partner and community hub – one that welcomes everyone and grows alongside the city it serves. Bringing this strategy to life will require a thoughtful and community-centred approach that balances ambition with practicality. Progress will be paced to align with available resources and capacity, while remaining responsive to change and new opportunities as Welland continues to grow.

Success will depend on collaboration – with the City, community organizations, and sector partners – and on maintaining open communication, transparency, and accountability along the way. Above all, implementation will stay grounded in the needs and aspirations of Welland residents, ensuring that services, spaces, and programs make a tangible difference in people's lives.

This plan reflects a shared commitment among the Library, the City, and the community to sustain an inclusive, connected, and forward-looking library system that supports Welland's continued growth and vitality.

Come discover What's Possible at the Library.



1. Introduction

Over the past five years, the Welland Public Library (WPL) has seen a significant rise in usage – a clear signal of its growing relevance, impact, and value to the community. WPL has continued to sustain record levels of engagement well beyond pre-pandemic levels, from card registrations to branch visits and participation in programs. With this strategic plan, WPL is carrying that momentum forward.

Looking ahead, Welland is poised for continued and rapid growth. As the city's population expands and diversifies in the coming years, so too will community needs and expectations of the library. This strategic plan identifies clear priorities that will guide WPL over the next five years, ensuring it can continue to respond to the needs of today while remaining flexible and forward-thinking in the face of future change.

1.1. The Planning Process

This plan was developed through a multi-faceted approach combining robust community engagement, internal consultation, and targeted desk research carried out by Nordicity. Desk research included a review of background documents including policies, annual reports, and past strategies from WPL, as well as City plans to ensure library alignment with municipal priorities. A community profile was also created to understand how Welland's demographic context is expected to shift in the years ahead.



The following engagement activities were facilitated (engaging an estimated total of 407 participants):

- Internal focus groups with City of Welland staff, Library Board members, and WPL's management team.
- Informal discussions with Library staff during site visits to each of the three WPL branches.
- Discussions with community organizations.
- Passive engagement posters at various spots around the city, including at each WPL branch.
- Public and staff survey.

A Key Findings report was developed and shared with the Board and Leadership Team for review and validation. Building on this foundation, a workshop with the Board and Leadership Team was held to shape the plan's priorities and objectives, with staff providing additional input on specific actions and initiatives. Drawing on these validated findings and planning inputs, a full draft plan was prepared and reviewed by WPL before being finalized.

1.2. Alignment with City Priorities

WPL is well positioned to support and advance the City of Welland's strategic priorities: Health & Well-being, Livability, Economic Growth, and Environmental Stewardship.

Through its programs, collections, services, and physical spaces, the Library promotes individual and community wellbeing, supports lifelong learning and skill development, enhances access to information, and fosters inclusion. Its role as a welcoming public space with barrier-free access to resources contributes to the livability of Welland's neighbourhoods, while digital and business-focused services (e.g., meeting rooms) align with the City's economic growth agenda. As a trusted, accessible institution embedded in the daily life of the city, the Library is a natural partner in delivering on Welland's vision.



2. The Local Context: Community Profile

This section outlines a summary of a community profile for Welland, which establishes a baseline understanding of the city's current population makeup and future growth trajectory. A more detailed community profile is provided in the Appendix; this section presents the key findings and trends that are relevant to the Library's services. As the city grows and diversifies, WPL will need to remain responsive to emerging needs.

- **Rapid Population Growth:** Welland's population grew 6.6% between 2016 and 2021 and is now projected to grow 54% by 2034, reaching approximately 100,888. While growth is expected city-wide, the north and south ends of the city (covering where Seaway Mall and Diamond Trail branches are located) are expected to see more pronounced expansion. This population boom will continue to place pressure on existing services and infrastructure, underscoring the need for increased service points and potential facility expansion to meet future demands.
- **Broad Age Range and Smaller Households:** The average household size (2.3) falls below the provincial average, indicating a lower proportion of families in Welland compared to the broader Ontario context. Moreover, Welland has a relatively balanced age distribution in line with provincial standards, with a quarter (24%) of residents aged 25-44. As more young adults in this bracket transition into family life, Welland could see an increase in families in the near future, and along with it, increased demand for family-focused programming.



- **Increasing Diversity:** Welland's current population is predominately European in background, but cultural and linguistic diversity is expected to rise as the city grows. Expanding multilingual materials, culturally inclusive programming, and targeted outreach will help WPL remain welcoming and relevant – especially to newcomers who may be unfamiliar with Canadian public library systems.
- **Education, Income, and Access:** Nearly half of Welland residents have no post-secondary education, and 12% live below the Low-Income Measure (LIM-AT). These indicators point to significant opportunity for WPL to support skill development, lifelong learning, and access to (digital) resources. Free programs, tech support, and barrier-free spaces will remain essential in helping residents overcome financial and educational gaps.
- **The Library in a Changing City:** Welland's growth is driven by affordability, quality of life, and migration from larger centres. With employment rooted in health care, education, retail, and manufacturing – and supported by City incentive programs – the Library can play a key role in supporting workforce readiness and community integration. As the city expands, so too must the Library's points of service.



3. WPL Now: Current State

This section provides a snapshot of WPL’s current state across three core areas: Library Offerings; Community Engagement & Experience; and Facilities, Infrastructure, and Operations. These findings are based on insights gathered through engagements, site visits, and desk research, and provide the foundation for the strategic priorities and recommendations presented in this plan.

Key survey findings and library usage statistics have been integrated into the sections below, with detailed results provided in the Appendix.

