



MN/DOT Librarians - - Trusted Information Partners

By El Tinklenberg, Commissioner of Transportation 1999-2002, Minnesota

Minnesota sits at the head of navigation on the Mississippi River and the St. Lawrence Seaway. It is home to the world's tenth busiest airport. Our Twin Cities are an important railway hub and the state has one of the nation's most extensive networks of highways. Transportation, in all modes, is a vital element in the lives and livelihood of all residents of Minnesota.

As the agency charged with developing and maintaining the state's transportation systems, the primary goals of the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MN/DOT) are to support the economic vitality of the state and to maximize the use of existing infrastructure. To achieve these goals the department's strategic directions focus on multi-modalism, program delivery, corridor connections, and information.

A great deal of our effort in the information arena is placed on providing the traveling public with real-time data. Providing information on current traffic conditions, construction delays, detours, weather and other elements, allows everyone to become our partners in maximizing the use of roads, waterways, airports and other transportation facilities. Many of MN/DOT's most visible and successful programs, especially in the area of intelligent transportation systems, provide these information services. But, in order to design, develop and operate our state's transportation systems, including these advanced information systems, MN/DOT and our many partners need access to a far wider array of information. Meeting this need is where MN/DOT Library fits into the department's strategic vision and directions.

The broad range and critical nature of programs and services provided by our department requires the skills and knowledge of a remarkably diverse group of employees. Professional and technical services of planners, engineers, economists, hydrologists, accountants, appraisers and many others are all needed to carry out our responsibilities. Add to that mix the services of librarians who anticipate and respond to the information needs of them all. MN/DOT Library provides a focal point for their work ensuring Minnesota's transportation community has access to, and the use of, information from anywhere on the globe.

The recent mergers of MN/DOT Library with our Offices of Research Administration and Strategic Initiatives align many of our services that gather, create, and synthesize information, and then help develop strategies to implement and act upon the information. Our newly created Office of Research and Strategic Services, including the library, reports to the department's Chief of Staff, reporting to me, within the Office of the Commissioner of Transportation.

For many years our library staff have been valued for their ability to locate and retrieve information. Their skills in searching databases and their knowledge of information sources have allowed the rest of our staff to efficiently investigate and respond to a wide range of issues. More recently, as the amount of available information and the number of issues demanding our attention have expanded, the department has benefited from even more areas of librarians' knowledge.

Department-wide committees dealing with document and workflow management, web site design and organization, knowledge management, and other issues benefit from librarians' education and experience in understanding customers and organizing information. Library staff experience with information vendors and products, combined with IT staff work with computers and networks, provide desktop access to information services for all employees.

The increased role of librarians in meeting our information needs played a part in the recent decision to relocate MN/DOT Library to a highly visible location just off the main lobby in our Central Office Building. This location not only emphasizes our department's efforts to become a learning organization, but also helps meet another goal - that of becoming a trusted source of information. The new library, open to the public, provides increased space for users, including publicly accessible PCs they can use to search library catalogs, databases, and the Internet. It allows our partners, and our opponents, access to the same information and many of the services our employees use in making transportation-related decisions.

MN/DOT has long been a lead agency in the field of transportation research. The department published more than 50 reports on completed research in 1999 alone. In addition, scores of other reports, including environmental impact statements, business and strategic plans, marketing surveys, etc., are published by our various offices and units. Again, the skills of our library staff are employed to organize and describe these resources. Data and metadata created by our

librarians are entered into OCLC's WorldCat database. Providing information about our research and other activities to WorldCat users around the world enhances the value of our efforts and our reputation as a trusted source of information.

Across the country and internationally, transportation organizations are becoming increasingly aware of the strategic value of information and information services. There are an increasing number of information-related committees within the Transportation Research Board and the most recent comprehensive transportation funding bill, TEA-21, created, for the first time, a National Transportation Library. As these programs grow and develop, we believe our efforts here in Minnesota can provide a model for the networks and services that need to be created on a larger scale, and the role librarians can play in adding to their success.