



STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Toronto Public Library Centre for Democracy Update

Date: May 25, 2026
To: Toronto Public Library Board
From: City Librarian

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide the Toronto Public Library (TPL) Board with an update on the development of the TPL Centre for Democracy, including progress achieved to date, key activities underway in 2026, and planned work leading to the Centre's opening in 2028.

Foundational work completed to date includes the establishment of the Centre's mandate, vision, and a draft theory of change. Information is provided on how the Centre will function as a public, non-partisan civic space that supports democratic participation, information literacy, social connection, and civic learning, and situates the Centre within both TPL's strategic priorities and the broader Canadian democracy ecosystem.

An update is provided on the capital project for a dedicated space at the Toronto Reference Library, forthcoming community engagement to inform space and

service design, and progress on partnership development and philanthropic activities supporting long-term sustainability.

A system-wide review of existing democracy-related programming at TPL and how this work will inform a coordinated “Democracy at TPL” framework and service model is underway. A three-year programming outlook is presented, highlighting phased initiatives such as Democracy Fitness, civic education programming connected to Toronto’s 2026 municipal election, an expanded *On Civil Society* series, sector convenings, and new participatory civic programs.

Next steps required to advance the Centre’s development are provided, including governance and advisory structures, program planning, partnership strategy, and branding and identity work.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

This report has no financial impact beyond what has been approved in the current year’s budget.

The Director, Finance & Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this Financial Impact Statement and agrees with it.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN

The TPL Centre for Democracy is in direct response to TPL’s 2025-2029 Strategic Plan pillar of “social connection, civic engagement and democracy” and specifically objective C1.2.1: Civic Engagement and Democracy Learning Centre to develop and implement a vision and service model for a learning and engagement centre focused on celebrating, practicing and promoting democratic values.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

TPL recognizes the importance of ensuring that all Torontonians, regardless of their race, gender, family composition or other intersecting identities have equal opportunity to engage in and participate in civic life. TPL recognizes that systemic discrimination has negatively impacted how Indigenous, Black, racialized and equity-deserving communities, including women, people who identify as

2SLGBTQ+, people with disabilities, people that experience homelessness, newcomers and residents with precarious immigration status, and people who live on low incomes are included in, and afforded opportunities for community engagement and civic life in Toronto.

The TPL Centre for Democracy will be particularly focused on TPL's Equity Goal #6: Ensure spaces, collections, and services reach, engage and reflect equity deserving groups and help them express and amplify their voices. The Centre's space design and programming will be informed by engagement with equity deserving groups to ensure it is designed and programmed to be welcoming and inclusive. The programming will aim to promote and strengthen civic engagement for all, especially equity deserving groups.

DECISION HISTORY

At its June 23, 2025 meeting, the TPL Board received the [TPL Centre for Democracy Board Education](#) presentation for information.

At its April 22, 2025 meeting, the TPL Board received the [2025-2029 Strategic Plan Implementation and Measurement Framework and 2020-2024 Strategic Plan Results](#) report and approved the 2025-2029 Strategic Plan Implementation Roadmap which includes the 2025-2028 Objective C1.2.1 Civic Engagement and Democracy Learning Centre to develop and implement a vision and service model for a learning and engagement centre focused on celebrating, practicing and promoting democratic values.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

In 2024, with funding support from the TPL Foundation, TPL engaged MASS LBP to conduct exploratory research to assess the potential for enhancing democratic engagement and education at TPL by developing a centre for democracy-focused programs and services geared for all ages.

Research included a three-step process to explore what a TPL Centre for Democracy might look like:

- An overview scan of existing democracy-related programming within TPL, across the GTA region, and internationally. This scan included interviews with TPL staff overseeing democracy-related programming;
- A workshop with TPL leadership to share the outcomes of the overview scan and discuss the opportunities that a permanent physical space devoted to democracy could provide, and explored what success might look like for TPL's Centre for Democracy; and
- External interviews with stakeholders and potential partners to test their perspectives on the feasibility of a democracy centre at TPL and conversations with international leaders who are running similar centres to learn from their experience.

Consultations strongly endorsed TPL proceeding with the establishment of a TPL Centre for Democracy, with a clear focus on open partnership, complementing rather than duplicating existing initiatives such as those offered in Toronto by academic or think-tank organizations, and aiming to be inclusive and broadly accessible. A key outcome of the consultation work was the confirmation that, while there are a number of democracy-related organizations working in the city of Toronto, there are no free, accessible, public-focused spaces designed for Torontonians.

The exploratory research was followed by a second engagement with MASS LBP to develop an Implementation Plan model that would identify base operating requirements, help surface and address assumptions and to outline the work streams needed to develop the program and service model for a TPL Centre for Democracy.

Preliminary capital project design work was completed with design firm SuperKül, resulting in a draft design proposal for the TPL Centre for Democracy for TPL Foundation fundraising purposes. The intention is the Centre will be located on the 2nd floor of the Toronto Reference Library, co-located with the Bram and Bruma Appel Salon and the TPL Book Sanctuary.

In January 2026, the Senior Manager, TPL Centre for Democracy was hired to develop the Centre and this new service area.