3.1. Library Offerings

WPL delivers a wide range of offerings that reflect its commitment to literacy, digital access, social connection, and community wellbeing. Its programs, collections, and services are consistently cited as core strengths with several standout features, including early literacy programming, the Library of Things, and responsive community services. As Welland’s population grows and diversifies, the Library’s ability to adapt through innovation, partnerships, and inclusive design will be key to sustaining its impact and meeting new demand.



Programs

Programming is widely recognized as the “lifeblood” of WPL, drawing people into the library and connecting them to the Library’s mission. Program attendance has grown by 31% in both 2023 and 2024, which indicates offerings are relevant and meeting current needs. However, survey findings indicate that awareness of programs (for all age levels) remains low, indicating potential for further growth.

Early literacy programs, youth-focused activities, and basic digital skills support were identified as strengths that can be built upon. Collaborative program delivery, including partnerships with groups such as the Welland Museum, was also noted as a clear success that allows the Library to tap into specialized expertise while helping partnering organizations reach a broader audience. In 2024, WPL also launched a Human Library Project, connecting patrons to an expert or individual with specific life experience, illustrating the Library’s willingness to try new things and respond to emerging library trends. There may be opportunity to continue to further grow this program by strategically addressing gaps and needs (e.g., building understanding around the experiences of unhoused and other vulnerable individuals, helping youth discover possible career paths, sharing local history with newcomers).

There is growing interest in expanding programming to support practical life skills – from coding and AI literacy to maker workshops and career readiness. Community members raised these areas as priorities for growth, noting their potential to strengthen WPL’s role as a community partner and deepen its integration with local schools, colleges, and employment services. Community members also suggested more author talks, movie nights, teen-focused programs, and mentoring partnerships. Moreover, expanding evening and weekend programming could help reach working adults and residents with complex schedules – a practical gap in the current model.

Internally, staff and management acknowledged the need to balance consistency with creativity. There is opportunity to foster a culture of ongoing program development and iteration — where staff feel supported to experiment, innovate, and grow offerings each year instead of becoming complacent and satisfied with simply repeating “what worked last year.”

There is also opportunity to align program design with broader municipal goals, such as sustainability (e.g., choosing green vehicles for bookmobile, expanding digital services) and economic development (e.g., job readiness, small business support).

Collections

WPL’s collections continue to evolve in response to changing needs. Satisfaction with the physical collection is high, with 86% of respondents from the survey reporting feeling “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with books and periodicals. However, some survey respondents note that there are limited copies of high-demand materials, which contributes to long wait times.

When it comes to digital resources, more than half of survey respondents reported satisfaction with e-books and audio-books. Digital magazines and newspapers, online reference databases, and video and music streaming had slightly lower levels of satisfaction. However, nearly one-third are unaware of digital offerings.



From 2023 to 2024, physical item circulation increased by nearly 5%, while digital circulation grew by approximately 32% with over 760,000 digital items borrowed. This trend reflects high demand for e-books, audiobooks, streaming media, and online news, and underscores a broader shift toward digital access. However, these resources come with rising costs and lower visibility in traditional circulation metrics.

The Library of Things is a standout feature that resonates with residents across age groups. For example, 57% of survey respondents report feeling satisfied with WPL's Library of Things, though nearly a third (31%) are unaware of this offering, suggesting opportunity to make the collection more visible. By providing access to instruments, robotics kits, memory games, and more, the Library of Things reduces barriers to learning and exploration — especially for families on tight budgets. Some partners suggested integrating the program more fully into Welland's broader sustainability and circular economy goals. As the community evolves, it will be important to continually review and refresh this collection to remain relevant to local lifestyles and interests.

WPL's local history collection is growing in reach, in part as a result of digitization efforts, partnerships with heritage associations, and promotion through the Library's website and social media. Increasing discoverability of this collection for new residents may further expand its impact.

As Welland's diversity grows, multilingual and culturally relevant collections are becoming increasingly important. Community members expressed interest in more materials in French (and more visible French displays), Punjabi, Hindi, and other languages — as well as visible displays and storytimes that reflect that diversity. Expanding these offerings will require thoughtful staffing, partnerships, and promotion.

Services

As WPL continues to serve more vulnerable and at-risk residents – especially but not limited to Main – pressure is placed on staff who may be asked to respond to complex needs beyond their role. WPL's initiatives such as the “Pay What You Can Market” and the Little Free Pantry (which offers personal care items and pantry staples on a “take what you can, leave what you can” approach) reflect a strong commitment to community well-being and support for vulnerable residents. These low-barrier services are widely appreciated; however, it is difficult to keep fully stocked to match the level of demand. Moreover, while these supports are valued, they can create tensions around perceived safety.

There is broad agreement that stronger partnerships with social service organizations are needed to support the Library in serving vulnerable residents — including through onsite drop-ins, referrals, or even co-located staff — so that the Library can continue offering compassionate support while maintaining clear boundaries. Reinforcing the code of conduct and rethinking space layouts (particularly at Main) may also help ensure that everyone feels welcome and safe.

WPL's flexible service delivery is another major strength. Pop-up events and large-scale outreach initiatives help reach non-users, but require significant capacity. The Bookmobile — already in development — is expected to play a vital role in reaching seniors' residences, multicultural neighbourhoods, and local parks or schools. Additional service points such as lockers, vending machines, or micro-libraries are a point of interest to increase visibility and access. As Welland's population evolves, flexible models will be key to meeting the needs of a growing population and to ensuring that Library services are embedded across



Welland's neighbourhoods to bring the Library closer to where people live, especially in newer or underserved areas.

Technology & Innovation

Public computer use, device access, and Wi-Fi are in high demand, particularly among those who rely on the Library for job applications, government forms, or online services. However, digital literacy can be a barrier — particularly for seniors and youth. Patrons continue to seek support using digital tools, devices, and online platforms. Suggestions for additional or expanded support included more tablets or iPads, simplified renewal systems, and more visible tech assistance. There is clear demand for both hands-on tech help and programs focused on AI literacy, privacy awareness, and digital citizenship.

