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## Public Libraries: Surviving the Next Quarter Century

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# Public Libraries: Surviving the Next Quarter Century

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The future of libraries depends on our ability to look wisely into the future, anticipate possibilities, and take the risks necessary to succeed in our purpose and mission.

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This is the golden age of public libraries. Things have never been better for public libraries in the U. S. and particularly in Oregon. In the past two decades we have done a wonderful job of both renovating and expanding our existing library facilities, and of building new facilities. And there are more on the way, in Eugene, Jackson County, Multnomah County, Forest Grove, Hood River, and elsewhere. Collections are strong and growing in most libraries, and library technology has been dramatically improved. Library staff are larger and better skilled than ever. Library use is at an all-time high in most libraries. Circulation is growing. Traditional reference services remain steady, while online reference services using licensed databases and library Web portals are expanding. More children are participating in library summer reading and other programs than ever before, and more and more libraries are taking children's services out of the library to child care providers and Head Start centers.

With this kind of success, it is human nature to slip into a comfort zone. And if public librarians, staff, and trustees do this, we may be extinct before 2025. This is true because the environment in which we operate is changing radically. The key word here is "competition." There are entrepreneurs in both the public and private sectors who see opportunities in the information business. They think they can do what we have done for 150 years better/cheaper/faster. This is something we have never had to deal with before. Public libraries have had a virtual monopoly on the "free reading material and information" business for the past two centuries. But that is changing, and we must be prepared and ready to respond.

Before we can deal effectively with our changing circumstances, we must first articulate the most immediate and significant threats facing public libraries. The next step is to determine the requirements that will be needed to overcome these threats. To be successful, we should also understand the barriers that could impede our progress

toward fulfilling those requirements.

The following list is an attempt at this process. The list also includes some harbingers— events that are happening now that point to the challenges we will face in the future. If you have not heard of these harbingers, you would do well to investigate them.

## Top 5 Threats

### 1. Peer to Peer Media Sharing

*Harbinger:* Napster, Gnutella, "Riding the Bullet."

*Scenario:* Peer to peer media sharing spreads from music to books; encrypted e-books are hacked and made freely available.

### 2. Low-Cost e-media

*Harbinger:* netLibrary, bn.com, "The Plant," Hollywood Video.

*Scenario:* The threat of peer to peer media sharing is averted through effective litigation, encryption, and price reductions; the public accepts greatly reduced prices ("micro-payments") and is willing to pay for e-media.

### 3. Web-based Information Services

*Harbingers:* Google, Ask Jeeves, Encyclopedia Britannica.

*Scenario:* Any question can be answered using commercial Web-based information services supported by advertising or micro-payments.

### 4. Education Services Provided to Children by Schools or Non-Profits

*Harbingers:* Experimental school-based after school or summer programs, Head Start, SMART.

*Scenario:* Schools and various non-profits move aggressively into traditional library youth services markets: summer reading, storytime, after school programs, evening programs.

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### 5. Erosion of Library Brand Identity

*Harbingers:* ebrary; rocket-library.com; Questia.

*Scenario:* For-profit virtual “libraries” confuse the public and erode support for tax-supported libraries.

### Top 5 Requirements

#### 1. Outstanding Executive Leadership

Libraries need CEO’s of the highest caliber who understand the new competitive environment for libraries. This means defending or adapting traditional library products, where possible, and innovating new products that meet important community needs.

#### 2. Dedicated Tax Base

In Oregon, the libraries with a permanent tax rate will be in the most defensible position to maintain their value to communities.

#### 3. Entrepreneurial Risk-Taking

Innovating new ways to add value to communities may become crucial if traditional library services like circulating books and answering reference questions are undermined by new technologies.

#### 4. Top-quality Management and Enterprise-Wide Specialists

High-quality executive leadership is not enough. Libraries will need highly skilled and creative project management, IT/Web management, personnel and training management, and team management.

#### 5. Organizational Agility

Public libraries have been doing basically the same things in the same ways for the past 150 years; unlearning the past and creating the future will be crucial.

### Top 5 Barriers

#### 1. Aversion to Scale

Libraries traditionally have been mostly small and local—a recipe for disaster if you consider that it is virtually impossible for a small, local library to meet the five requirements above.

#### 2. Comfort Zone

Public libraries have never been more successful, in both services and resources, than they are today—another recipe for disaster if our current success blinds us to the very real and daunting challenges that lie ahead.

#### 3. Aversion to Creative Destruction

Some traditional library services may not be salvageable, and yet librarians have not been known for their ability to cut their losses and move on to services that will continue to add value to communities.

#### 4. Organizational Inertia

Libraries have been slow to embrace management innovations and are mostly organized the same as they were 100 years ago; we invest very little in continuously upgrading the skills and abilities of library staff at all levels.

#### 5. Subsistence to Other Agendas

Libraries that are part of multi-purpose governments will find it even harder to defend and grow their resources as traditional library services begin to erode, and many begin to question the continued relevance of the public library to community needs.

Understanding these issues, threats, and opportunities is paramount. The future of libraries depends on our ability to look wisely into the future, anticipate possibilities, and take the risks necessary to succeed in our purpose and mission. But we must also remember the future of libraries is not about us, it is about our users.

