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Case study: The Evergreen Open Source Integrated Library System; its origins and significant implementations in the USA and Canada

Ben Hyman

Manager, Library Policy & Technology
Public Library Services Branch, Ministry of Education
Government of British Columbia, Canada
Victoria, BC, Canada

Julie Walker

Interim Deputy State Librarian
Georgia Public Library Service
Atlanta, GA, USA

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ABSTRACT

On December 10, 2007 the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation named the Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS) as one of 10 recipients of the second annual Mellon Awards for Technology Collaboration for the development and release of the Evergreen open-source library automation system.

Evergreen's development relied on input from the end-user community. On time and under budget, 252 PINES libraries went live on Evergreen on September 5, 2006. There are presently 275 "Georgia PINES" libraries using Evergreen.

Public libraries in the Province of British Columbia (BC), Canada committed to a 5 year phased implementation of Evergreen beginning with a pilot installation in November, 2007. As of May, 2008 there are 4 sites live, and 14 more scheduled in 2008; by 2011, more than 65 BC libraries - including colleges and schools - are expected to share BC's Evergreen-powered union database.

CASE STUDY: THE EVERGREEN OPEN SOURCE INTEGRATED LIBRARY SYSTEM; ITS ORIGINS AND SIGNIFICANT IMPLEMENTATIONS IN THE USA AND CANADA

On December 10, 2007 the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation named the Georgia Public Library Service as one of 10 recipients of the second annual Mellon Awards for Technology Collaboration. The \$50,000 grant recognized GPLS for the development and release of the Evergreen open-source library automation software, which is licensed under the General Public License (GPL).

The Mellon Awards honour not-for-profit organizations for leadership in the collaborative development of open-source software tools with particular application to higher education and cultural heritage not-for-profit activities.

Evergreen's Origins in Georgia:

The Evergreen software project was originally conceived to meet the unique functional needs of a large group of public libraries committed to sharing materials, a consortium called Georgia Library Public Information Network for Electronic Services (PINES). A program of the Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS), Georgia Library PINES is the public library automation and lending network for 275 libraries in 140 counties. PINES creates a statewide "borderless library" that provides equal access to information for all Georgians. Georgians with a PINES library card have access to materials beyond what is available on their local shelves, enjoying a shared collection of 8 million books that can be delivered to their home library free of charge.

PINES began as a Y2K compliance project, with 26 of the smallest and least affluent library systems in Georgia needing to upgrade their Integrated Library Systems (ILS's). PINES membership is voluntary, and has been since the beginning. As PINES has grown, first from library systems with Y2K non-compliant automation systems, and then to libraries that saw the benefits for the library system and the patrons and joined, there are now PINES library cardholders in all 159 counties in Georgia. PINES is really a simple idea: Any resident of Georgia can get a PINES library card, and PINES patrons have the flexibility to use any of the 275 participating libraries. They can borrow and return materials to any PINES library as if it were their home library.

One reason that PINES works so well is that there are common policies and procedures among the PINES libraries, with the goal that the customer will enjoy a consistent and quality experience at any PINES library. This ideal was respected from the beginning and patrons love it. PINES Libraries agree to a

common set of policies such as check out periods and fee structures. Individual libraries continue to set many other policies, such as closed dates for the library system, but policies that affect the patron are set by the PINES Executive Committee. All PINES library policies are approved by the PINES Executive Committee, which is elected from among member library systems. When a policy change is suggested from the membership, the process is that the policy change is submitted to the PINES subcommittees for discussion and a recommendation. Subcommittees are composed of front-line staff working in the libraries. Because we recognize that policies can and often do impact all areas of the library, all subcommittee members consider and debate each suggested change, weighing its impact on patrons and libraries. The recommendation of the subcommittees, along with discussion points, is presented to the Executive Committee by the PINES Program Director. The Executive Committee is the final policy-making body of PINES.