There is also potential for technological tools, such as AI, to streamline internal operations and free up staff time for deeper patron engagement — though further exploration is needed to address privacy, governance, and union-related questions. There may also be a broader leadership opportunity for WPL — and Niagara region libraries more generally — to support community conversations about digital privacy, AI literacy, and tech ethics.

Key Takeaways: Library Offerings

Strengths

- Wide range of offerings aligned with literacy, digital access, social connection, and community well-being.
- Programs are well attended and loved, with strong offerings in early literacy, youth-focused activities, and basic digital skills.
- Partnerships enhance program quality and community reach.
- WPL demonstrates a culture of innovation, with forward-thinking initiatives like the Human Library Project, and the exploration of alternative service models (i.e., bookmobile and pop-ups).
- Physical collections are highly rated (86% satisfaction).
- Library of Things is a standout feature, reducing barriers to access and exploration while supporting sustainability and circular economy goals through shared resource use.
- WPL has service offerings that respond to real community needs (e.g., food security, hygiene).
- Growing local history collection with increased digital discoverability.
- The forthcoming bookmobile and outreach efforts are expanding access and offerings across the community.



Challenges & Gaps

- Awareness of programming remains a gap, despite growth in participation.
- Risk of program stagnation from over-reliance on “what worked last year.”
- Long wait times for popular and high demand collection items.
- Despite limited awareness, demand for circulation for digital services is growing, though satisfaction still lags behind the physical collection.
- Staff are faced with responding to complex social needs beyond their scope of training and role.
- Community initiatives (e.g., Little Free Pantry) are well-used but difficult to keep sufficiently stocked.
- Safety concerns and tensions exist around space use and vulnerable patrons, especially at Main.

Opportunities

- Expand promotion of offerings to increase awareness and participation.
- Continue to strategically expand Human Library Project to address programming gaps.
- Formalize partnerships with health and social service providers.
- Grow particular life skills programming.
- Explore teen-specific programming and intergenerational offerings.
- Ensure multilingual and culturally inclusive collections and programs through acquisitions, staffing, and partnerships.
- Make the Library of Things more visible through displays that highlight what is on offer.
- Refresh and promote digital collections to meet growing demand.
- Position WPL (potentially in partnership with other Niagara libraries) as leaders within the Ontario library sector in conversations around digital privacy, AI ethics, and tech literacy.
- Deepen digital support through literacy programs, device help, and workshops on emerging technologies



3.2. Community Engagement & Experience

Welland Public Library is a welcoming, responsive space that offers far more than books. The Library is widely used within Welland, with approximately 40% of the population holding library cards. This number exceeds the provincial average (31%).

For many, WPL functions as a connector — across generations, cultures, and income levels — and as a third place (not home, not work) where people find community, learning, and joy. However, gaps in perception, participation, and access still exist. Under-engaged groups, inconsistent experiences across branches, and lingering public misconceptions about what libraries do continue to limit WPL's reach. Strengthening engagement will require targeted outreach, new partnerships, thoughtful space design, and clearer storytelling about the Library's value.

Public Perception & Library Role

Among regular users, the Library is valued as an inclusive, stigma-free hub that acts as a social equalizer, fostering equity and connection. Community members praised the Library as a safe space for kids, a digital lifeline, and a place to explore creativity through activities like scavenger hunts, games, and maker tools.

Still, many community members — particularly non-library users — hold more traditional or outdated views of what the Library offers, or are simply unaware of the Library's offerings. Some newcomers may be unfamiliar with the Canadian library model, while others — particularly the more economically secure residents — perceive the Library as a “nice-to-have” rather than an essential public good. This disconnect can make it harder to build political and community-wide support.

There is an opportunity to elevate WPL's public narrative — highlighting its social value in combatting isolation, supporting youth development and confidence-building, and connecting people to critical life resources. According to survey results, respondents suggest the library plays an integral role in supporting literacy and lifelong learning; serving as a trusted source of information; and providing free, accessible, and inclusive public spaces for everyone. These areas were identified by both public and staff respondents as the most critical for the next five years.

There is broad alignment around the Library's future vision as a responsive, inclusive community hub — “a community's living room.” This vision is already visible in pockets of WPL's work, but realizing it fully will require sustained advocacy, stronger impact storytelling, and strategic investment in facilities, technology, and people. There is also clear opportunity to build a forward-looking narrative that shows how the Library contributes to social good — its role in supporting mental health, literacy, economic opportunity, and community resilience.

Engaging Communities

Despite a growing and increasingly diverse population, several groups remain underrepresented in WPL's patron base. Newcomers and multicultural residents, in particular, may be unaware of the Library's free offerings or unsure whether the space is meant for them. French-speaking residents also voiced interest in



more visible displays, expanded collections, and consistent year-round programming in French – positively noting WPL’s current French storytime.

Teens were flagged as another hard-to-reach demographic, a problem not unique to WPL. While school outreach exists, there may be room to create more youth-friendly environments, tech-driven programs, and casual hangout spaces. Older adults – particularly those without family nearby – may benefit from expanded programming, memory kits, or intergenerational initiatives that promote social connection. Some participants also suggested that adults in their 30s–40s without children are often overlooked in current programming.

While the majority of survey respondents noted there were no existing barriers to engaging with WPL, some pointed to noise levels, parking, and issues of safety as a deterrent to library usage. In addition, barriers like transportation, safety concerns (especially at the Main Branch), or lack of awareness were commonly cited during engagements as limiting accessor participation at the Library.

