

INTRODUCTION:

As part of its strategic planning process, Somerville Public Library (SPL) engaged **Barbara Alevras, PMP**, of **Sage Consulting Services** to facilitate **five 90-minute focus groups** with **25 adult community members** in November 2025. Participants included frequent, occasional, and non-users of the Library and represented residents, educators, city staff, and community partners.

Across nine questions, participants shared candid and thoughtful feedback on the Library's **identity, spaces, programs, services, technology, barriers, and future role** in the community. This report synthesizes input from all sessions to inform strategic planning and decision-making.

1. What are the very first two words you think of when you think about the Library?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants most often described the Library using **positive, values-based language**, emphasizing *access, community, and welcome*. A smaller but consistent set of responses referenced **aging facilities**, particularly at the Central Branch.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Access and Inclusivity** (accessible, available, inclusive, safe)
- **Atmosphere** (Inviting, beautiful building, classy)
- **Community and Belonging** (community, people together, welcoming, warm)
- **Core Identity** (books, information, resources, services)
- **Facility Condition** (needs updating, shabby (Central))
- **Youth and Families** (Children's Library, youth space, hangout space for kids)



OBSERVATIONS: The Library is widely seen as a **welcoming community anchor**. Facility condition influences perception, especially where spaces feel outdated or less inviting.

2. Which Library resources or materials do you use most frequently?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Usage varied widely, from weekly visits to infrequent or professional-only interactions. Many participants engage with the Library in **multiple roles**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Branch Visits and Use**
 - The Central Branch is most frequently used.
 - All branches are visited for both personal and professional reasons.
- **Most Valued Resources**
 - Books and audiobooks.
 - Library space for meetings and events.
 - Printing and computer access.
 - Libby and digital collections.
 - Museum passes.
 - Library of Things and the Seed Library.
- **Professional and Partner Use:** Strong collaboration with city departments, educators, and local nonprofits (e.g., meeting room use, co-sponsored programs).
- **Unexpected Uses**
 - Social worker support (very popular service).
 - Immigration and citizenship assistance.
 - Clean restrooms and warming center access.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Participants were often **surprised by the range of materials and services** available, signaling the need for stronger communication and clearer pathways to access.

3. How can the Library's physical space be improved? What can we do to make the facility more welcoming, useful, and user-friendly?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: While participants appreciate staff efforts, they identified **significant and recurring space challenges**, especially related to accessibility, meeting space, and teen areas.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **System-Wide Needs**
 - More flexible meeting space.
 - Dedicated, inclusive teen areas.
 - Better integration of indoor and outdoor spaces.
- **Central Branch**
 - Modernization and expansion are needed.
 - More private work areas and updated furniture.
 - Elevator reliability, parking, and wayfinding concerns (need more/better signage).
 - Auditorium technology and aesthetics need upgrades.

- Outdoor space lacks usability (e.g., comfortable seating).
- **East Branch**
 - Strong consensus that major renovations are needed.
 - HVAC and space constraints limit service delivery.
 - Outdoor space is underused.
- **West Branch**
 - Generally positive post-renovation.
 - Additional private workshop and meeting space needed.
- **Accessibility**
 - Multilingual signage and directories.
 - Improved visibility of service desks.
 - Hill location and parking barriers at Central.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Participants want Library spaces to reflect their importance as **community jewels**, supporting collaboration, teens, accessibility, and comfort across all branches.

4. What do you like the most/least about the programs the Library offers?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Most participants have attended programs, though attendance is **infrequent**, primarily due to time, awareness, and logistics.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Participation Patterns:** Attendance drops after patrons' children grow older.
- **Barriers**
 - Scheduling conflicts (e.g., working adults/parents cannot attend daytime programs).
 - Parking and transportation.
 - Perception of youth-focused programming.
- **Most Valued Programs**
 - Book clubs.
 - Author talks.
 - Cooking and crafting.
 - Writing and local history programs.
- **Format Preferences**
 - Strong preference for **in-person programs**.
 - Virtual and hybrid options are valued as supplements.
- **Ideas for Expansion**
 - Adult art programs.
 - Gardening and seed workshops.

- Multilingual and culturally representative programming.
- Utilize community members with interesting skills and expertise that others would value.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Programs that **bring people together** are most valued. **Improved marketing and scheduling clarity** could significantly boost participation.

5. How can the Library expand or improve its services?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants use a wide array of services but often learn about additional offerings only through word of mouth.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Commonly Used Services**
 - Printing and computers.
 - Digital borrowing.
 - Meeting rooms.
 - Museum passes.
 - Tax preparation.
- **Highly Valued Supports**
 - Social worker services.
 - Immigration and citizenship assistance.
- **Opportunities**
 - Reduce eBook wait times.
 - Expand application assistance.
 - Improve coordination with schools and town departments.
 - Add shredding and electronic drop-off services.
- **Operational Ideas**
 - Reevaluate and phase out underused services to accommodate new services.
 - Explore nontraditional hours.
 - Simplify Library of Things donations.
 - Strengthen resilience hub capacity.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: The Library does **more than many residents realize**. **Visibility and coordination** are key opportunities.