As the end of PINES' initial ILS vendor contract neared, the future direction of PINES was foremost in the minds of the GPLS staff. Due to the size and complexity of a consortium like PINES, many limits in the existing vendor solution had been reached. Adding other libraries across the state was impossible. The GPLS staff conducted a comprehensive survey of the library automation marketplace, and were very honest with vendors about the needs of PINES libraries. Search results clearly showed that no ILS systems could adequately handle the scale of PINES; in particular, one that allowed PINES to continue its growth by adding more library systems interested in becoming member libraries. Consortial acquisitions was particularly problematic, since no existing ILS solution had an available acquisitions system that would work well in a large-scale environment.

PINES wanted a system that was designed with the specific needs of PINES libraries in mind, one that could be tuned and altered and upgraded as needed, on their timetable suited for the library business. PINES knew first-hand the frustration of working with a system but not being able to fine-tune it to meet specific needs and knowing those needs would be met in version xxx to be released in 2-3 years, if at all. PINES had reached a crossroads and had to decide how to position itself for continued growth in order to realize the hope of having a statewide library card.

Aside from several important issues such as security and scalability for a very large and complex consortium, the PINES staff at the Georgia Public Library Service wanted input from people in the field, the users of the system to contribute to the design of the software. Forums and many focus groups statewide allowed for input from libraries. Hundreds of people attended. The guiding principle in these focus groups was, "Pretend it's magic" to forget the traditional limitations that we often associate with

software. Amazing ideas came from library staff working in the field - both PINES and non-PINES libraries. The GPLS staff listened, and designed the system based on input from library staff and patrons. This created a sense of ownership and pride in the system as it developed.

Work on Evergreen began in June 2004. Developers relied on input from the end-user community, staff members working daily in the PINES libraries, to guide the software design.

On time and under budget, 252 PINES libraries went live on Evergreen on September 5, 2006. There are presently 275 PINES libraries live on Evergreen.

Evergreen in BC:

Since late 2004, public libraries in British Columbia (BC) have made significant progress towards the implementation of several strategic initiatives concerned with ensuring equitable access to information for everyone in BC. A provincial library card and core licensed databases are examples of such initiatives. Still, to truly deliver equitable access, libraries in BC needed to be able to deliver seamless authentication and communication between discrete ILS's. While many BC public libraries use state-of-the-art, enterprise-class ILS's, some libraries in BC aren't automated. Others are on end-of-life systems. Many more are on PC-based systems that are not standards compliant. Clearly, a solution was needed.

Beginning in 2006, BC's Ministry of Education – Public Library Services Branch (PLSB) began working with regional groupings of libraries on the Federated Libraries Integrated ILS Project (FLIP) grants. These grants were established to enable library federations to purchase state-of-the-art, standards-based ILS's. Seventy-four percent (53) of all public libraries in BC were in Federation, pre-Federation or quasi-Federation status in March, 2007, and were at various stages of the process leading to a common ILS: North Coast, Kootenay Library Federation, North Central, North East, Sea-to-Sky and The Islands. In the spring of 2007, only one ILS appeared to meet the FLIP grant requirements, not the least of which was affordability, and strong consortial functionality - such as complex hold matrices.

In early March, 2007 SirsiDynix announced the cancellation of its Horizon 8.x product and advised customers that all of its legacy software paths would lead to a new ILS slated for release in late 2007 / early 2008. In the view of BC's public libraries, the SirsiDynix announcement changed the landscape of the ILS marketplace; the traditional ILS market was no longer a haven for the risk adverse. Indeed, the risk associated with the Evergreen Open ILS was suddenly no greater than the risk associated with the acquisition of an ILS product in the traditional marketplace. In fact, given the following risk reducers, the risk associated with the adoption of Evergreen appeared to be mitigated or manageable:

- The software was in use in a jurisdiction of similar size and composition to BC.
- Evergreen could be developed in BC, for BC and development priorities could be determined by BC.
- No need for escrow clauses.
- For those BC libraries who might opt out of Evergreen, its existence in the province would serve as insurance against a volatile marketplace.
- Significantly lower Total Cost of Ownership compared with traditional solutions.
- Centralized database and centralized staffing reduces local staffing overhead.
- Strong collegial support community in Canada; Evergreen's development community is distributed across the US, Canada and beyond, and provides opportunities to collaborate and partner.
- Vendor support for Evergreen exists - Equinox Software is a company founded by the original Evergreen software developers.