Partnerships & Outreach

WPL is widely seen as a willing and collaborative partner – and existing outreach efforts (e.g., pop-ups, school visits, and library card mail-out campaigns) are a clear strength. However, capacity remains a challenge, especially when it comes to resource-intensive large-scale events (e.g., food trucks, music, kids activities) and initiatives that are successful at attracting new users.

While a current strength, there is opportunity for WPL to continue this momentum and lean further into partnerships as a way to expand reach, relevance, and impact. For instance, co-locating (or more regularly co-locating) pop-ups, clinics, or drop-ins with other service providers, sharing meeting spaces flexibly, or collaborating to reach neighbourhoods where trust in public institutions may be lower. To meet hard-to-reach communities specifically, suggestions arose around more targeted outreach through trusted community organizations, use of the bookmobile to reach retirement homes, and activations in familiar community spaces like playgrounds.

There is also a broader opportunity to position the Library as part of Welland’s economic development narrative. WPL could be featured more prominently in conversations with new businesses or industries about Welland’s quality of life and social infrastructure, suggesting an opportunity for a greater partnership between the Library and City in advancing municipal goals.

Patron Experience

Overall, WPL is described as a welcoming and friendly environment – a true “third place” for many community members. In person visitation has grown 166% from 2021 to 2024, likely a result of strong program offerings. Programs, drop-ins, and informal staff interactions (like a friendly chat at checkout) play an important role in making people feel seen and connected – especially for older adults living alone. There are opportunities to strengthen WPL’s “third space” role, such as through more drop-in programs, craft corners (beyond kids-focused activities), board game areas, and flexible, cozy spaces.



According to the survey, the vast majority of respondents (91%) report high satisfaction with staff support. However, there is room to strengthen consistency across locations. Each branch serves a different neighbourhood with its own demographics, but patrons may receive different levels of service depending on where and when they visit. Management and frontline staff noted a need for stronger internal communication and accountability to ensure a consistently positive experience system-wide.

Safety and inclusion are also top-of-mind concerns. While some patrons appreciate visible security measures (e.g., locked public bathrooms and a security guard stationed at Main), others find them off-putting — highlighting the tension between creating a space that feels both secure and non-stigmatizing. Navigating this balance with empathy and intention will be key.

Beyond patron engagement in-branch, there is also online engagement to consider. The website has seen a high degree of growth, with 635,068 visits in 2024, and a huge jump from 2022 through 2024 after the launch of the new website in late 2021. Overall, this finding suggests that the new website is playing a role in helping patrons access information online.

Key Takeaways: Community Engagement & Experience

Strengths

- WPL has a high usage rate among the community, with nearly 40% of the population holding a library card.
- WPL is widely viewed as a welcoming, inclusive, community-oriented, “third space.”
- Satisfaction with in-person offerings is generally strong, particularly staff support.
- Proactive outreach efforts like school visits, pop-ups, and direct mail campaigns have been effective at growing library usage.
- In-person visitation and website traffic have continued to grow, illustrating strong engagement.
- WPL is recognized as a collaborative and willing partner in community-building initiatives.

Challenges & Gaps

- Outdated perceptions of the Library persist among non-users and more economically secure residents.
- Some newcomers may be unfamiliar with the Canadian library model and not perceive the library as a space for them.
- Engagement with newcomers, multicultural residents, teens, adults without children, and isolated seniors is a gap.



- Service is not yet consistent across branches, with different experiences depending on time and location.
- Capacity limitations make it difficult to sustain large-scale events and deeper outreach efforts, even though they are successful.
- Balancing safety and a welcoming, non-stigmatizing environment remains a challenge.
- Barriers including transportation (parking specifically), safety, and limited awareness of the Library's offering affect library usage.

Opportunities

- Strengthen WPL's public narrative by pairing usage data with human-centered impact stories.
- Targeted outreach with trusted community organizations to better engage hard-to-reach members of the community.
- Partner more frequently and consistently with local organizations to co-deliver services and share space.
- Tailor outreach and messaging to meet the needs of distinct demographic groups.
- Expand (visibility of) French-language and culturally relevant offerings to reflect community demographics.
- Prioritize internal communication, consistency, and accountability to ensure a high-quality patron experience at every branch.
- Enhance the Library's "third space" experience through more drop-ins, board games, and cozy spaces.
- Build an impact narrative that connects library value to funding (leveraging VOLT data and storytelling), and position WPL as community's "living room" through advocacy and community benefit framing.
- Leverage bookmobile and extended service points to expand reach into retirement homes and new neighbourhoods to ensure engagement with under-served populations and in growing neighbourhoods.



3.3. Facilities, Infrastructure, & Operations

WPL operates three branches with plans to implement a new bookmobile in the near future that will expand access beyond the current three service points, with 141 potential stops already identified including schools, seniors' residences, and community events. The Library's ability to operate effectively within its branches and expanded services points is shaped by staffing, digital tools, and governance.

Organizational Culture

WPL's internal culture has evolved significantly over the past several years. What was previously described as a divided or tense workplace has become more collaborative and trusting. The recently formed Employee Engagement & Wellness Committee (EEWC) is also helping to foster more trust and shared ownership among staff. For example, the recent Professional Development Day was widely praised as a "by staff, for staff" success. These insights were further echoed in staff survey findings. When asked "what aspect of WPL's internal culture or working environment were working well," respondents noted the Library's positive culture, the Employee Engagement & Wellness Committee, in-branch collaboration, and having well-defined roles.

