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# FAST FACTS

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## Libraries as a public good

Imagine a Winnipeg where public library operating hours have been halved, branches closed, and service fees charged to borrowers. This is the scenario that faces the citizens of Jackson County, Oregon and several other American cities, where library services have been taken over by a for-profit management firm. These takeovers have been sanctioned by city councils who feel that tax-supported libraries are too expensive and provide poor value for service.

As a “soft” service, public libraries are easy targets for cuts and closures by profit-minded city administrations. There is also an increasingly common misconception that with the universal availability of the Internet and easy access to research information through Google and Wikipedia, libraries are obsolete relics. It certainly appears that Winnipeg’s administration subscribes to this belief, since libraries were targeted in the initial Economic Opportunity Commission report.

In fact, Winnipeg’s public libraries provide an invaluable service to our community, and are an important part of its economy. Like other libraries which have been the subject of economic studies in Canada, the United States, Australia and Europe, Winnipeg’s libraries are essential to the

community’s prosperity, functioning as employers, purchasers, service providers, and educators.

As municipal institutions, public libraries receive most of their funding from city taxpayers, but not all their revenue is tax-based. A 2006 Canadian Urban Public Libraries Council report shows that libraries themselves generated nearly \$40 million in revenue through programming, sales, special events, and donations.

Public libraries play an important role in supporting small business development and growth through Internet access, online resources, workshops and research expertise. Government information, including forms and publications are often available exclusively online, which means that public libraries are important access points for government information, including forms and announcements. The federal Community Access Programme (CAP) ensures that every public library in Canada has an internet connection, and through multi-level government partnerships continues to maintain equipment and access.

Libraries also have an important physical presence. Winnipeggers value library



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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programming, which can include readings, speakers, performances, programs for young adults, new parents and seniors, as well as reading and literacy support. After school Homework Help programs are very popular in many areas.

How well does the City of Winnipeg support this valuable community service? According to the 2007 operating budget, the City of Winnipeg contributes \$21.9 million to the Libraries, which represents 2.95% of the total municipal budget. Budget figures from cities of similar size across Canada show that each of them contributes a higher proportion of their municipal budget to their libraries. Edmonton is closest with 3%, followed by Hamilton at 4%, Vancouver at 4% and Mississauga at 5%. Expenditure per capita data are even more revealing. In 2006, Winnipeg ranked 30th in total library expenditures per capita, behind Regina, Saskatoon and Thunder Bay. It ranked 41st in materials expenditure per capita, and 45th in hours open per capita.

The library gives value for its budget, with a lean 56% of revenues going toward salaries. In addition to providing collections and services, WPL also supported family literacy, a summer reading programme, a writer in residence and 20 weeks of concerts and lectures. This connection to the community may be manifested in one important metric: registered borrowers. Here Winnipeg ranks in the top 20 of Canadian libraries with 64.77% of its citizens holding library cards.

In spite of doing more with less, the Winnipeg Public Library was on the chopping block in the City of Winnipeg's 2007 EOC Report. It was proposed that \$2 million in savings could be achieved by replacing paid staff with volunteers, amalgamating public libraries with school libraries and leasing library space in malls. Replacing staff with volunteers is a favourite cost-cutting measure. This comes from a misunderstanding of what library staff do.

A professional librarian has completed a Master's degree in Library and Information Studies from an accredited program. Librarians are trained managers, with specializations in research and education/training, public service/customer service, information organization, collections development and budgeting, or automated systems and web development. Other staff members are also specially trained to provide library services.

With today's public libraries posting multimillion dollar collection and technology budgets which requires staff to have specialized knowledge, volunteers simply cannot provide the necessary level of technical and professional expertise. Volunteers may not uphold values such as freedom of information and protection of privacy, core requirements of any library operation. U.S. experiments with for-profit library privatization have demonstrated that when library operations are moved out of the public sector, "They operate entirely with our tax dollars but they have no transparency...We no longer know where our tax dollars are going."

There is one further area integral to public libraries, that of diversity. As a "community commons...where ideas and cultures can intersect" public libraries are uniquely positioned to ensure that everyone feels connected to their community. Winnipeg's social ills cannot be solved completely by greater investment in its public libraries; but as established, trusted and welcoming places of reading, learning and community, our libraries can play a significant role in the development and enrichment of our city's potential. The American Library Association may have summed it up best: "libraries are not a simple commodity, but are an essential public good."

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