

INTRODUCTION:

As part of its strategic planning process, Somerville Public Library (SPL) engaged strategic planning consultant Barbara Alevras, PMP, from Sage Consulting Services to conduct **seven 60-minute interviews** with **eight community members** in December 2025. Participants included **key city leaders, Library staff, and representatives from city departments and local social services organizations.**

Interviewees responded to nine questions exploring perceptions of the Library, patterns of use, program and service experiences, physical space needs, technology priorities, barriers to access, and future community challenges. Collectively, the interviews provided **thoughtful, candid, and forward-looking feedback** that highlights both the Library's strengths and clear opportunities for growth over the next five years.

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 **community-oriented and welcoming language**, with additional references to collections, neighborhood identity, and physical limitations.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Community** (most frequently cited)
- **Welcoming** and **warm**
- **Books** and **resource**
- **Diverse** and **comprehensive**
- Sense of **neighborhood presence**
- Concern that the Library is **not big enough**



GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Overall impressions are **strongly positive and values-driven**, emphasizing the Library's role as a community anchor. At the same time, comments about size suggest early awareness of **space constraints that limit potential.**

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

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Usage patterns varied widely, reflecting different life stages and roles. Participants most frequently valued **print materials, digital reading platforms, children's resources, and shared system access**, while least-used materials tended to be legacy formats.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Most Valued:**
 - Print books and **physical browsing**.
 - **Libby** and eBooks.
 - **Minuteman Network** and interlibrary loan.
 - Children's collections, toys, and programs.
 - Craft programs and author talks.
- **Least Valued:**
 - CDs and magazines.
 - Audiobooks on CD and Playaways.
 - Databases that participants knew were important but did not personally use.
- **Unexpected Uses:**
 - **Library of Things**.
 - Wi-Fi hotspots.
 - COVID-19 tests, masks, and NARCAN.
 - Free printing and meeting rooms.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Participants recognized that **personal use does not equate to community value**. There was strong appreciation for SPL's responsiveness during crises, growing enthusiasm for **non-traditional lending**, and a desire for **greater visibility and user guidance**.

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: Participants consistently identified **aging infrastructure, layout challenges, and inequities across branches** as major concerns, while also expressing affection for the Library and aspirations for a more modern, flexible environment.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Major renovation needs**, especially at the Central Branch.
- Improved **staff spaces**, bathrooms, and elevators.
- More **social, collaborative, and informal spaces**.
- Dedicated classrooms and maker spaces.
- Better signage and wayfinding.
- Need for **equitable investment across branches**.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: The Library is seen as **functional but worn**, with layouts that can confuse first-time users. Participants emphasized that physical design affects behavior, accessibility, and teen engagement, and that **welcoming space is as important as collections**.

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

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Program participation was influenced more by **time and scheduling constraints** than by lack of interest. When programs aligned with interests and availability, experiences were highly positive.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Most Valued Programs:**
 - Children's events, such as **Dino Day**.
 - Crafts and hands-on activities.
 - Financial literacy programs.
 - Cookbook and social programs.
 - Author talks and lectures.
- **Program Format Preferences:**
 - Strong preference for **in-person**.
 - Support for **hybrid options**.
 - Mixed feelings about recorded programs, with emphasis on **quality over quantity**.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Participants encouraged SPL to **prioritize fewer, higher-quality programs**, improve internal communication about offerings, and consider recordings as an enhancement rather than a replacement for in-person engagement.

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

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Many services were underutilized due to **limited awareness**, not a lack of need. Participants emphasized the importance of promotion, flexibility, and inclusive design.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Strong appreciation for **printing, faxing, and reference support**.
- High value is placed on **Wi-Fi hotspots and devices**.
- Growing interest in **home delivery beyond traditional definitions**.
- Cultural passes are seen as a major asset.
- Desire for expanded **ELL, social work, tutoring, and lecture offerings**.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: SPL is viewed as **already doing a great deal**, but participants stressed that clearer messaging, multilingual outreach, and partnerships could significantly increase impact without entirely new service models.

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

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants emphasized **access, instruction, and digital literacy**, rather than cutting-edge technology for its own sake.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Increased demand for **circulating devices**.
- **Technology instruction** for beginners and new Americans.
- Support for **media literacy and AI education**.
- Access to **subscription-based software**.
- Better visibility of **Library of Things** items.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: The Library is trusted as a **guide through technological change**. Participants cautioned against assuming baseline digital skills and encouraged SPL to thoughtfully lead on emerging technologies such as AI.

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: While most participants did not personally experience major barriers, they identified **systemic and operational challenges** affecting broader access.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Occasional **limited access to printers and computers**.
- Insufficient **stroller storage/parking**.
- Desire for **expanded hours**, especially evenings and Sundays.
- **Staff technology device limitations** (lack of a staff-dedicated high-capacity printer, scanner, or copier).
- Recognition that **teens and vulnerable populations need targeted engagement**.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Barriers were framed as **opportunities for refinement**, not failures. Participants consistently balanced realism about staffing and budgets with optimism about incremental improvements.

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

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants expressed concern about **political, economic, and social pressures**, particularly around funding, free expression, and vulnerable populations.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Budget uncertainty** at all government levels.
- **Free speech and content challenges**.

- Immigration and homelessness.
- Need for **contingency planning**.
- Interest in securing **alternative funding sources**.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: The Library is seen as **both a target and a safeguard** during uncertain times. Participants encouraged preparedness without panic and emphasized adaptability.

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

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants strongly affirmed SPL's mission and staff while encouraging **broader outreach, inclusivity, and visibility**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Year-round engagement with non-English-speaking communities.
- More **weekend and family programming**.
- Expanded outdoor and community events.
- Clear, **multilingual communication**.
- Reinforcement of the Library as a **free, welcoming space for everyone**.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: There was deep appreciation for Library staff and recognition of the challenges they face. Participants want SPL to be **even more visible, proactive, and understood** as a cornerstone community resource.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS:

Across all nine questions, key considerations include:

- Prioritize **facility renovation and space reconfiguration**.
- Invest in **equitable branch resources**.
- **Improve visibility and understanding** of services.
- **Balance program quantity with quality**.
- **Expand technology access** and instruction.
- **Strengthen community engagement and advocacy**.
- **Prepare for funding and policy challenges** with flexibility.

CONCLUSION:

Taken together, the interview feedback emphasized the importance of the Somerville Public Library as a place that supports **community connection, learning, and belonging**. Participants recognize SPL's **strengths in collections, staff expertise, and service diversity**, while also identifying clear **opportunities to modernize spaces, expand awareness, and deepen engagement** across all populations.

As the Library looks ahead, the feedback highlights the importance of **targeted investment, equitable access across branches, inclusive design**, and **proactive communication** to ensure the Library continues to **meet evolving community needs** and remains a vital public resource for all for years to come.

NOTE: See the supplemental *Somerville Public Library Community Ideas Report 2026* for details regarding participants' specific ideas.