6. What technology do you think the Library should focus on over the next five years?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants emphasized the Library's role in **digital access, literacy, and trust**, especially for underserved populations.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Priority Areas**
 - Digital literacy for all ages, including underserved populations.
 - Media literacy and misinformation identification.
 - Scam and fraud prevention.
 - Online privacy and cybersecurity.
- **Emerging Technology**
 - Practical education on AI.
 - Critical thinking skills related to AI use.
- **Technology Services**
 - Hands-on help with devices and software.
 - Programs on tools like Canva and social media.
 - Financial literacy for teens.
- **Collaborations and Partnerships**
 - Police department (e.g., scam and fraud prevention)
 - Local schools (e.g., social media safety, critical thinking)
 - Technology businesses (e.g., emerging technology education).
- **Website and Systems**
 - Website is generally usable but not seamless.
 - Meeting room booking and confirmations are confusing.
 - Museum pass and study room reservation processes work well.
 - Libby preferred over the website for digital borrowing.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Increase and improve the promotion of technology offerings. The Library is well-positioned to be a **community technology hub**, combining access, education, and trusted guidance.

7. Are there any barriers to service—things that impede your ability to receive the service you need or want from the Library?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Barriers were less about staff or hours and more about **space, awareness, and capacity**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Awareness and Communication:** Need stronger promotion and consistency of messaging.
- **Space and Capacity**
 - Limited meeting space.
 - Underutilized outdoor space.

- Teen use impacts others seeking quiet use.
- **Staffing**
 - Strong customer service.
 - Clear calls to better support and compensate staff.
- **Collections:** Need more copies of popular titles.
- **Access**
 - Provide a clearer explanation of the library card use options (e.g., on your phone? in Apple Wallet?).
 - Accessibility remains a concern at the Central Branch.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Many barriers are **structural rather than operational** and could be addressed through investment, communication, and scheduling strategies.

8. What issues are now facing the town that you think may impact the Library over the next five years?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants see the Library at the intersection of **social, economic, and civic challenges**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Equity and Inclusion**
 - Threats to LGBTQ and immigrant communities.
 - Language accessibility.
- **Funding**
 - Budget austerity.
 - Need for advocacy and partnerships.
- **Safety and Preparedness**
 - Civil unrest and emergency response planning.
 - Need for clear protocols and staff training.
- **Social Services**
 - Growing unhoused population.
 - Food insecurity.
 - Strong support for expanding social worker services.
- **Youth and Teens**
 - Lack of youth space.
 - Behavioral challenges after school.
 - Need for stronger school connections.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: The Library is increasingly relied upon as a **safe, stabilizing presence** during community stress and uncertainty.

9. What could the Library do to serve the Somerville community better? What advice do you have?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants offered advice rooted in **trust, focus, and adaptability**, with strong support for the Library's core mission.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Community-Centered Programming**
 - Highlight local expertise and diversity.
 - Language learning partnerships.
 - Critical thinking and literacy for fun.
- **Core Role**
 - Trusted information hub.
 - Convenor of people and ideas.
 - A true third place.
- **Focus and Balance**
 - Cannot be all things to all people.
 - Avoid drastic mission shifts.
- **Support and Capacity**
 - Expand social worker services.
 - Invest in staff training and professional development.
- **Values**
 - Strong support for free public libraries.
 - Commitment to safety, dignity, and welcome.
- **Youth Engagement:** After-school teen programs with incentives.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Participants want the Library to **stay true to its mission** while remaining flexible and responsive to changing needs.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS:

Across all nine questions, key considerations include:

- Invest in **equitable, accessible facilities**, especially at Central and East branches.
- Create **dedicated teen spaces** and **after-school engagement strategies**.
- Strengthen **communication and marketing** of services and programs.
- Expand **social service partnerships and capacity**.
- Position the Library as a **trusted technology and information leader**.
- Support and retain staff through **training and compensation**.
- Plan for the Library's role in **resilience, safety, and community care**.

CONCLUSION:

Adult community members consistently view Somerville Public Library as a **trusted, welcoming, and essential public institution**. Focus group feedback highlights strong appreciation for staff, services, and the Library's role as a community hub, alongside clear opportunities to improve **spaces, visibility, accessibility, and capacity**.

As the Library plans for the next five years, this input underscores the importance of aligning **facilities, programs, services, and staffing** with Somerville's evolving needs, while preserving the Library's core identity as a **free, inclusive, and trusted public resource**.