



ROLLING MEADOWS LIBRARY Focus Groups: Themes & Takeaways October 28-30, 2024

NOTE: Focus group attendees were invited to participate in this exercise either because of a recommendation from a member of the project's steering committee or at the suggestion of the RML director.

As each of these four sessions commenced, attendees were informed that their comments may be paraphrased (and in some cases typed verbatim) and would be shared in aggregate with library leadership at the conclusion of the assessment work. However, for comfort and maximum candor, the moderators assured participants that comments would not be attributable back to specific individuals. In rare cases where an exception seems warranted and a name is listed alongside a comment or suggestion, it is done with the express approval of that individual.

What follows are key themes and other vital takeaways as expressed by focus group attendees across multiple sessions. Opinions and topics that came up only in passing or did not gain traction are not represented here.

Perspectives and ideas as presented here do not necessarily reflect the beliefs or recommendations of the Library Strategies consulting team.

Moderator: Nick Dimassis MLIS
Note-taker: Melissa Brechon MLIS

Tell us what you feel we should know about the community you call home and in which your library operates.

- Although it is just one of many suburbs, the Rolling Meadows community has a distinct identity and personality all its own. It tight knit and something of a "hidden gem" for the region.
- Rolling Meadows maintains a small town / homey feel. Families stay close and frequently return to the area when an opportunity to do so presents itself.
- Overall, RM has a reputation as a safe community and a walkable one. (However, " the further you are from apartments, the safer you are.")
- Since RM borders so many communities, anything near a border is often assumed to be part of an adjoining city – which is not always the case.



- RM contains few parks relative to its size. Preservation or establishment of green spaces has not been a priority.
- RM is more diverse than at least some of the neighboring suburbs and also has a higher prevalence of multi-generational families. Increasing diversity is not uniformly embraced.
- RM citizens exude civic pride (“fiercely proud”).
- RM is somewhat unique in its quality of life proposition: modestly sized and tight-knit, yet you can get most anywhere in the Chicago metro fairly quickly.
- RM’s tax rate is modest compared to other suburbs but the amenities are also modest. The latter is offset somewhat by the fact that RM residents can so easily get to neighboring communities.
- RM struggles “to get noticed” compared to neighboring communities with larger populations (and in some cases, flashier amenities).
- RM’s fortunes and reputation have morphed with time. (It was once commonly referred to as “Rolling Ghettos.”)
- While the community is overall welcoming to newcomers, language barriers create a disconnect that’s hard to bridge.
- There is a stigma around East Park Apartments, despite the fact that they were once recognized with a National Grant of Excellence.
- Community demographics have changed and now include Hispanic, Polish, and Ukrainian families.
- More Latinos and many new immigrants live here (East Park Apartments) between Central and Algonquin near the PNR.
- While some do not or choose not to see it, there is still poverty in Rolling Meadows. Government relationships are strong; cross-department collaborations are a strength (city, police, social services, etc.)
- There is a lack of public transportation – a true barrier for some, especially if you do not have a personal vehicle.
- Prevalence of rowhouses / townhomes makes some neighbors feel crowded.
- RM boasts many opportunities for civic engagement and volunteerism (ex., concerts in the park).
- Housing costs are generally 10-15% lower than neighboring communities.
- If they don’t already, library leadership should consider partnering with: park district, senior center (active adult center), garden club, historical society, and chamber of commerce. Also consider: Community Events Foundation, Morton Grove Arboretum, and Gallagher Insurance (for classes on financial literacy).
- Area schoolchildren purportedly speak more than 50 languages in the home.
- City of Rolling Meadows has a Ten-Year Comprehensive Plan in place. It includes a big focus on making the Kirchoff Road Corridor District the center of town.
- Chicago Bears are currently looking at utilizing the former Arlington Racetrack for a new stadium. This would have huge implications on city streets, traffic flow and access, and even housing, etc. (“It is far from being settled or a decision made.”)



