

Public Libraries as Key Strategic Partners in Smart City and Smart Community Development

The role of public libraries in their communities has evolved over time. Once mainly repositories of knowledge sources and items typically dispensed through physical shelves and manual catalogues, public libraries have become anchor institutions with the unique ability to understand and support community needs, strengthen civic life, and facilitate engagement among community members to achieve shared goals.

Currently, public libraries offer programs and services to a variety of patrons, designed to meet their diverse needs and demands. They also provide a safe and neutral space within the community for patrons to participate in different activities, interact with each other and enjoy free and easy access to information and a variety of technologies.

All these features make public libraries a potential strategic partner in the development of smart cities and smart communities.



A Smart City/Community...^[1]

- Promotes a comprehensive view of the city/community, which materializes in different types of initiatives, from waste management to traffic control or water management.
- Adopts a double perspective, technological and human, which means that technology is key in their development (and, therefore, it is the tool par excellence) but that, at the same time, smart cities and communities have to be developed for, by, and with citizens. As a result, urban governance and participation processes as well as investments in human and social capital are inherent attributes of a smart city.
- Pursues a triple goal: to improve the efficiency of urban operations, to improve citizens' quality of life, and to promote the local economy, having as a common background environmental sustainability.

[1] For the rest of the document, the term "smart community" will be used and will be inclusive of both cities and other communities.

The idea that public libraries are necessary partners in urban development is not new. In the specific case of smart communities -- particularly after 2009 when the term “anchor institution” made its first appearance in United States law in the context of broadband policy -- public libraries have been widely identified as anchor institutions that could extend connectivity and the benefits of robust broadband, playing a key role in digital inclusion. In addition, libraries have embraced the digital era, becoming technological hubs: it is no surprise to find public computers and free Wi-Fi in libraries today; also e-books and online databases for research and an array of other online resources. Further, libraries are using social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, to connect with patrons.

Yet, as parts of the digital, knowledge and creative infrastructures of smart communities, public libraries can go beyond providing access to computers and the Internet. Our research shows that, generally speaking, public libraries have the potential to contribute to smart communities by 1) developing smart citizens, 2) enabling citizen participation, and 3) providing an innovation environment.

Developing Smart Citizens

Given the emergence of proficiency in digital skills as an essential aspect of being a smart citizen, public libraries may, for example, provide training to help improve patrons' digital literacy and understanding of open data.

Enabling Citizen Participation

Public libraries may enable citizen engagement by providing opportunities to participate in the development of smart communities. It is not enough to have access to the technology and to know how to use it if there are no opportunities to meaningfully utilize the technology to engage in smart community initiatives. Public libraries are already considered trusted physical (and also virtual) environments where, among other, civic and cultural engagement, lifelong learning, establishing feelings of identity and belonging to a community, and civic engagement can take place. Accordingly, public libraries can also enable the participation of civil society in smart community initiatives.

Providing an Innovation Environment

Public libraries may also create and support innovation spaces where entrepreneurs and small businesses can experiment with very diverse technologies and use them to conceptualize or develop new ideas and products. Further, in the context of smart communities, public libraries may serve as open spaces or techno-centric hubs for stakeholder engagement, and they may become knowledge hubs and innovation environments where reliable sources of information are shared to understand, discuss and potentially solve community problems.



There is a clear opportunity for public libraries to become a strategic and recognized partner in the development of smart communities, which surpasses digitalizing libraries or democratizing the benefits of digital connectivity. The traditional and important role of public libraries as trusted information intermediaries provides a powerful platform for public libraries to become key players in smart community initiatives, reinforcing their role as community anchors. In this respect, local governments -- as well as other key community stakeholders in the development of smart communities -- may boost their investments by counting on the work of public libraries and adding them to the network of strategic partners that together may make the community smarter.

If you are a local government, a school or a university, a private company, or a nonprofit, approach your public library to know more about what it does and how it is already contributing to developing a smart community. Partner with it to jointly guarantee success of your smart community strategy and to produce public value and specific benefits to a diverse set of community members. Support public libraries to become an acknowledged and strategic partner in smart cities and communities.

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