However, some interpersonal tensions persist. Managers continue to observe gaps in personal accountability, and some staff still perceive divisions within the organization. The model of having staff work primarily within a single "home branch" can inadvertently reinforce silos, making it harder to maintain system-wide consistency or build a shared sense of purpose. There is opportunity to strengthen staff development approaches and cross-branch collaboration to support greater cohesion and alignment with WPL's long-term vision. In the staff survey, respondents noted that, while efforts are being made, more inter-system collaboration, communication, and trust-building is needed.

Looking ahead, staff also identified concrete ways WPL could better support them in their roles over the next five years. According to survey findings, these included increasing staff, ensuring more equitable task distribution, and providing dedicated "off-desk" time for part-time staff to engage in professional development and training. When asked about what opportunities would best support them in their role, staff most frequently responded with mental health, resilience, and well-being supports (43%), conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques (43%), and customer service and community engagement (43%).

Suggestions from the survey also emphasized expanding opportunity for hands-on learning, introducing structured onboarding, and encouraging managers to shadow front-line roles. In terms of workplace well-being, staff highlighted a need for more responsive support with difficult patron interactions, including providing time and space to decompress following a challenging interaction and establishing debriefing processes. Improvements to technology and physical workspaces were also noted, alongside a call for better volunteer identification (e.g., badges) and efforts to enhance transparency across the organization.



Staffing and Resourcing

Staffing and resourcing remain critical factors in shaping WPL's internal culture and operational effectiveness. The expanded management team – including new IT and business roles – has been a foundational building block that has helped turn the organization around since the pandemic.

Still, gaps in front-line capacity persist. There is a need for additional front-line support and programming staff to help alleviate pressure, dedicated IT support for more complex tasks, and an adult page role to improve service reliability. There is also a need for partnerships or in-house roles focused on social work or mental health support – particularly considering challenges at the Main Branch. There is, however, some debate around whether such services should fall under WPL's purview or be delivered through regional partnerships.

More broadly, WPL is entrenched in a lingering “austerity mindset,” which prevents everyone in the organization from dreaming bigger – from Board to front-line staff. This mindset also limits proactive planning and investment in growth. There is a strong call across all groups for building an impact narrative that ties visible community benefit to funding asks, which could build upon data from the Valuing Ontario Libraries Toolkit (VOLT) – an initiative that helps libraries demonstrate their community value and impact.

Governance

The Board is widely seen as stable, engaged, and representative of a diversity of perspectives. There is an opportunity to document what is working well to help preserve this stability through any future transitions. Board members also expressed interest in tools or guidelines to support their advocacy role, especially during election cycles or when engaging with skeptical community interest-holders who may question the Library's value. There may also be an opportunity for the Board to revisit its role in fundraising, where it previously played a greater role than it does currently. Such a shift could be part of building a stronger foundation for the Library's ongoing sustainability. In addition, orientation for new Board members could more explicitly address the realities of operating in a unionized, evolving system, ensuring that the Board is well-informed and well-equipped to support management effectively.

WPL is governed by a number of policies (e.g., governance policies, administrative policies) and plans (e.g., risk management, advertising strategy, recruitment and succession strategy). These policies and plans are regularly reviewed and updated.

From the City's perspective, the working relationship with WPL is more clearly defined and collaborative than in the past, especially in areas like HR where clearer areas of alignment and delineation have been identified. Regular touchpoints and shared event and program planning now help avoid duplication between City and Library offerings. Emergency preparedness protocols remain an area for improvement, with opportunities to better align approaches between the City and Library – particularly given the unique challenges of the Main Branch's downtown location and its co-location with City Hall. It was also noted that Library and City staff are in the same union, and there is a need to ensure alignment and consistent messaging from management.



Digital Infrastructure & Tools

Digital tools are a growing part of WPL's operational infrastructure. Microsoft Teams is working well for management but is underused by frontline staff, partly due to the challenges of shared workstations. Introducing branch-level accounts may offer a practical workaround.

Additionally, there may be an opportunity to expand self-serve options, such as self-checkout kiosks, to help reduce routine workloads and allow staff to focus on higher-impact tasks like programming, collections, and patron support. There is also potential to explore AI tools to improve efficiency and free up staff capacity — though management noted a need for further investigation around best practices, risks, and implications.

Facilities

Each of WPL's three branches is equipped with its own co-location model and plays a unique role in the system.

Main Branch

The Main Branch is the Library's downtown flagship, offering ample space, valued amenities (such as the Library of Things, local history collections, plentiful reading space, computer workstations, meeting rooms, and maker equipment located at the Innovation Station). It shares a location with City Hall, reinforcing its role as a visible community anchor. According to survey findings, the majority (56%) of respondents report primarily using Main as their branch of choice.

While Main has many amenities to offer, some community members avoid the branch due to perceived safety concerns, given its downtown context and the range of vulnerable patrons who use Main for library services as well as for relief from weather and climate conditions. This negative perception associated with Main is compounded by limited free parking (according to the survey, 76% of respondents access this branch by car) and outdated or underlit areas at the branch. There is opportunity to revisit the branch's layout to help all patrons feel equally welcome and safe. For instance, there may be opportunity to separate the children's area from the Personal Care Pantry.

Clearer wayfinding and displays – especially for special collections like the Library of Things – could also help more patrons discover what is available, while balancing security and theft-prevention measures. There is also opportunity to expand the Innovation Station into a fully realized makerspace, in line with library trends (e.g., incorporating additional tools such as 3D printers, sewing machines, audio-visual equipment, and creating dedicated and compelling space for hands-on learning, creativity, and collaboration).

Over the longer term, Main may require significant upgrades or relocation depending on lease milestones and broader downtown planning.

Seaway Mall Branch

The Seaway Mall Branch, despite its small footprint, is consistently described as “punching above its weight.” With high foot traffic, ample free parking (given its mall location), and a family-friendly feel, it is



appreciated by all ages, especially by seniors and parents who may feel less comfortable downtown at Main. More than a third (39%) of survey respondents report using Seaway Mall as their primary branch.

