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Fundraising and Building a Sense of Ownership

by **Mary Rounds**
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worker since 1977*

The town of Alsea, being unincorporated, has no government: no mayor, no police, no city manager, no money. Alsea is a town “in transition” from a former timber-dependent community to, well, something else. In 1995 a committed group of area residents decided that what they didn’t want was to transition into nonexistence as a viable service center or to lose their sense of community.

They formed a nonprofit community development corporation, Alsea Community Effort (ACE), and began prioritizing town improvement projects. High on the list was a new or relocated library. This was necessary because the old building was decrepit and totally inadequate for the continual growth in demand from Alsea patrons on their branch of the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library for materials and online computer use.

State Librarian Jim Scheppke crafted a building plan identifying Alsea’s needs, and architect Richard Turi completed preliminary drawings. Both of these were created through a series of public meetings. A large Library Support Group was formed, complete with bright red T-shirts proclaiming “Great Communities need Great Libraries” on the front and “So many books, so little space” on the back. At that point we had what we needed to start looking for funds: documented community input and visible support (bright red), plus a very attractive picture of our future library and a clearly designed plan.

ACE’s funding strategy realized that local folks who had just lost their timber industry jobs or retired from them were not likely to back any increase in their property taxes. ACE approached private foundations, the state, and federal government for grants. ACE asked Benton County Commissioners to apply for a federal Community Develop-

ment Block Grant, and ACE added a dozen other state, federal, and private foundation potential donors to the mix.

This makes it all sound easy: it wasn’t. Some potential funders sent our grant applications back to the drawing board, but were quite helpful in advising us how to adjust our requests. Some foundations were experiencing losses in the post-2001 economic downturn and offered us a fraction of what we asked for. Some told us to ask for more than our original request. Some just turned us down. One generous timber company sent us a check without even being asked. Local donors who pledged to purchase the future library property had to invest and tie up their money because the project dragged on and on.

In the very early days of beginning to write grants, ACE was challenged first at the County level, then at the State Land Use Board of Appeals about our request for a Conditional Use Permit to build on the corner of a farm field right next to Alsea School. This held up the whole project for about two years while the appeal process continued, with the final outcome to our benefit. Legal costs for the appeal ran to \$12,000, and ACE had a local fundraising campaign just for these expenses. Although costly and time-consuming, the issue rallied the library users of the community to fight with a dogged determination for their new building on the chosen location. Now the library supporters truly owned the project.

By 2003, ACE had raised \$700,000. Building costs had increased over the intervening years and a \$20,000 clerestory window array above the library service desk was removed from the design. In spring 2004 the CDBG funds were released. The land was purchased and groundbreaking began in August. Our Alsea Community Center Library was completed in February 2005.





The Alsea Community Center Library

Hooray! Oops, that's not the end of this story. Now ACE, a local nonprofit whose board of directors is made up of volunteers, farmers, local small business owners, artists, teachers, and retirees, owns a lovely 4400 sq. ft. building. ACE has an Inter-Governmental Agreement with Benton County and the City of Corvallis for operation of the branch of the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library in the building, so those privileges and responsibilities are clearly delineated. Like any homeowner, ACE will be doing repairs, paying insurance, replacing light fixtures, repainting, and other maintenance, for the entire (hopefully long) life of the building. There is currently a small maintenance fund, but not an amount that will generate enough interest to pay for upkeep. If ACE (ah, hindsight!) had built a small percentage of the building cost for future maintenance into the overall amount requested from all construction grants, we would be closer to having a solid long-term maintenance nest egg. Currently we are soliciting funds in the form of yearly pledges that we can count on from "Champions of the Alsea Library." So far, the response has

been excellent, but the reality of the septic tank pump that failed a month past the one year warranty expiration date still haunts us. Then the HVAC fan fried, just past the one year warranty, and the ballasts in the fluorescent lights that only last a year, and it goes on.

The library project turned out to be more than just erecting a lovely and usable facility for the Alsea community. ACE formed some wonderful partnerships with funders who now have an interest in the Alsea community. Our town discovered what staunch supporters our County Commissioners are and how hard our County Development Department works for us. We found out how much the Corvallis Library was willing to give us (lots). Our community can reflect on the Alsea Community Center Library project and its ups and downs and congratulate itself on stepping up to the challenges of being "in transition." In other words, we've gained some community identity. We are the ones who stuck with the project and built that cool, new Alsea Library. 🌿

