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### **WLN Strategic Plan 2023-25**

As of its May Board meeting, the Westmoreland Library Network of 23 public Libraries in Westmoreland County has a new Strategic Plan. It was written by consultant Richard Bowra in concert with the WLN Board Directors and covers the period of 2023-2025.

The Plan is exceptionally comprehensive and includes headline items, with many sub-issues, about maintaining and assuring quality operations/administrative services, self-awareness to project identity to the public, a robust IT/technology base, robust staff support, adequate funding for operations, excellence of communications between all entities, support for services and programs, staff development and services, quality District Library services, Board Development, and effective committee structure.

That is a formidable list for a relatively small staff to wrap its arms around, and much too much for this column to tackle in one issue. For today, I want to focus on one matter only, because it goes to many of the others, namely the matter of self-awareness and identity projection.

When the WLN members first switched over, in late 2007, from a paper-based and wooden-furniture catalogue system, each one isolated at its own Library, to the shared and electronically based Polaris Integrated Library System (ILS) of today, with all individual catalogues blended on-line for all patrons, there was a conscious fostering of a unified identity to go with the ILS. Not just a physical Polaris ILS server and software. First of all, that WLN identity was proudly signified with the patron Library card, an image of which you see on this page. A great deal of thought and collaborative discussion went into just the design of that card, that identity, because it is the brand that you the patron always carry with you.

Building identity was not just about the card, however. It was about drawing the individual Libraries and their Trustees away from a predilection for local community silo-ization. That was how things mostly were back then, and it was easy to see all the other benefits to be had from cross-Library collaborations. Among them are sharing lower negotiated costs for materials and services, conducting unified staff training, sharing programming and ideas, and projecting a clearer image for the public about what a modern Library is.

Of course, the great and immediate benefit was the Polaris ILS itself, a way of life now that few even notice or question, which underlies everything that is so great about owning a WLN Library card. Yet Mr. Bowra could note this too: "Library users in the county see their home Library as their 'go to' with WLN functioning more in the background." He noted that individual Libraries still value their own independence.

So, even more than 15 years after the launch of the Polaris ILS, this underlying tension is yet in play as a matter for inclusion in the new Strategic Plan. Having lived through the earlier period, when this was a tangible issue to be weighed for the success of the Polaris ILS launch itself, I hope that self-awareness to project WLN identity will be taken

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seriously as a matter of implementation of the Plan. It is important to the future of WLN public Libraries in such a rapidly changing world.

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