- Many new high-quality restaurants are opening.
- Industry in town has a higher occupancy rate than neighboring communities, and there is a strong commercial real estate market.
- A current, key community challenge is school redistricting.
- At present, RM lacks a real downtown and no off-ramp from the northern suburbs.
- In many ways, Rolling Meadows feels in the shadows of Palatine.
- It is not easy for single parents to arrange library visits as the community lacks public transportation and it is difficult walking in the winter months.
- The community demographic is young and with the youth comes a vibrancy.
- The city is working with the state legislature on funding public transportation, but it is a complex issue with various boards and approval processes in the mix.
- The City of Rolling Meadows recently added social services staff to help “fill in the gaps” between in-need residents and services.

Tell us about your library. What are your top-of-mind impressions? What characteristics or services feel most noteworthy?

- The library is not an independent taxing district and so comes to the city for funding.
- City administration wants the library to succeed, grow, update, become a partner with other community organizations.
- The City Council supports the library and wants the 2025 strategic plan to be an actionable one.
- Transportation is a problem as most people have only one car and it is too far to walk in the winter.
- Staff are extremely helpful and provide personalized service where needed (finding books, sponsoring/leading classes, etc.)
- The library maintains a good relationship with local schools and teachers.
- Disability / accessibility parking is a problem. Handicap spots require a long walk, and it feels especially long in wintery conditions.
- RML is hidden in plain sight and needs a larger sign with clear directions on how to get to the building from Kirchoff Road.
- Bicycle access is terrific due to park adjacency (and it is nice that you can check out bike locks).
- A small library floorplan is easy to navigate and not overwhelming.
- Children like to visit the library when there is something interesting on offer. They generally prefer interactive books and games (especially the interactive games beamed from the ceiling).
- The recent Day of the Dead Sugar Skull activity sponsored at the library and held at the outreach facility was well liked and an example of programs that speak authentically to Hispanic/Latino culture. (Laura’s programs are excellent and she understands Latino cultures and their nuances).



- Not all children learn in the same ways and the library can/does accommodate this. Ex.: Some children like physical books and some prefer audiobooks. This variety is important, even when (and maybe especially because) differing learning modalities are not always well understood by parents.
- RML is one of the community's most welcoming spaces. It is made so by staff and because one does not have to pay.
- Geographically, the library is located in a reasonably central position but it is hard for some to get to.
- Book delivery to the homebound is appreciated by those who know/use it but does not have a lot of exposure. This service could grow if advertised.
- The library did an excellent job adapting to changing conditions and community needs during the pandemic years.
- Interlibrary loan is valued on its face, but doubly so because RML seems to have so few copies of most new releases / popular materials.
- Residents appreciate the no late fees policy, especially because that's not a universal policy across all Illinois libraries.
- There are no self-checkouts, unlike other local libraries. This is an impediment if you are in a hurry.
- Digital resources are great, but many do not know how to access Libby or Hoopla. In addition, an outdated interface makes online resources hard to discover/navigate.
- Library staff provide valued outreach services to area schools and the East Park Apartments.
- Proposed Library of Things additions include knitting needles and umbrellas.
- Regular patrons like the "Library of Things" but this collection is not advertised very aggressively. Added exposure would bring added popularity.
- RML maintains a decent selection of newspapers, periodicals, cookbooks, and non-fiction collections. This is appreciated because those sections seem to be atrophying in many community libraries.
- RML offers "exceptional programs," such as computer instruction classes and children's storytimes. There are even robotics. Notably, the line-up is lighter on programming geared towards Hispanic / Latino / Spanish-speaking adults.
- RML invites community members to display woodworking and other handicraft / artwork pieces in its display area, which lends a nice, hyperlocal feel.
- Storywalk in the Park is fun but needs to be changed up more frequently.
- Library hours are reasonable but many would like to see longer hours on Friday evening.
- RML provides valued volunteer opportunities for both teens and seniors, but word of these opportunities may not be reaching everyone who would be interested.
- Outdoor lockers are available 24/7. It is a popular option.
- Spanish language collection is great, all things considered. District teachers frequently use that collection



- For the Latino / Hispanic communities, trust in the library often depends on cultural background – on which part of Central America they emigrated from.
- The library is a significant community asset. However, the current facility is very traditional and is not attracting a younger customer base.
- Carl Sandburg Junior High School lets classes out at 1:00 p.m. on Friday. What can the library offer these students? There should be a win-win partnership between the school and library, but nothing of that kind seems to exist currently.
- Library referendums are commonplace and RM may soon be due for its own. Is a facility assessment needed to articulate that need? If so, should it be captured in the strategic plan?
- Youth services could benefit from a reevaluation and service model updates. New trends and emerging needs are not well reflected at present.
- During the winter, entry into the building from the parking lot can be brutal.