On April 18, 2007, inspired by the Georgia example and motivated both by a lack of interoperability between libraries in their own jurisdiction, public libraries in the Province of British Columbia, Canada, committed to a five year phased implementation of Evergreen on two concurrent paths:

1. Implement live Evergreen open ILS software pilot sites in BC, *and*
2. Strike an ILS Advisory Committee (code-named SITKA) to manage a consortial installation of the Evergreen ILS in BC.

The first year implementation in BC is now complete, and the second is well underway. Rather than start small, BC libraries opted to design and invest in an unquestionably flexible, scalable server architecture to run Evergreen in BC. Modelled on the stable Georgia PINES implementation, which smoothly handles nearly 100,000 Circulations per day, BC's solid infrastructure can easily grow to accommodate all interested BC libraries, large or small.

SITKA's Evergreen server array is housed in a high-security, state-of-the-art data centre in Vancouver, BC, with available backup power for over a week. Like its network architecture, access to unlimited data and power supplies ensures that SITKA's Evergreen instance can grow to accommodate all interested libraries. Situating BC's Evergreen servers within our own jurisdiction also ensures that patron data is being managed consistently with BC's rigorous privacy legislation.

The SITKA team of knowledgeable staff now consists of a Project Manager, two Data Specialists and two Trainers, as well as assigned PLSB staff. As of May, 2008, these folks have successfully led four pilot migrations from four legacy ILS's and, in addition to rolling out Self Check, RFID and email notification this past spring, they're poised to migrate fifteen more libraries to Evergreen by January, 2009.

The SITKA ILS Advisory Committee has met seven times, and has grown in size to more accurately reflect the size, shape and type of libraries in BC. Informed by its Cataloguing, Circulation, Governance and Gap Analysis Working Groups, the SITKA Committee is forging ahead in a thoughtful, sensitive manner; ultimately it will make recommendations that will define the governance and management of Evergreen in BC. Like Georgia PINES, the BC ILS Advisory Committee believes that policy decisions must pass the patron experience litmus test.

In part, the appeal of Evergreen for BC's libraries is the attractiveness of contributing to and benefiting from a collaborative and diverse development community. BC libraries saw an opportunity in Evergreen to empower themselves in order to best serve library patrons across BC. Opportunities for knowledge transfer exist with Evergreen that simply do not exist with proprietary vendor solutions; participation in the larger development or user community can create timely, meaningful and demonstrable improvements to the source code, the documentation and the end-user experience. Indeed, innovative approaches from outside the traditional ILS sphere quickly pollinate Evergreen community discussion threads and find a fit in the software, benefiting all Evergreen libraries in BC and beyond. Given the pace of technological change and a heightened level of end-user expectations, innovation and openness seems prudent if not vital.

The Evergreen community is varied and thriving and now includes committed partners in public, academic and school libraries. Libraries and developers alike have been inspired by the GPLS' bold and proactive decision to forge ahead with an in-house, open source library automation system. Together, Evergreen's supporters have formed a worldwide community committed to the principles that describe Evergreen; Stable, even under extreme load; Robust, and capable of handling a high volume of transactions and simultaneous users; Flexible, to accommodate the varied needs of libraries; Secure, to protect our patrons' privacy and data; and User-friendly, to facilitate patron and staff use of the system.

In Georgia, USA, and in BC, Canada, the award-winning Evergreen open ILS is driving the effort to deliver outstanding user-centric public library experiences; libraries in both jurisdictions look forward to the first-ever Evergreen International User's Conference this winter in Atlanta, Georgia.