This branch benefits from a rent-free lease (up for renewal in 2027) and a strong relationship with mall security, which further supports its success. It is valued among the community for its safer and more convenient location, with easy access to other errands.

However, space constraints are a challenge. The branch has limited back-of-house space; it cannot easily accommodate more than two staff working simultaneously. Moreover, there is desire for quiet workspace and meeting rooms at this branch, if space allowed. There may be opportunity to address these challenges through future reconfiguration.

The programming room is also a valued asset; the room has piqued the interest of mall-goers, helping to entice new program registrants and card-holders. However, the programming room is often underused or appears inactive when blinds are down, which may give a false impression that the Library itself is not busy. There may be opportunity to activate this space more consistently, which would require additional staff capacity and/or partnerships. To combat space limitations, there may be opportunity to connect the Library more intentionally with other community service organizations in the mall (e.g., seniors and youth service organizations) to explore shared, multipurpose programming space and generally make the most of Seaway's co-location potential.

Diamond Trail Branch

Diamond Trail Branch serves a high-priority area in Welland that is poised for significant future population growth, however, it remains underutilized largely due to access and awareness issues. According to survey results, usage of this branch is low compared to the other two branches, with only 4% of respondents reporting Diamond Trail as their branch of choice.

Its shared-use agreement with the school board limits hours and visibility, and many nearby residents are unaware it exists. Parking is also a challenge as it is limited and shared with the school. Perception challenges also may play a part in low usage, with some community members feeling uncomfortable with the branch's school setting or feeling unwelcome in that environment. There is an opportunity to strengthen promotion, improve exterior lighting and signage, and build relationships with local organizations to better integrate this location into the neighbourhood's social fabric.

Preparing for Growth

As Welland's population expands, all engagement groups acknowledged the need to plan proactively for future facility and staffing demands. Co-location models — situating Library services within new or upgraded civic hubs — are widely supported, but interest-holders stressed that this should supplement, not replace, strong-performing locations like Seaway Mall.

The forthcoming bookmobile is widely celebrated as a promising and practical way to reach underserved communities — including seniors, families, and cultural communities in neighbourhoods with fewer services. The bookmobile can also play a key role in assessing and piloting locations for future branches to meet the demands of a growing population. Several stakeholders also identified opportunities to expand



service through drop-off lockers, vending machines, or micro-libraries in arenas, schools, and community centres. These extended service points would need to be designed and resourced thoughtfully to ensure equity, sustainability, and impact.

Key Takeaways: Facilities, Infrastructure, & Operations

Strengths

- Strong progress in organizational culture, staff engagement, and governance stability.
- Expanded management team has contributed to post-pandemic growth and organizational improvement.
- Strong City–Library relationship with increasing alignment on roles and priorities.
- Establishment of the Employee Engagement & Wellness Committee has supported a more collaborative and trusting organizational culture.
- Three-branch system offers diverse access points, with each serving a distinct role. Main Branch offers valued resources and civic presence; Seaway Mall delivers high impact in a small space.
- Bookmobile and extended service concepts are widely supported and being proactively explored.
- Clear policy and planning framework in place, with regular review and updates.

Challenges & Gaps

- Front-line staffing pressures, workload imbalance, and limited capacity to expand programming or activate underused spaces.
- Persistent silos between branches due to “home branch” model and inconsistent cross-system collaboration.
- Main Branch faces safety and accessibility concerns; Seaway is space-constrained; Diamond Trail lacks visibility and access.
- Emergency preparedness, especially for Main, requires a coordinated response with the City.
- Digital tool usage is uneven, especially among front-line staff due to shared workstation barriers.
- “Austerity mindset” limits proactive planning and ambition.



Opportunities

- Document Board best practices to preserve governance stability through future transitions, and revisit Board's role in fundraising to support long-term sustainability.
- Reconfigure Seaway Mall back-of-house and programming room activation to maximize impact and visibility, and strengthen partnerships with other mall-based organizations for shared programming space to address space limitations.
- Create clearer wayfinding and displays at Main and redesign layout to address perceived safety challenges.
- Expand visibility and community outreach around Diamond Trail, while considering long-term suitability of the location as current lease approaches renewal.
- Leverage bookmobile and expanded service points to meet under-reached community members, and to test and refine expansion plans.
- Strengthen internal collaboration and staff development across branches.
- Explore digital tools (e.g., self-checkout, AI) to improve service delivery and free up staff capacity to focus on higher impact activities.



4. Strategic Plan

This strategic plan charts a course for WPL over the next five years. It builds on the Library's existing strengths while preparing for the needs of a growing and diversifying city. The framework is organized around three interconnected priorities:

1. **Inspire Curiosity and Learning**, focusing on **what the Library will offer** through inclusive programs, collections, and services that encourage discovery and skill-building
2. **Enhance Experience and Engagement**, focusing on **how the Library will connect** with residents through partnerships, outreach, and welcoming patron experiences
3. **Invest in People and Places**, focusing on **how the Library will deliver** by strengthening staff capacity, organizational culture, technology, and facilities

These priorities are mutually reinforcing, each supporting the Library's vision and role as a vital civic and community resource. Taken together, they provide a balanced and achievable framework for strengthening what patrons already value while laying the groundwork for future needs.



4.1. Vision, Mission, Values

These statements serve as WPL's north star, guiding its development over the next five years. Together, they articulate the Library's aspirations for the community, its core purpose, and its guiding principles.

Vision

Our aspiration for the community

A welcoming, connected community that can grow, learn, and thrive.

Mission

What we do

Opening doors to knowledge, ideas, and opportunity for everyone.

