



athabasca county
at the centre of it all

Athabasca County Library Board

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A Brief to the Royal Society of Canada's Expert Panel on The Status and Future of Canada's Libraries and Archives

I am writing as Chair of the Board of the Athabasca County Library Board in Northern Alberta. The Board runs 3 school based public libraries in hamlets in Athabasca County. They are in Wandering River, Grassland, and Rochester. As well, we provide library service to county residents through service agreements with the municipal libraries in the Village of Boyle and the Town of Athabasca. The comments below correspond to the framing questions that were posed by the Panel.

Services

1. Our libraries provide library service to residents of Athabasca County. This includes natives and new Canadians as well as people from many ethnic backgrounds. Canadians as a whole get very good library service from the public, school, academic, and special libraries in Canada. While the services vary from library to library, most provide recreational reading, reference or information services as well as access to online databases and services. As well, many libraries provide meeting places for community groups and programs for their patrons that enhance their knowledge and skills. For the most part, these are of good quality. There is a great emphasis on working to develop literacy skills and other skills that will help people manage in society.

Archives are less well known by Canadians, but they are aware that they exist. I don't think that some people know that they can access archives for their own research.

2. Libraries have embraced whatever technology is in use at the time. As a result, we have some material that is in formats that are hard to use or people can't use as they don't have the machines to use them. In past 20 years technology has changed immensely. Libraries have been chronically underfunded and have struggled to embrace the many changes.

They have managed to do so fairly well. What they haven't been able to do is to take older material in one format and change it to one that is useable by current technology. The best example of this is the number of videocassettes and cassette tapes and records that are in libraries. Most public libraries do not have facilities or staff to get them converted to digital format or even to CDs or store them on a streaming server. There needs to be much cooperation and a huge increase in training and funding for this to happen.

3. We don't measure the outcome of our services. We record data about what we do, but we don't know what the impact is of the use of the services by our users. We sometimes ask for uses for their opinions about our services, but we don't have any effective way of measuring the impact of the service. We know that people like our service and feel that we offer valuable services to them. They keep using them and keep telling us how much they like our services. Use of the libraries continues to increase.

Community Outreach and Awareness

1. In our county, people definitely know that the public libraries are there and they are very supportive of our libraries. About a year and a half ago we had community meetings about how the library could meet community needs. These were well attended by a good cross section of the community. Out of the meetings came a Plan of Service for each of the 3 libraries in the County. This has been shared with attendees and the general community. There is definite feeling in each community that the library serves a valuable and important role in the community. Our users know that we are part of the larger library community as they often request books through the library system and get material from other libraries in the system or from other places.
2. The libraries in Athabasca County provide a variety of services to users including: recreational reading, interlibrary loan, access to a variety of databases (provided by Northern Lights Library System and The Alberta Library), reference and information, story time for young children, author readings, informational programs, access to government information, access to computers and the Internet, photocopying, and access to print magazines. Our library system is a consortial service that is supported by 4 of the regional library systems in Alberta. We count the usage of most services, but we don't have any way of measuring the impact that service has on people. Often users will make informal comments about a service or program, but this interaction is not captured in a formal manner. The library staff do regular evaluations of the goals that are in our Plan of Service and make changes to services as needed. We do patron surveys to ask them what they think of the services we provide, but not on the impact of the service. In general, our users are very satisfied with the services that we provide.

3. In the digital era, patrons may need to have help with using online services such as how to search databases, how to search and use the library catalogue, or access and use audio books. We need to assist users with whatever they are doing as they request it. Libraries should be a place where people can find information that they need especially in online format. In the school based public libraries that the Athabasca County Library Board runs, the library managers provide students with information on how to use the Internet and teach basic information literacy skills. This is very important as children need to develop good quality information seeking and analysis skills so that they can navigate the vast array of online resources as easily as possible.
4. Libraries can be a place for people to learn together by attending programs. They provide informal spaces where users share what they are reading or doing and just share time together. These activities build communities. Library systems are providing options for the sharing of reviews of materials which helps others decide which books they want to read. The library is the place to house collective memory as they have many books, older issues of magazines or newspapers and other materials that aren't available anywhere else. The collection is maintained and catalogued so that it is easily accessible. It is vital that this material remain available to people as new users often want to go back to the original books or articles that were written many years previously. This is a vital role of libraries.

New Directions

Digitization

1. "Born-digital" material has many challenges for small libraries. First is to even know that it exists and then figuring how to access it if one even knows of its existence. Then one has to determine whether it is of reasonable and reliable quality. Then there is the challenge of letting users know that it exists and helping them access it.
2. The "brick-and-mortar library" will always be with us in our opinion. It will always be a place to go to find material, interact with others, access information for some, get assistance with finding information, or just sit and read. The paper book or magazine is still the most easily portable source for reading. One doesn't need any special equipment to use it and you can use them anywhere as long as there is light to read by! They need to be stored in a readily accessible location and we won't ever have everything digitized or online or in a format that everyone can use that way.

Education

1. I don't have an answer for this question.
2. I think that library school professors and instructors need to come to small, rural libraries and see how they operate. Then they will be able to determine what competencies their students will need in order to work in them. They also need to help students learn to be advocates for libraries and their users. The conversation hasn't started very much at all from what I can tell. While the same type of activity happens in many public libraries, there are unique challenges that rural librarians and library boards face that it would be good to study and document.

Resources

1. In Alberta there are already a consortia and library systems that have been formed to assist with the support the technological needs of public libraries. Athabasca County is a member of Northern Lights Library System which is a member of the Alberta Library. NLLS is one of seven public library systems in Alberta. There are staff at the system office who are dedicated to dealing with and supporting technology in the libraries. We benefit greatly from the knowledge and skills of these people. We couldn't manage to operate in the complex world of library technology without their support. They do many things including servicing equipment and fixing problems to doing censorial purchasing of equipment that is then set up the same way. All the libraries have wireless internet available to users and web sites. Neither of these would be possible without the work of the library system staff.

It is unfortunate that the Government of Alberta has chosen to stop funding the Alberta Public Library Electronic Network (APLEN). This organization operated as a part of The Alberta Library (TAL) and provided good support for the systems and to larger public libraries in support of technology in public libraries. The work that APLEN did is supposed to be taken on by the Public Library Services Branch, but to date, very little seem to have happened and what has been done is not funded enough to do any good from what we can see.

2. Not applicable to public libraries
3. The library budget of our public library board would have to at least double if not triple so that we could provide the quality of library service to our patrons that we only dream about now. We need to have full time staff working for the public library. Currently the library managers receive a small honorarium for the amount of time that they spend doing public library work. In one case, the library manager is provided by the school division. We should

be open many more hours than we are. We need to have more time to provide programs and space to provide programs.

Given adequate financial resources, in 2017, our full time staff would provide: evening and weekend hours on more days as determined in consultation with our users. There would be a wide variety of current material, frequent varied programs for a range of users, and a summer reading program for the whole summer staffed by a student and supported by regular staff. The libraries would be full of people using the Internet or using other resources on our computers or reading the newest issues of their favorite magazines and newspapers and reading a variety of material in the library. Our online services would be very busy.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our comments about the state of Canada's libraries and archives as well as how this applies to our situation in Athabasca County.

Respectfully submitted,

Doug Kariel
Chair