Envision how you want Rolling Meadows Library to look a decade from now. Describe it. How is the library of the future different from the library you use today?

- The library should feel more authentically integrated within the community it serves. This would be accomplished through several years of more concerted outreach.
- It would be great if RML were more frequented by / loved by area teens. A larger dedicated “footprint” within the library’s floorplan would help, as would technology enhancements (particularly gaming).
- RML should at least consider establishing a second, satellite location in the underserved portion of the service area.
- Many would benefit from a satellite location or access point of some kind near the East Park Apartments. Various barriers prevent these higher need families from physically visiting the library as often as they would like.
- RML must increase and update its web and social media presence.
- Upgrade the tired, outdated building (but the manner and extent of those reinvestments are up for debate.)
- RML needs clearer protocols around the registration and use of its meeting rooms.
- Restrooms should be improved/updated to meet modern accessibility standards.
- In the future, perhaps the outside “green space” can be made into a useful reading area.
- The library would benefit tremendously from more flex spaces for community interaction, programming, and education.
- Ideally, the programs offered would be more diverse and offered at various times of the day (to enfranchise more would-be attendees).
- Families would like to see the children’s area upgraded and offer more interactive elements (making this section of the library a destination unto itself).
- Storywalk should be upgraded quarterly.



- We'd like to see middle school aged programming including homework help, crafts, book clubs, etc. (preferably with snacks provided).
- Rolling Meadows should have better lines of communication generally, with the library as one node or part of that network (alongside the city, schools, churches, etc.)
- Vision: The library provides events that reflect the community and result in increases to visitation numbers, cardholder counts and circulation figures.
- As the community hub, the library should consider hosting job fairs, senior fairs, business expos, volunteer exhibitions, etc.

**What do you feel are the library's biggest and/or most urgent needs for improvement?
(Feel free to address topics already mentioned.)**

- RML's space is not being used in ways that match modern usage patterns. It would benefit from more co-working areas and small videoconference suites.
- Open hours should be reviewed periodically to ensure they continue to fit the needs of the community.
- Offer innovative technology like maker space amenities, woodworking equipment, etc. – and classes on how to use these tools responsively and creatively.
- Consider smaller and more frequent events for middle grade and young adult audiences, positioning the library as this demographic's preferred "third place."
- Temperature control seems to be an issue in at least several of the bookable rooms.
- Few current library staff members speak Spanish but the need is great and growing.
- Older high school students do not use the library any longer. There is not as much there to sustain their interest.
- Increase programming for the 2-5- year olds and offer them at various times (mix of mornings, afternoons and evenings).
- Latino mothers (and presumably parents generally) appreciate activities and interactive items (toys and books) that allow children to self-occupy while their caregiver accomplishes other tasks nearby.
- Continue to grow the Spanish language collections.
- Consider more Spanish-language classes and socialization opportunities.
- A self-checkout machine would be a huge improvement.
- Class subjects of particular interest include cooking, painting, sewing, etc.
- Restrooms all need to be updated and made accessible for individuals who rely on wheelchairs, walkers, scooters, etc.
- Prioritize overdue updates to the website and social media channels.
- RML's app needs to be added for improved functionality. Even simply reserving a book is difficult for many.
- Wait times for certain materials feel prohibitive to many. Cardholders often need to wait six months for an e-book/audiobook to become available to them, and then are only allowed a three-week checkout window.



