

Central library services to member libraries and patrons of member libraries of the Southern Tier Library System, by Owen Frank. March / April 2006

The Steele Memorial Library, the central library of the Southern Tier Library System, provides reference services to member libraries, reference services directly to researchers who visit the Steele Library, reference services to persons who email or FAX the Steele Library, workshops for (and in) member libraries, computer use classes at the Steele Library, a website monthly “best of the web” for member libraries and their library patrons as part of the Chemung County Library District’s website, and public library services to patrons of STLS member libraries on Sunday afternoons from 1pm to 5pm in the Fall, Winter, and Spring months of the year.

To make these reference and public library services possible, professional and clerical staff of the Steele Memorial Library select, maintain, and distribute the central library collection purchased annually with Central Book Aid funds.

The following facts and figures assist in quantifying the range of services offered and provided:

- 2,165 adult non-fiction titles were purchased with CBA funds, costing \$31,167.
- 429 reference titles were purchased with CBA funds, costing \$41,869.
- \$1,076 was paid to Southern Tier for processing these non-fiction and reference materials.
- 44,000 circulation transactions to patrons of STLS member libraries.

Costs to the Steele Memorial Library in 2006 to provide these services equals: \$159,600 in staff salaries and benefits (1.79 clerical FTE and 1.0 professional FTE) for the distribution of CBA materials. Therefore, since the central library program brings in \$105,000 annually, the taxpayers of the Chemung County Library District add an additional \$54,600 for the privilege of being the central library.

The annual central library development and central book aid grants do not pay for 100% of the costs of the selection, maintenance, and distribution of the *print* collection. Here once again, the taxpayers of the Chemung County Library District pay additionally for the privilege of providing additional central library services – walk-in service to public library patrons, the “best of the web”, electronic reference services – to STLS member libraries.

Responses from the STLS sponsored focus groups conducted throughout the system from 11/2005 through 1/2006 reveal that patrons throughout the system recognize the role of the print book format as the foundation of what a library is, and shall continue to be.

When asked the question “*Think back about some information you needed during the past year. How did you look for the information?*” “A number talked about the reliability of books and about using the library for in-depth research, books” When asked “*If the library disappeared tomorrow and you were starting over, what would your ‘new’ library be like and what would it do?*” Participants stressed the importance of books. When asked questions concerning the library’s evolving relationship with new technologies and formats, participants said “The more books the better. Books communicate our culture. I’ve got an iPod but I want a printed book.” The focus group participants “are concerned that more computers will mean fewer books.” In their words participants said “No one likes to read books online...[we] don’t want books to go away, ...incorporate new technology and keep books as a basic part of library services... Supply access to books to be enjoyed.”

To summarize, the foundation of central library services – access to the central library collection, supplemented by workshops, email reference, direct service to member library patrons and a monthly “best of the web” offering – are in accord with the current and future stated needs of patrons of the member libraries of the Southern Tier Library System.