

Advocacy Initiative: Libraries Helping to Build a Digital Ontario

Date:	June 22, 2021
To:	Toronto Public Library Board
From:	City Librarian

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to recommend that the Toronto Public Library Board call on the Province of Ontario to collaborate with Toronto Public Library (TPL) and other Ontario library systems to help achieve the goals and outcomes articulated in the Province's first digital and data strategy, *Building a Digital Ontario*¹. It is also recommended that the Board engage the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL) in these advocacy efforts to amplify the voice of public libraries across Ontario, and the critical role that they play in supporting and enabling equitable digital access, literacy and inclusion for all Ontarians.

The alignment between Ontario's digital and data strategy and TPL's strategic priorities creates a significant opportunity for the Province and TPL to work together to advance their shared goals: connecting residents to high-speed internet and broadband; providing better access to open data; supporting digital government and library services; and advancing digital literacy and skills development, among others. Communicating this opportunity to the Province early in the Strategy's execution creates the potential for collaboration, accelerated progress, and greater success in achieving shared outcomes, and ultimately enabling all Ontario residents and communities to benefit from living in the world's leading digital jurisdiction.

¹ Building a Digital Ontario <https://www.ontario.ca/page/building-digital-ontario>

RECOMMENDATIONS

The City Librarian recommends that the Toronto Public Library Board:

1. Call on the Province of Ontario to collaborate with TPL in the execution of their first digital and data strategy, *Building a Digital Ontario*, and through this collaboration, accelerate progress on the shared goals of the Province, TPL and other public libraries in advancing digital access, literacy and inclusion in Ontario.
2. Engage FOPL in TPL's advocacy efforts with the Province and provide them with tools and messaging to amplify the voice of public libraries across Ontario in this effort.

Implementation Points

- Toronto Public Library Board send a letter to the Province of Ontario congratulating it on the launch of its first digital and data strategy and calling for the Province's collaboration with TPL and public libraries across Ontario to support the Strategy's goals and outcomes.
- Library and FOPL Board Members Councillor Paul Ainslie and Alim Remtulla share this report with the FOPL Board and request their participation in TPL's advocacy efforts. TPL will offer FOPL the tools and messaging to support their engagement.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

This advocacy initiative will have no financial impact beyond what has already been approved in the current year's budget.

The Director, Finance & Treasurer has reviewed this financial impact statement and agrees with it.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN

Collaboration with the Province to help them achieve the goals and outcomes of their digital and data strategy, *Building a Digital Ontario*, has the potential to accelerate progress on TPL's strategic priority of *Broadening Toronto's digital access and inclusion*, a shared priority with the Province.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

This advocacy initiative may have a positive impact on services to equity deserving groups. By collaborating with the Province, TPL may increase its capacity and support to advance the Library's mission and strategic priorities, specifically *Broadening Toronto's digital access and inclusion for all Torontonians*.

COMMENTS

The launch of the Province's first digital and data strategy, *Building a Digital Ontario*, presents a significant advocacy opportunity for TPL to advance its strategic priorities as outlined in TPL's Strategic Plan 2020-2024 and Digital Strategy 2020-2024, and to achieve outcomes shared with the Province and other Ontario public libraries. TPL's mission and priorities align with the Strategy's core vision: *to ensure that everyone in Ontario has access to the digital basics they need, like reliable and affordable internet, and training that gives them the skills to succeed in the new digital economy* as a foundation to becoming the most digitally advanced jurisdiction in the world. Public libraries are critical to achieving this vision. Calling for the Province to collaborate with TPL in the execution of the Strategy, and engaging FOPL to amplify these advocacy efforts on behalf of Ontario libraries, has the potential to accelerate shared goals and outcomes, advancing digital access, literacy and inclusion for all Ontarians.

With 265 public library boards and 45 First Nation libraries throughout Ontario, and 1,157 service points across the province including library branches, book deposit stations and bookmobile stops, public libraries serve people where they live, work, learn and come together. Core to their mandate and mission, public libraries are critical providers of digital access and digital literacy skills and supports. Recent Bridge data demonstrates the value that public libraries provide:

- 53% of respondents reported that the library was their only point of access to the technology that they used
- 80% of respondents indicated increases in their level of digital comfort after receiving technology service(s) and support at the library
- 59% of respondents used the library's technology service(s) for educational activities
- 33% of respondents used the library's technology service(s) to access online government resources
- 34% of respondents used the library's technology service(s) to develop employable skills

- 46% of respondents who used the technology service(s) to improve their job skills were successful in finding a job.²

As the largest library in Ontario and in fulfilling its provincial mandate, TPL is well positioned to work with the Province and other Ontario public libraries to advance the goals of the Province's Strategy. Potential opportunities where public libraries could work with the Province to execute the Strategy include:

- Increase bandwidth and technology in public libraries for Ontarians to access digital government services and data as well as to ensure equitable access to education, health and workforce opportunities across the province;
- Incubate innovative program models in public libraries to address a range of shared goals including increasing the number of Ontarians:
 - a) who feel they understand their data rights when they're online by offering programs and services that increase understanding of digital privacy rights and risks, and methods to increase online safety;
 - b) who have access to reskilling and retraining opportunities, so they can succeed in the digital economy by offering workforce development and IT certification opportunities, and increasing access to online learning opportunities, with a particular focus on equity deserving groups.
- Expand current public library evaluation practices to measure the impact of broadband efforts, digital government services, and digital literacy programs in bridging the digital divide and advancing digital equity in communities. TPL currently leads the Bridge project, started in July 2016 through a research and innovation grant from the Ontario Government. It currently collects and analyzes similar data and could be leveraged to meet provincial needs;
- Establish public libraries as a trusted "curator" of open data collections whereby the public can easily access a comprehensive catalogue of open data in-branch or online. Libraries can also provide access to technologies not readily available or affordable by the general public to analyze the data. Finally, librarians as knowledge workers can support the public in their data queries and analysis to support good decision-making in health, education, life or business; and
- Capitalize on the public library's understanding of its communities and include public library representation on Ontario Strategic Data Leadership Councils. In

² Bridge Technology Assessment Toolkit

<https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/bridgetoolkit/reports-and-findings.jsp>

this role, public libraries could provide targeted, sector-specific advice to the government on how to harness data more effectively to increase people's participation in the digital economy, find new opportunities for growth, and support more Ontario businesses.

By pursuing the above initiatives, public libraries can help to accelerate the progress of Ontario's digital and data strategy while achieving better outcomes and a greater impact on Ontarians.

In summary, TPL and public libraries across the province are critical enablers of digital access, literacy and inclusion, and can help the Province achieve our shared vision, as articulated in its *Building a Digital Ontario* strategy, that all Ontarians are able to succeed in the digital world, now and in the future.

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SIGNATURE

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