Values

What guides our work

Inclusion: We make sure everyone belongs here, with equitable access and inclusive services.

Collaboration: We work with one another and our partners, building relationships that strengthen our community.

Curiosity: We spark curiosity and support learning at every stage of life.

Innovation: We adapt and grow with creativity, experimentation, and openness to new ideas.

Integrity: We act with honesty, accountability, and respect in everything we do.

Intellectual Freedom: We uphold the right to read, learn, and exchange ideas freely.



4.2. Future States

The following “future states” describe the direction WPL is working toward across its three core areas. They illustrate what success will look like for the Library through and beyond the life of this plan, keeping the organization focused on long-term community needs, growth, and potential. These future states provide a touchstone for decision-making and a broader horizon for the actions in this plan – helping WPL continue building a library system that is responsive, future-focused, and a lasting asset for the community.

Library Offerings

- WPL offers a responsive, dynamic slate of programs that reflect the needs and interests of Welland’s evolving population.
- A culture of experimentation and iteration supports staff in developing fresh, relevant offerings across age groups and interests.
- The Library’s collections are inclusive, accessible, and easy to discover – available in a range of formats that meet users where they are, both physically and digitally.
- Digital tools and emerging technologies are integrated into Library offerings, with strong support for digital literacy, access, and innovation.
- WPL’s services enhance community wellbeing, delivered in partnership with trusted organizations that extend the Library’s reach and impact.

Community Engagement & Experience

- WPL is recognized by residents and decision-makers as an essential community resource, supported by strong public narratives that combine data with real-life impact stories.
- WPL is valued as a welcoming, inclusive space where everyone belongs.
- Outreach and partnerships actively connect the Library to communities that are underrepresented and underserved, helping close gaps in access and participation.
- Communication strategies are tailored and effective, ensuring residents know what the Library offers and how it can support their specific goals and interests.
- Every service point offers a consistent, high-quality patron experience with safe, friendly, and well-designed spaces that foster connection, curiosity, and comfort.



Facilities, Infrastructure, & Operations

- WPL's physical and digital infrastructure keeps pace with Welland's growth, with service points accessible in neighbourhoods across the city.
- Facilities are welcoming, accessible, and purpose-built, reflecting the needs of their communities and reinforcing the Library's civic role.
- Organizational culture is collaborative, resilient, and mission-driven, supported by inclusive leadership, clear communication, and professional development.
- WPL embraces a forward-thinking culture that emphasizes creativity and experimentation, empowering staff to test new ideas even in a resource-conscious environment.
- Strong partnerships with the City of Welland and other key partners enable proactive planning, shared problem-solving, and long-term investment.
- Digital systems and tools support efficient operations and responsive service delivery, with staff empowered to adopt new technologies that improve workflows and benefit users.

4.3. Recommendations

The following recommendations are organized into three strategic priorities. Each priority sets out objectives that define WPL's intended outcomes, supported by concrete actions to achieve them. Framed around what the Library will offer, how it will connect, and how it will deliver, this framework shows how WPL will bring its vision, mission, and values to life by expanding opportunities for learning, strengthening community connections, and investing in library spaces and the people that help shape Welland's future.

Priority 1: Inspire Curiosity and Learning

What We'll Offer

This strategic priority is about delivering relevant and inclusive programs, collections, and services that encourage discovery, build skills, and connect people to ideas, information, and local history.

Objective 1.1. Build collections that reflect Welland's diversity, history, and evolving interests, and support their discovery and use across the system.

- A. Update and expand collections to reflect community interests, demographics, and languages through LINC, interlibrary loan, and targeted acquisitions, with diverse formats and rotating displays highlighting materials system-wide.
- B. Develop a framework to guide growth and evaluation of the Library of Things, and promote this collection consistently across all service points.



- C. Grow and promote the local history resources through digitization, exhibits, equipment renewal (e.g., microfilm reader), and special projects (e.g., the history of Welland's mayors).
- D. Regularly review and enhance catalogue features, labeling, and shelving to ensure collections and resources are easy to browse and use across the system.
- E. Invest in and refresh e-book, audiobook, and online learning collections, exploring cost-effective approaches (e.g., consortial purchasing).

Objective 1.2 Deliver inclusive programs that foster creativity, skill-building, and lifelong learning.

- A. Expand family-focused and intergenerational programming that introduces library use early and delivers lifelong value.
- B. Partner with local organizations and City departments to deliver programs that support life skills and workforce readiness, with targeted outreach to teens and young adults.
- C. Building off the pilot's success, host Human Library events that connect residents with diverse lived experiences and areas of expertise, fostering empathy, dialogue, and shared understanding.
- D. Collaborate with schools, postsecondary institutions, and community/cultural organizations to co-deliver inclusive programs, extend resources, and increase mutual impact.
- E. Increase access to hands-on STEAM and creative technology learning opportunities (including makerspace programs).

Objective 1.3 Champion community-wide digital literacy and access, preparing the community for the demands of tomorrow.

- A. Expand access to digital devices system-wide (e.g., laptop lending, device lending pilots).
- B. Provide scheduled and targeted digital workshops, drop-ins, and one-on-one tech help to build user confidence.
- C. Offer programs and public conversations on AI, privacy, misinformation, and online safety, in partnership with regional libraries.

Priority 2: Enhance Experience and Engagement

How We'll Connect

This strategic priority is about reaching further into Welland's growing community through partnerships and outreach, inviting more people to discover the Library, and enriching the patron experience.

Objective 2.1 Expand targeted outreach and engagement with underserved and new residents.

- A. Encourage card sign-ups through targeted communications (e.g., digital campaigns, direct mail, community events) and participation in newcomer welcome resources and events.



