

# Taking Stock of the Stacks



In the decade between Jackie Nytes' departure from the Indianapolis Public Library (IPL) as chief financial officer and her return as chief executive officer in 2012, "the world changed," she says.



**To keep pace with the “world” it serves,** IPL clearly had some catching up to do. Among the challenges Nytes encountered after her 10-year hiatus: Facilities had aged, populations had shifted, property tax controls had come into play, and technology had advanced at warp speed. “Libraries change because society changes,” explains Nytes. “This was a very different place than it was when I left it.”



The time was right to pause, take stock and draft a strategic plan based on substantive data and community input. Supported by two Endowment grants totaling \$300,000, Nytes and her staff engaged experts, recruited research partners and convened task forces. Their goals were to learn what the community needed from its library, determine how well the library was meeting those needs, and design a plan to close the gap. “We wanted to make sure that the actions we take and the choices we make are in response to the community’s priorities and concerns,” says Nytes.

(OPPOSITE) Indianapolis Public Library CEO Jackie Nytes reviews a draft of the library’s new strategic plan with patrons at the Garfield Park Branch. In 2014 she will host similar discussions at each of the library’s 23 branches.

(ABOVE) Dahvion Johnson, age 3, plays educational computer games at one of the Garfield Park Branch’s kid-friendly computer stations.

(RIGHT) Southport Branch patron Betty Holt gets help setting up her e-reader from Alex Hampton. Hampton visits each branch twice a month to run the library’s “Tinker Stations,” which give patrons an opportunity to try out unfamiliar electronic devices and have their technology questions answered.

The in-depth study, now wrapping up, has dispelled some assumptions and confirmed others. For starters: “The Internet is not going to replace us,” Nytes emphasizes. “There is a mythology out there that claims since people have the Internet, nothing else matters. We know that’s not true, but





The library's strategic planning process included in-depth research and lots of community input. "We wanted to make sure that the actions we take and the choices we make are in response to the community's priorities and concerns," says Nytes.

Community members use the library in many ways, from accessing the library's e-book collections to using library branches as office space to taking advantage of long-standing traditions like children's story time.

it's been important for us to validate that the community has needs that are logical for us to fill." A second false assumption is that libraries today should purchase fewer books and more

desktop computers. To the contrary, trends indicate that "people increasingly are bringing their personal laptops and tablets to the library to access high-speed Internet service that they might not have at home," says Nytes. "So it isn't a question of how many computers we provide, but rather how much space we allocate to desks and chairs so they can sit and use their devices."

As for downsizing the book collection, Nytes clarifies that library branches don't necessarily need fewer books, but they likely need different books depending on the demographics of their surrounding neighborhoods. A software package, purchased with Endowment funds, now analyzes circulation patterns and gives a snapshot of specific materials in demand in specific parts of the community. "As a result, we can reallocate our materials, buy differently in the future and remove items intelligently," says Nytes.

**The research project will culminate early in 2014** when Nytes visits each of the library's 23 branches to host a discussion on the findings and the strategic plan in progress. Much of the conversation likely will focus on newly identified needs. These include more group study rooms to serve the growing number of area residents returning to school and a "Tinker Station" that gives technology-shy patrons the opportunity to tinker with e-books and other digital tools. "We want to be a center of innovation," Nytes says. "A lot of people need a guide on their digital journey, and we've found that to be a logical role for us."

Even as IPL's data-driven study has brought to light emerging needs, so has it endorsed the importance of familiar services. "All the demographic work we've done has reaffirmed our commitment to early childhood literacy," assures Nytes. "When it comes to reading and reading readiness, we are a key player in that initiative. You might say it's one of our core businesses...and that will never change."

