

February 10th, 2015

Toronto Public Library Board
c/o Nancy Marshall, Board Secretary
789 Yonge Street
Toronto ON M4W 2G8

RE: "LEGACY LETTER" TO THE INCOMING TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY BOARD

Dear incoming Members of the Toronto Public Library Board,

Just as the outgoing Board did, you will soon discover what a humbling honour it is to serve the Toronto Public Library: Toronto's largest and most important cultural institution and by some measures the largest public library system in the world. TPL is at once the most vibrant, current public institution in the City – with over 19 Million in-person visits and 26 Million online visits per year – and also among its oldest, built in the best traditions and history of our city and country.

It is an established practice that the outgoing Toronto Public Library Board communicate to the incoming one a short summary of the successes from the last term and challenges that remain for the next one. This letter is an imperfect executive summary of those things.

Successes

Understanding why the outgoing Board is so proud of its record is easier with some historical context. Three and a half years ago the outgoing Board inherited a system in the midst of perhaps the noisiest controversy in its history. The Metro Hall Urban Affairs Library had just been closed by the previous Board in order to balance the budget and the Mayor of the day was publicly demanding a further \$17 Million cut to the library budget, including to library services if necessary. Library supporters were mobilized against these contemplated cuts, some taking the equally unreasonable position that the Board should not look for any new savings or efficiencies at all, or that none existed.

We are proud that almost immediately the new Board calmed these stormy waters. Within 6 months the threat of any further library closures was gone, drastic cuts to open hours and collections had been soundly rejected, and almost \$10 Million in new revenue, savings, and efficiencies had been found explicitly and consciously without any impacts to library service.

In fact, compared to the day before the outgoing Board's term began the following things are true:

- ✓ The Library now has more open hours than ever before. There are 1,794 more annual library branch open hours today than three and a half years ago.
- ✓ The Library has a larger collections budget than ever before. The outgoing Board inherited a collections budget of \$17.12 million. As of 2014 the collections budget was

\$17.987 million. In the 2015 operating budget a further increase of \$445,000 is proposed.

- ✓ The Board will have opened two new library branches (Fort York and Scarborough Civic Centre) by spring 2015. These are the first new library branches to open in Toronto in 10 years. We inherited a system with 98 branches and pass on one with 100.
- ✓ Growth in the budget has been kept at 90% below the rate of inflation. Despite maintaining or improving service levels by every measure (including opening two whole new branches) the outgoing Board and Staff managed to find the money to do so almost entirely from within existing resources. In fact, despite improving services, the TPL spends fewer tax dollars today than when the outgoing Board's term began. This is an outstanding accomplishment that many government bodies aspire to but few achieve. It is unmatched by any other City Agency, Board or Commission who almost all either reduced services or required large amounts of new money to deliver improvements over the same period.
- ✓ The Library adopted its first accountability measures. As a statutory "Local Board (extended definition)" the Library Board is not automatically subject to any of the accountability measures that almost all other City bodies are. Addressing this accountability gap for the first time the outgoing Board created the first lobbyist registry system for the TPL, and began the process of establishing the first Ombudsman oversight and first Code of Conduct for Board Members.
- ✓ Leading Canada in the fight for equal access to e-content. No library in Canada, including TPL, has equal access to e-books on the same market terms that the public does. Three and a half years ago the "big six" publishers all either refused to sell e-books to libraries at all, sold it to them at grossly inflated prices, or would only sell them a use-limited license. The TPL was the first and the loudest to directly challenge the publishers on this approach, including threatening to take them to the competition bureau if necessary. The result has been new access and terms that have dramatically improved the quality and affordability of all public libraries' e-content, for which the TPL has received thanks and accolades for its leadership from libraries across Canada.
- ✓ Appointing a new City Librarian. Not every Board has the chance to appoint a new City Librarian. The outgoing Board had the distinct privilege of appointing Ms. Vickery Bowles to that position, someone whose contributions will one day surely be mentioned alongside Sanderson or Locke in the library's history.

These successes would not have been possible without Toronto Public Library Staff who are professional, courteous, and passionate about protecting the library. It is impossible to properly recognize all of them who deserve it but the outstanding work of Jane Pyper, Anne Bailey, Larry Hughsam, Dan Keon, Linda Hazzan, Linda Mackenzie, Ron Dyck, and Paul Trumphour and many others must be noted.

Challenges that Remain

There are many ongoing challenges large and small facing TPL in the coming year. There is not enough space here for a complete list. However, among the most important are:

Negotiating a new collective agreement with Local 4948. This agreement accounts for approximately three quarters of the TPL's operating budget and will likely only be negotiated once during the next 4 years.

Improved access to e-content, in particular e-books, must be aggressively pursued. The percentage of the library's collection that e-content occupies has been almost doubling each year. The TPL faces an existential crisis of relevancy if full access to publishers' e-content is not secured at a reasonable price.

As the transition to e-content continues the Board will have to closely consider and articulate the justification for maintaining a robust physical system of 100 branches. Libraries in Toronto serve as places to access programs, to study, to take children, to access the internet, and so much more. Some decision-makers have an antiquated view of the library as only a place to retrieve physical copies of books, and have begun openly questioning whether the transition to e-content means that some branches should downsize or close. The TPL can't afford to be on the defensive in this narrative.

Finally, a specific note about the proposed First Parliament Branch. The outgoing Board approved the construction of a new library at the First Parliament site. First Parliament has the potential to be among the best branches in the City but faces many well-known cost, environmental, heritage, and community hurdles. The Board has to make a conscious effort to keep this project progressing forward or the costs and timelines could easily spin out of control. Although the TPL would probably not be responsible it might still get unfairly blamed given that the proposed library branch is the centrepiece of the site.

The privilege and responsibility of considering these things and for advancing the Toronto Public Library system is now yours. For the next four years you are personally responsible for ensuring that service is delivered to the high standards expected by those millions of Torontonians who rely on the system at a cost that they can afford. Good luck.

Sincerely,



Michael Foderick
Chair, Toronto Public Library Board