- Teens could volunteer to assist with technology questions, and it would bring them into the library.
- Partner with the hospital to provide education and support for in-need and/or at-risk groups like new mothers, caretakers, cancer warriors, etc.
- Offer suite of parenting classes on how to protect children online, monitor phone and TV habits, teach safety best practices, etc.
- Provide resources for children with special needs: headphones, a dedicated sensory room, and/or quieter zones within the library.
- When and where they are offered, RML staff should attend community meetings on topics impacting our community / their clientele. (Populations of note include children with special needs, seniors, ADHD, Alzheimer's, etc.)
- Intentionally position the library as the community's go-to place for spending time and for networking. This will admittedly take time.
- Movies are hard to reserve, and patrons cannot place new ones on hold.
- Newsletter format would benefit from a refresh. The current design is somewhat stale.
- Offer more family events and consider a "hook" to draw new people in (ex., ice cream trucks, live music).
- Conduct memory care cafes, as other libraries are doing.
- Allow beverages in the library – at least in designated areas.
- Seek feedback and ideas more regularly. Perhaps place a suggestion box where it is conspicuous for patrons.
- Offer programs during the day geared specifically towards the homeschooling crowd.
- While budget is surely an issue, there is no escaping that this library feels somewhat "old fashioned." The community room is used but not equipped with up-to-date technology. We need a drive-up window and book return.
- Consider a seasonal bike mobile (especially for the park).
- Staff should wear name tags or uniform shirts for recognition purposes. They are not always easy to single out.
- Hold community program on media literacy and detecting misinformation. This is needed now more than ever.
- Fraud prevention is another need. Proactive efforts in the form of classes and webinars would be a great help.
- Offer technology classes focused on popular applications: tablets laptops, e-mail 101, audiobooks 101, how to access RML's digital services, etc.
- Run regular buses from East Park to the library and back again.
- Not all staff are welcoming, or at least not equally welcome to everybody. For example, some are notably irritable with kids and teens.
- Act as a hub for news and distribution of social services offered by other players across Rolling Meadows.
- RML is trending towards disconnection from the community because it is not keeping up with the times as well as other metro libraries.



- Other program and activity suggestions include: ELL/ESL learning and conversational circles; more children's take home kits; expanded homework assistance.
- Rolling Meadows deserves a larger and state-of-the-art presentation room with theater seating, podium, and multi-media equipment. An author speaker series in this same room would be another win.
- It is vital that RML update its branding and website to be fresh, inviting, trendy – and to in general make folks want to visit if they are not already in the habit.
- RML should be led by a board and staff who truly understand the needs that exist within the community, even if those needs are not challenges or aspirations that they themselves can identify with.
- The library needs to meet people where they are by showing a true willingness to adjust priorities and practices when warranted.

Can you think of other critical issues or opportunities facing RML which we have not already discussed?

- Consciously position the library as a safe and accepting place for LGBTQ patrons. Signal that RML is welcoming through LGBTQ-friendly programming.
- Strive to reflect the community in both staff composition and collection development priorities.
- Programming times seem to align well with staff's preferred schedules, but are often ill timed for many would-be attendees. Consider evening story times and other "unconventional" times that gives others a chance to fit the library around their work, school and family schedules.
- Staff often gossip at the checkout desk, distracting themselves and patrons. Please address.
- Library leaders have not traditionally been open to new ideas / changing with the times. This record of relative inaction shows in today's library, which feels somewhat stale.
- East Park holds great need, but families here may be the RM residents who find their library least accessible. Transportation barriers (and winter weather) are always a challenge. Can outreach efforts target this area?
- Seek more partnerships within the community to amplify what you can do and who you can reach.
- Do more to market current services and resources ("like the newsletter, but *more*"). Many of the offerings available are effectively hidden gems appreciated only by those "in the know."
- Remove pictures from the checkout desk and update this area for better aesthetic appeal.
- The library should always be asking "How can we help the community avoid polarization with civic conversations and informational literacy?"



- RM once stood out among area libraries for its emphasis/specialization in business resources. That focus and reputation have waned. Seek and invest in new focus areas that are well matched to current/emerging needs.
- Again, it's important that library staff reflect the community. Example shared: A Latina mother with minimal English language skills tried to reserve a study room for a parent group and could not get anyone to help her in Spanish.