

The Importance of Supporting Public Libraries by Tracy Rimmer, Glenboro Gazette

There was a time when every community of a certain size or larger had a public library. Libraries have been, for millennia, considered places of learning, where a record of society is kept both through the published works of writers and the archives of such things as newspapers and public records. They have been places of knowledge and education, and, since the advent of libraries open to the general public, a place which evened the playing field when it came to access to education.

Today, libraries are also cultural centres, offering classes, children's programs, and community information for newcomers. They are a meeting place for book clubs and writing groups, they offer access to computers for those who may not own them, and access to the internet to those who may have their own laptop, but no connectivity at home. In smaller communities, they provide a version of the "wifi-cafe" service available in larger centres.

They are an introduction to literacy to a community's youth, offer a place for homework help and research resources for essays and assignments for older students, and many offer ESL resources to immigrants whose first language is not English, making them places where new Canadians learn about their chosen country. They are also often a first-line observer of a community's needs. Librarians interact with a large, diverse group of people, from across the socioeconomic spectrum, and are often the first to be made aware of certain social issues and needs.

Libraries are intrinsic to the social fabric of our communities, large and small, and as such, must evolve with their community's needs, but at the same time, the community must ensure that the future of our libraries are valued and provided for. We cannot measure a library's value on the red and black entries in their financial reports alone; their contribution to our communities as a whole is not necessarily quantifiable, and we must remember that when the topic of library funding comes up.

The Glenboro/South Cypress Library is one of branches of the Western Manitoba Regional Library System; the other branches are located in Brandon, Carberry, Neepawa and Hartney. Recently it was learned that the Board of the Western Manitoba Regional Library is assessing the financial sustainability of the library system as part of its Strategic Plan. This assessment may impact the collections and services offered by the smaller community libraries as they are currently not self-sustaining.

Currently, the local library levy per capita is \$9.00. Nine dollars to support the building, staff, and resources. That is equal to approximately two cups of coffee at Starbucks, two gallons of gasoline, or a jug of milk and loaf of bread. Per year. For residents, this gives them access to the full catalogue of books in the Western Manitoba Regional Library, a total of over 140,000 separate resources. They can be accessed at your local library, at any one of the associated library locations, online, and by phone. They cater to those who walk in with an eReader, and those who wish to have a real, physical book to enjoy.

Our libraries offer free internet access, which, when I last checked, was at least \$50 a month for the most basic service. Computer stations are available for those who do not wish to, or cannot, invest in one of their own.

Children's programs are held throughout the year, and the Summer Reading Program is a holiday staple for many of our young students. With over 40,000 children's books, the Western Manitoba Regional Library is a strong supporter of early literacy.

Over 300 different magazines and newspapers are subscribed to on behalf of the members of the library, and for those who love books but cannot read for themselves due to vision issues (or prefer to listen to books, rather than music or the radio while driving or doing other things), there are over 1300 audio books available. With 1833 DVDs available for borrowing, you could watch a movie each night for over five years without watching the same title twice.

All for nine dollars each.

Other areas, smaller centres not fortunate enough to be associated with a larger, city-supported library such as Brandon, are not so fortunate. Why? Because they do not have a larger centre, with a broader tax base, supporting their facilities. If libraries such as Glenboro, Hartney, and Carberry were not associated with Brandon, our per capita levy would be much higher.

In Morden, the per capita is \$10.81. This allows members from that library system (the South Central Regional Library, with branches in Morden, Winkler, Altona, and the RM of Thompson) access to a catalogue of 127,815 resources.

In Boissevain, the levy is remarkably higher. With a combined town and rural population of around 2,300, each council provides \$44,000 in funding to the library, for a total of \$88,000. This represents a per capita levy of \$38.04, significantly higher than in our area. This funding allows not only for an excellent library system and information resource for the community, but also a community archive project and a small museum, employing one full time staff and five part-time casual positions.

The \$9.00 we pay in this area gives us access not only to our regional library's resources, but also access to interlibrary loans available from every library in the province. Millions of resources which are available within a few days, delivered to our local library and ready for pickup, which we can keep for, in most cases, weeks.

This is a resource we cannot dismiss lightly. Libraries give us access to a world beyond our immediate area, they give us the experiences of people a world away, allowing us to walk in the shoes of those from not only other places, but also from other times, and let us gain those experiences to add to our own. For our nine dollars, we have access to languages and art, politics and history, entertainment, instruction, and perspectives beyond our own.

But the nine dollars we currently pay for the privilege may not be enough to continue that. Brandon's larger tax base has allowed us the support that the smaller centres require to remain operating at their current level, but we cannot rely on that indefinitely. To keep our rural libraries open, we must understand that, in today's world, you get what you pay for, and we are not paying nearly enough to support this local resource without assistance. Comparatively, nine dollars is relatively insignificant for a year's service. If you borrow two books per month, over the year, you are paying less than forty cents for the use of each title. When you consider the price of books, to purchase those same titles would cost nearly \$400. Nine dollars begins to look like a very good deal.

But, you might say, I don't use the library, why should I pay for others to do so? First, you should probably drop in to the library and see what it has to offer you, as there is indeed something for everyone there. Second, investing in the literacy of a community as a whole has benefits that everyone enjoys. Having recreational resources such as libraries draws young families to a community, broadening the tax base and benefitting the community as a whole. Last, but not least, libraries in communities draw people from surrounding communities which do not have them, and while visiting, they tend to frequent other businesses, increasing the economic viability of a community as a whole.

In short, libraries are an important part of any viable community, and if we are to thrive, rather than just survive, we must support ours.