

Frequently Asked Questions about the Consultant Recommendations for Buncombe County Public Libraries

1. What is the “Buncombe County Public Library Facilities Master Plan”? Who developed the “plan” and why?

The library facilities study was a component of an overall County facilities study that began in 2019. The purpose of the County study was to assess the overall condition and maintenance needs for County facilities and analyze space usage in order to recommend possible reorganization for efficiency. The libraries received an additional level of analysis due to existing maintenance needs at several locations, and recognition that existing space was not adequate to provide 21st century library services.

A consultant (720 Design) specializing in libraries was hired to conduct the library portion of the study. This involved a process that included review of current facility conditions, analysis of population and library usage data, a peer library comparison study and a community input process that included meetings and a survey. The consultant presented a set of recommendations to the Commissioners in June, in a slide presentation titled “Buncombe County Libraries Facility Master Plan.” A final plan document has not been presented to the Board of Commissioners. The Library Advisory Board is now gathering community feedback to inform the final recommendations to be shared with the Commissioners.

Copies of the recommendations and other study materials are available at all libraries and online (add link). Other materials include a summary of findings from a comparison of Buncombe County Public Libraries to peer libraries in the United States and research observations that summarize a survey and multiple online public meetings held in fall 2019.

2. Is it approved by the County Commission?

No. The Commission delayed further consideration of the consultant recommendations to provide the Library Advisory Board an opportunity to collect public input. The Library Advisory Board, Library Director and Buncombe County’s Communications and Public Engagement Department are holding a series of public meetings for this purpose.

3. Does this plan take into account other Buncombe County strategic plans and goals?

The library facilities recommendations are based on a study of the condition of the existing facilities, population and usage data, peer library comparisons and community feedback. The recommendations still need to be considered in the context of the County’s strategic plans and goals.

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4. What is the consultant recommended timeline for implementation of plans for changes in the library system?

A timeline was presented in May 2021 as part of the consultant's presentation to the Board of Commissioners. This timeline was recommended in the context of the 15-year timeline for the overall County facilities study. The timeline is a projection of the order in which recommended changes might occur depending on the starting date. As with the other library facilities recommendations, this timeline has not been approved by the Commissioners.

5. Did the consultants provide any cost information in their recommendations?

The recommendations are conceptual in nature and only address the anticipated facility size needed to deliver desired services. There are no specific details regarding location or construction needs. There are no specific details regarding location or construction needs. The consultants have shared a high level potential cost of \$81,795,638 (not including Pack Library), noting that this estimate is of limited use given that costs for a 15-year plan are difficult to project. Variables such as inflation, increases in cost of land and building materials and any changes made in the final plan recommendations will impact costs. Additionally, a variety of funding mechanisms may be used to build/renovate facilities (e.g. grant opportunities, fundraising), which can impact the final cost.

6. Why does the plan include drive time as a measure in these recommendations?

Library consultants traditionally use this measure when studying whether there are enough library facilities to serve a specific geographic area and the number of people living in the area. The consultant considered drive time measures in accordance with North Carolina State Library standards, which discusses drive times between libraries. The standards indicate a drive time goal of 20 minutes for urban settings and 30 minutes for rural settings.

7. Why is the County thinking about changing the library's organizational structure to a "regional system" from a "branches system" and what does that mean? Do the regional facilities have to be in the middle of the area it serves?

The consultant's use of the term "regional system" is a means of describing a library system's organizational structure. A regional system includes libraries with more resources and capacity to provide a wider array of services than a system composed of smaller branch libraries. A branch system such as Buncombe consists of a large central library that has much of the system's resources and smaller libraries that serve the various communities. A regional system offers more to areas that are not near the central library, including larger collections, staffing, programs, computers and specialized

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services. It provides the library system with a broader reach, offering more services closer to where people live. The regional model recommended by the consultant is suggested to provide more consistent service throughout the community by expanding existing facilities and building larger facilities. Facilities ideally would be located in a way that is central to the area they are designated to serve.

8. Which of the existing library buildings are leased by the county?

The County leases library space for the Black Mountain, Swannanoa and Oakley/South Asheville branch libraries. Operating and personnel costs are paid for by the County.

9. Why not just renovate or remodel existing libraries? Why decrease the number of libraries and increase the size of libraries? Do the facilities really need to be 20,000 square feet?

Capital/facility projects are typically funded outside of general operating budgets and are designed to meet both current and future needs. Investment in construction and renovation is made in consideration of population growth patterns. Whether or not an existing facility has the capacity or infrastructure to make possible and worthwhile the investment to expand or renovate must also be considered.

In terms of appropriate size, based on projected growth patterns, 20,000 square foot facilities are in line with anticipated needs for collection space, meeting room space, additional services, and possible co-location with other County services.

The number of libraries considered for consolidation or closing, as the plan suggests, has to do with county wide needs to maintain adequate staffing in places where consolidation brings together more resources and services, improved facilities, additional meeting space and the potential for relationships with other County services.

10. If new libraries are going to be built, will there be an opportunity for additional input?

If new libraries are approved for construction, significant community engagement opportunities would be provided. As an example, the new East Asheville Library's size and service offerings are a direct result of a collaborative community design process. The community was involved in preliminary discussions, design activities and review meetings throughout the process.

11. How do I communicate my thoughts about the plan?

Please provide comments to prteam@buncombecounty.org. We look forward to hearing from you!

12. When will our comments be sent to the County Commission by the Library Advisory Board?

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While the recent surge of COVID-19 has temporarily paused the Library Advisory Board's in person feedback meetings, the Board is hopeful that sessions may resume in October. For the time being, additional virtual sessions have been scheduled through September, and may be accessed at buncombecounty.org/library. The Library Advisory Board believes in person sessions are vital to ensure all citizen voices are heard.

The Library Advisory Board is hoping to complete the input process by the end of October. Once the information has been gathered, it will be included in a final report to the Board of Commissioners. If there are not additional pauses in the process, the report is anticipated to be completed in November. The Library Advisory Board is committed to doing everything possible to ensure all input is gathered before it considers its work to be completed for submittal to the Board of Commissioners.