Like every New Jersey municipality, Pennington Borough faces daunting budget constraints despite the ever-present demand for municipal services. In late 2011, the Pennington Borough Library Board of Trustees began having discussions about the future of the library. Board members were asking themselves: What is our mission? What does our future look like? How can we continue to fulfill our mission under such fiscal constraints? Should the library, which has existed since 1876, be eliminated as a service to our residents?

As we discussed these questions, we found that they were difficult, challenging and tension-filled. Here we were, local appointees trying to decide the future of our 135 year old library. Could we possibly do that on our own? Would the library’s staff and our community accept our determinations?

Ultimately, the board concluded that these questions required a strategic planning process that would involve the community in the discussion. It also determined that decisions about the library’s future should be a community-driven process, rather than board directed.

The board did two things early in the process that were critical to developing a strategic plan. First, it designed and conducted a community survey to gather demographic information and data about the community’s satisfaction with the services provided by the library. This data provided information to inform the strategic plan. Next, the board engaged the services of Rutgers University’s Center for Applied Appreciative Inquiry (CAAI) to assist it in the collaborative strategic planning process.

Members of the board chose CAAI because it had the expertise to encourage a positive dialogue and used the practices of Appreciative Inquiry, known as Ai.

Appreciative Inquiry (Ai) is an organizational development method that shifts problem-solving dialogue away from finger-pointing discourse. Instead, the method seeks to focus the discussion on what it is people want. Ai is highly collaborative and engages multiple stakeholders in a strength-based dialogue about what is possible. The premise of the Ai process is that “people support that which they help to create.” Through the use of positively-
constructed questions, Ai helps participants discover the factors that contribute to success. Ai also seeks to focus the discussion on how these factors can be replicated to create new possibilities for the future. Instead of placing blame, participants can spend their time designing the future they most desire.

In the Ai-structured strategic planning process the traditional and divisive SWOT method (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) are replaced with a more engaging and future oriented SOAR approach (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results). The board felt that this approach would be more positive and lead to more productive and fruitful conversations among all of its community stakeholders.

CAAi helped the board design a planning process that fully engaged the local community in creating a strategic plan. A small core team, formed by the board, developed topics to guide the planning discussions and organized a community strategic planning summit. The core team identified the following stakeholder groups to invite to the summit:

- a cross-section of the library's patrons, including teens and adults;
- local officials and library board members;
- local business people;
- representatives of local organizations;
- Friends of the Library; and,
- library staff members and volunteers.

Through an Ai-structured dialogue process, the core team identified three summit transformational topics: Community Connections, Library as Place, and Serving Patrons of All Ages. Transformational topics serve as a beacon for what people most desire. The underlying principle is that organizational systems move in the direction of the images they depict and discuss.

The summit was held on two nights, spaced two weeks apart in order to maximize community participation. It was also designed using the 5-I cycle of Ai-based strategic planning: identify, inquiry, imagine, innovate and implement. This cycle focuses the discussion on an organization's strengths and how they might be leveraged and amplified for future success.

During the first night of the summit, people shared stories about their best experiences at the Pennington Library. They soon discovered the elements and strengths that made these experiences possible. In the imagine phase, the stakeholders created strategic visions incorporating those things that the library might do that are new, different and better. Next everyone worked together to create the library's strategic future. The process resulted in a revised mission statement, three strategic directions, six goals and 12 strategic initiatives with attendant action steps—all co-created by the community.

For the board, the opportunity to reassess their goals with community input was invaluable. The library’s 2008 strategic plan had expired, budget constraints were threatening operations, several new members had joined the board and the board was searching for a new director. The positive Ai approach reinforced and affirmed the community’s support for the library.

The strategic plan, defined with the input and support of taxpayers, now serves as a budget-planning document. Following the summit several participants were invited to join newly created implementation sub-committees. There is a new energy that now aligns the board with the community.

The process also afforded the board a unique opportunity to guide its decision-making, starting with the hiring of a new director. The plan became director Kim T. Ha’s introduction to the community.

Ha uses the plan as an instruction manual of sorts: “When I was hired, the staff and board were ready to move forward with all these initiatives. Based on their energy and knowledge of the community we were able to immediately set course on a new direction.”

Finally, by creating the sub-committees, the board continues to own and track the goals. The board has often discussed the trouble new board members have in understanding their role and the library's mission. The Ai approach has helped new volunteers to become active, contributing members of the board more quickly. With a community-based strategic plan, the library’s mission is more closely aligned with the community.

Ai can be applied in all kinds of ways to enhance the work of local government officials. It has been used to heal destructive adversarial labor-management relations, restructure and reorganize service delivery systems, effectuate shared services and consolidations, improve governance communication and decision-making and promote community engagement.

For more information about Ai and Rutgers University’s Center for Applied Appreciative Inquiry, contact the Center's Director, James M. Davy, at: jdavy@adromeda.rutgers.edu.