

# The Role of Arizona Libraries in the APNE Process

## White Paper

The New Economy presents unique challenges and opportunities for the citizens of Arizona. To ensure that the state is prepared to overcome the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities, the Governor has created the Arizona Partnership for the New Economy (APNE).

Libraries have always been central to the development and durability of democracy in America. Libraries are, in many communities, the primary space where citizens learn on their own, and come together as citizens to discuss the issues of the day. In addition to that, there exists an extensive body of research that demonstrates that strong libraries build healthy communities. People *want* to live in places where the libraries are vibrant, and businesses, likewise, *want* to relocate to communities where the educational environment is on solid ground. That is particularly true of the New Economy, since one of the distinguishing characteristics of the businesses that define the New Economy is the importance they place on education. If Arizona is to attract more New Economy companies, the state's communities must be educationally attractive to them, and libraries are central to that picture.

Libraries, then, play a crucial role in connecting Arizonans to the New Economy, because so many of the issues that are central to the New Economy—particularly, an educated citizenry, access to technology, workforce development, and research relating to local economies—are issues that libraries deal with daily. *Thus, Arizona libraries are logical stakeholders and they should be major players in any statewide effort to realize the opportunities afforded by the New Economy.* That statement reads even truer when one considers some of the tenets that define APNE.

APNE's purpose is to:

### 1. Define the New Economy and its importance to Arizona.

**Library response:** If nothing else, the New Economy is characterized by its use of new technologies within a global paradigm. Arizona libraries are often the first place members of the public encounter new information technologies. Libraries provide a free, public gateway to the Internet, and most offer introductory learning opportunities, especially for the out-of-school adult public, to gain new skills in searching digital resources and refining research methods. As much as one might think everyone has access to the Web, there remains a digital divide in Arizona, and libraries help bridge that chasm for those who lack access. Beyond this, libraries are windows on the world for many residents, and in the context of the borderless New Economy, an understanding and appreciation of other cultures, traditions, and languages, for example, is paramount. Through the Internet, books, magazines, newspapers, and public programs, libraries help foster an understanding of other nations—the very nations Arizona must deal with if it is to participate in the New Economy.

**2. Assess Arizona's current readiness and establish benchmarks for measuring progress.**

**Library response:** In order to “establish benchmarks” to determine Arizona’s readiness to participate in the New Economy, the state must begin with its individual communities. The information gathered in this research will likely focus on a community’s educational and business infrastructure, as well as any “visioning” programs the community is conducting. This information is often found in local libraries. Furthermore, libraries themselves are experienced at benchmarking and evaluation; they consistently evaluate their communities in an effort to better serve customer needs and interests. Libraries establish benchmarks of service that become part of their annual goals. Using these skills, libraries stand ready to assist local businesses and state government in assessing their community’s readiness for participation in the New Economy.

**3. Develop strategies for correcting perceived deficiencies in responding to opportunities.**

**Library response:** Through programs such as the Economic Development Information Centers (discussed below), Arizona libraries provide up-to-date, accurate business and economic information so community leaders can improve their strategies when responding to New Economy initiatives. Also, libraries themselves are constantly going through self-assessments, and they create programs and strategies that respond to the needs and interests of their patrons. Further, libraries are often the public space where the community as a whole comes together to evaluate itself—in town halls and similar events. From both a process and content perspective, then, libraries should be part of any discussion concerning assessing community deficiencies and the strategies available to address them.

Beyond these basic principles, there are several thematic topics that are central to New Economy thinking, and each of them has a strong connection to the work of libraries:

**E-Learning and New Talent**

**Library Response:** One premise of E-learning is to link innovations of the New Economy with the building of an improved knowledge base and skill level for all Arizona citizens. This is nothing new for libraries. As far back as Thomas Jefferson, he and others put their faith in libraries and schools “to inform [the public’s] discretion by education.” Indeed, for the nation’s Founders, the idea of an unenlightened public was anathema to democracy. Regardless of whether one is learning the Greek language, as in Jefferson’s time, or how to access the Internet, as one might do today, libraries often fulfill that role as community educator. Education does not stop with public school or even college; by its very nature, education is a life-long endeavor, and libraries are there to serve that need.