- B. Develop a Bookmobile strategy and explore complementary models that would extend services into growth areas (e.g., pop-ups, kiosks in schools, community centres, or seniors' residences).
- C. Pilot inclusive engagement opportunities for groups less likely to use the library (e.g., gamified teen events, programs for men).

Objective 2.2 Strengthen awareness, perceptions, and support for WPL.

- A. Maintain strong relationships with City staff and Council through both formal (e.g., evidence-based reporting) and informal (e.g., tours, hosting meetings) touchpoints.
- B. Develop an advocacy strategy for election cycles that includes candidate connections and engagement of new Councillors.
- C. Review and update the communications plan, prioritizing a high-impact campaign designed to broaden perceptions of what the library is and who it serves.
- D. Embed impact stories in marketing, outreach, and reporting to highlight WPL's contributions to Welland's growth and quality of life.

Objective 2.3 Ensure consistent, accessible, and welcoming patron experiences across all service points.

- A. Create and implement a consistent service standard aligned with City policy and library best practice, supported by staff training in meaningful engagement with diverse user groups.
- B. Regularly audit and enhance safety and inclusivity through improvements to design, wayfinding, lighting, and staff support protocols.
- C. Evaluate and streamline patron account settings and service policies (e.g., booking processes) to improve ease of use.
- D. Prominently post key policies and codes of conduct in clear, accessible, and welcoming language across all library locations (e.g., expectations around behaviour, use of space, unattended children).
- E. Expand digital service points (e.g., catalogue stations, staff-assisted kiosks) to make access easier while maintaining personalized staff service.

Objective 2.4 Connect residents to community supports that enrich their library experience and wellbeing.

- A. Regularly review core service policies to align with changing community needs, embedding equity and inclusion in all aspects of service delivery.
- B. Provide free space and resources for community organizations to deliver programs and services in the library, ensuring residents can access multiple supports in one location.
- C. Work with community and social service organizations to co-deliver programs, provide access to resources, and connect residents to holistic supports through initiatives like social prescribing.



Priority 3: Invest in People and Places

How We'll Deliver

This strategic priority is about equipping WPL with the spaces, technology, organizational culture, and capacity it needs to adapt and grow with Welland's future.

Objective 3.1 Optimize and plan library spaces and service points to support access, safety, and growth.

- A. Conduct a feasibility study and facility needs assessment to guide WPL's long-term growth and service delivery. This study should consider opportunities for Seaway Mall expansion (including workspace improvement, expansion opportunities), the best future location for Diamond Trail, and partnership opportunities with the City for co-located spaces and alternative service points (e.g., lockers, vending machines) to extend the Library's footprint as Welland grows.
- B. Reconfigure Main Branch layout to improve safety and patron experience (e.g., relocation of Pantry, replacement of central service desk).
- C. Work with the City to address paid parking barriers at Main Branch (e.g., validation, rebates, or alternative arrangements).
- D. Ensure maker/innovation opportunities are available system-wide and transform the Main Branch Innovation Station into a dedicated makerspace with tools, technology, and space that are accessible to all patrons.

Objective 3.2 Strengthen digital infrastructure to improve operational efficiency and innovation.

- A. Encourage openness to new tools by collecting staff feedback, evaluating what works, and iterating based on needs.
- B. Improve efficiency of internal and public-facing platforms (e.g., configure Teams for branch-level access rather than personal accounts, enhance patron booking and scheduling systems).
- C. Develop a technology lifecycle replacement plan and review key organizational software (e.g., HR management systems) to ensure compliance, security, and alignment with evolving needs and opportunities.
- D. Explore the potential of AI tools for administrative efficiency, guided by a clear internal policy framework.

Objective 3.3 Build staff capacity, skills, and wellbeing.

- A. Establish an annual goal-setting process to identify staff development priorities and support job satisfaction.
- B. Support staff development by delivering training in key areas (i.e., digital literacy, de-escalation, emergency preparedness, library trends, and emerging needs), and ensure staff have dedicated



time to pursue training and professional development, including opportunities to connect with peers in other library systems.

- C. Provide mental health, resilience, and wellbeing supports for employees.
- D. Invest in additional front-line and programming staff capacity (e.g., adult page role) to meet growing service demands.

Objective 3.4 Foster a collaborative, transparent, and future-ready organizational culture.

- A. Encourage staff to test new ideas, evaluate outcomes, and celebrate successes across the organization.
- B. Continue to support and resource staff committees (starting with the Employee Engagement & Wellness Committee) and explore opportunities for additional committees as needs and interests evolve.
- C. Regularly review policies and procedures, with opportunities for staff input and clear communication of outcomes.
- D. Update and document governance policies, tools, and practices to ensure continuity and support succession planning (e.g., document Board practices, Board orientation and advocacy tools, updated policies, and a CEO manual.)
- E. Introduce regular system-wide staff touchpoints to strengthen cross-branch collaboration.



5. Implementation Plan

Bringing this strategy to life will require a thoughtful and community-centred approach. Implementation should balance ambition with practicality, ensuring that actions are prioritized based on WPL's capacity while keeping pace with the needs of a growing city. The following principles will guide strategic decision-making and help sustain momentum over the next five years:

- Implementation will be **community-centred**, grounding decisions in the needs of Welland residents and ensuring services, spaces, and programs make a tangible difference in people's lives.
- Progress will be paced to remain **practical and realistic**, aligning ambition with available resources and staff capacity.
- Success will be **collaborative**, built on strong partnerships with the City, community organizations, and sector peers.
- Monitoring will be **accountable and transparent**, with regular measurement and reporting to refine approaches and build trust.
- The approach will remain **future-focused**, adaptable to change and responsive to new opportunities as Welland continues to grow.

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