Arizona libraries are ideal places for learners of all ages and backgrounds to experience the Internet, as well as many other educational opportunities—beginning with basic literacy, which many libraries are in the forefront of offering to residents. Programs such as the federal e-rate allow libraries with inadequate infrastructure to get wired. Grant opportunities like the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation provide modern hardware and software for libraries in rural and underserved areas, while the Qwest Foundation offers learning programs for people of all ages. Other initiatives, such as Libraries for the Future, the Rural Technology Centers, NAU-Net, AZ Learning System, Arizona Reads, and ASSET offer services and educational opportunities to Arizonans through the state’s library network.

### **Knowledge Leaders, Entrepreneurs and Capital**

**Library Response:** Arizona libraries can be found in every community in the state, and in many of these places, especially the smaller, rural areas, libraries serve an entrepreneurial role that is akin to a chamber of commerce elsewhere. Economic Development Information Centers (EDIC) are located throughout the state in libraries, providing information that will help attract new businesses to the region, as well as serve already-established enterprises. Library staff involved in the EDIC and other business outreach programs are active participants in local business forums and roundtables, and attend seminars on business-related topics in order to remain aware of changes in the business environment and the community’s economy. They help new businesses start and grow by providing demographic information, economic trends, and funding possibilities. In this sense, libraries help develop local entrepreneurial skills and provide information resources and training programs to help them make the case for obtaining venture capital.

### **New Commerce and Creative Communities**

**Library Response:** Arizona libraries are community-gathering places for people having a variety of interests. Much more than book-lenders, libraries are one place where residents come together to celebrate their past and plan their future. Libraries are often the site for town hall meetings, city council activities, and local “visioning” initiatives. Why? Because people recognize libraries as a safe space to disagree, as a place where divergent points of view can be shared. In this sense, libraries are creating community—“creative communities” where citizens constantly reinvent themselves and their community identity. The commercial sector, likewise, recognizes that the status quo is not sufficient. “New Commerce” knows that the community is evolving and businesses must change with it, if they are to remain responsive to citizen needs. Hence, businesses are integral to these community forums, and libraries are one place where residents and businesses can meet to plan together.

## **Building Connections to Opportunity**

**Library Response:** Arizona libraries are familiar with the digital divide, as a barrier to full participation in the New Economy. This barrier is true for individuals as well as businesses, and libraries are working to tear down that barrier in Arizona. There are at least two obstacles that prevent people and companies from full participation: first is the absence of appropriate hardware and infrastructure, and second is a lack of training. To address the first, libraries offer electronic access, even in communities where many residents and businesses have a difficult time getting on the information highway. Libraries continue to upgrade their hardware and networks through federal, state, and private funding. Beyond computers and wiring, however, libraries also offer educational programs that ease users' apprehension about technology, so they may experience and fully understand the benefits of the electronic global village. By linking to this village, even the most remote locations in Arizona can become full participants in the New Economy.

## **E-Government Edge**

**Library Response:** The New Economy is not simply a matter of new commercial enterprises. Without a more educated public and a visionary government to support them, new businesses will likely wither. The public's educational interests are served by libraries; these institutions also serve government and provide a communications network between and among people, governments, and businesses. Because of their close relationship to local governments, and because of their near universal presence throughout the state, libraries are ideal vehicles for connecting people to government. As mentioned, libraries are occasionally the community meeting place where citizens and elected officials come together to discuss local matters. Similarly, libraries often serve as campaign stops and polling locations—again, neutral places for the community to engage in political dialogue. In addition, library computers provide access to local, county, state, and federal governments, and libraries provide staffs to assist patrons with these activities. The Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records is also involved in an effort to provide e-government services to citizens through its vast library network. As such, libraries should be a place where people, businesses, and government meet and dialogue—either in person or at least in cyberspace.

## Summary

Libraries have always been central to Arizona's development. When many towns were first founded in the territory, one of the first public facilities that residents established was the local library, because that institution was seen as offering the kind of education that is necessary for a civilization to survive. That role for the library will not lessen as Arizona moves into the New Economy. The issues that define the New Economy—technology, education, information, communication—are the same issues that have always been key for libraries. There can be no doubt that an investment in libraries is an investment in the future of Arizona, an investment in the New Economy. The library community in Arizona stands ready to help promote and implement the concepts and goals of APNE.

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