COMMENTS

Since the arrival of the TPL Centre for Democracy's Senior Manager, several key areas have moved forward:

Initial Goal Setting

Extensive work has been done over the past several months to set ambitious but achievable goals for the TPL Centre for Democracy, honing the areas of focus for the space and programming.

The TPL Centre for Democracy will be a welcoming, inclusive space where people come together to build, strengthen and practice the knowledge and skills needed to actively and meaningfully participate in everyday democracy and foster civic health.

The Centre intends to create impact in two distinct but related areas: for the people of Toronto and for the civic ecosystem across Canada.

The Centre will serve as the heart of democratic culture and engagement for the people of Toronto by offering free and accessible programs and events that:

- **Improve wellbeing**, aiming to build social connection and reduce loneliness.
- **Build skills and knowledge** to provide the understanding, confidence, ability and interest to engage in civic life.
- **Cultivate public trust**, in each other and our public institutions.
- **Strengthen information and media literacy** fostering cognitive agency and critical thinking.
- **Offer opportunities to engage** in problem-solving on local issues.

As a global model for how public libraries can strengthen the civic ecosystem, the Centre will:

- **Convene and connect democracy sector organizations**, to enable more collaboration.
- **Be a home for democracy sector organizations** to share their public-facing work.
- **Lead by example for libraries across Canada** and beyond by sharing materials, approaches and insights related to democracy and civic engagement.

To support the development of the Centre and planning for its programs, TPL has crafted an initial theory of change as a guide to connect the outcomes TPL would like to achieve with the streams of programs and services being explored.

Capital project launch

In Q1 2026, the TPL Foundation confirmed a substantial donor commitment towards the establishment of the Centre. With these funds committed, TPL has launched the capital project to design and build the physical space that the TPL Centre for Democracy will occupy on the second floor of the Toronto Reference Library, adjacent to the Bram and Bluma Appel Salon. An open Request for Proposals process will launch by the end of Q2 and allow any qualified architects to bid for the project ensuring an open, fair and transparent process, aligned with TPL procurement policies and democratic values.

To ensure the space is designed to be welcoming, accessible and responsive to the needs of intended audiences and programming partners, TPL will conduct an extensive consultation with the groups TPL aims to serve, especially equity-deserving communities, Indigenous groups, members of the democracy sector and libraries across the country.

TPL is grateful to Councillor Dianne Saxe who has secured Section 37 Community Benefits funds to support the inclusion of a landmark Canadian-made public art piece to promote the TPL Centre for Democracy. This artwork will enhance the visitor experience and demonstrate the library's commitment to promoting Canadian culture. To procure this new custom-made artwork, TPL will work with a qualified public art consultant who will steward the process of commissioning the artist through a juried selection process. Working with guidance from the Public

Art Office within the City of Toronto's Economic Development & Culture Division, TPL will launch an open call for a public art consultant who will work closely with the TPL team and the selected architect to ensure the artwork aligns with the values of the library and is logistically incorporated into the construction project.

Network and Partnership Building

TPL has participated in numerous conversations with potential partners within the democracy sector and with library leaders in North America to build greater awareness of the TPL Centre for Democracy and explore areas for further collaboration. The Senior Manager, TPL Centre for Democracy has been invited to speak at several conferences in Toronto and across the country and will be joining an exclusive Canadian delegation traveling to Bornholm, Denmark to attend [Folkemødet](#), Denmark's annual Democracy Festival. After the recent release of the [Canadian Democracy Coalition](#) report, TPL is currently in conversation with the report's organizing body to explore the role for the TPL Centre for Democracy in supporting the democracy sector.

Service and Programming Audit

A systemwide audit of all existing and planned democracy-related programs and services is underway. The findings will inform the 2027 identity and branding work for the TPL Centre for Democracy and support the development of a "Democracy at TPL" framework. This framework will help staff design programs with clear civic engagement goals, strengthen and expand successful initiatives, address gaps, and better align offerings with TPL's strategic priorities.

Program Planning for 2026-2028

Although the physical TPL Centre for Democracy will not open until 2028, there are many democracy and civic engagement programs and initiatives being launched over the next two years to support TPL's strategic commitments. Examples of some of these programs are described below.

2026 Planned Programming

Democracy Fitness Pilot

As a pilot project TPL will offer Democracy Fitness sessions in six branches across the city. Developed in Denmark, Democracy Fitness is a proven program to strengthen the “democracy muscles” needed to actively participate in civic life.

Training modules are available for ten different “Democracy Muscles” including: *Active Listening, Compromise, Disagreement, Empathy, and Curiosity*. In fun, interactive 30-minute sessions, participants exercise their democracy muscles and remind each other that democracy lives through us. Without courage, empathy, curiosity, and action, democracy cannot flourish.

This year [Democracy Fitness](#) launched a global organization to scale its successful program that has been operating in Europe for almost a decade. TPL has signed on to be the official Canadian partner. TPL staff have also had the opportunity to experience Democracy Fitness sessions through various training and professional development activities that are taking place across divisions.

Know Your Vote T.O. and Celebrate Democracy

Toronto's October 2026 election will energize the city, bringing the function of municipal government and pressing local issues into everyday conversation, and providing a critical opportunity for residents to engage in civic education.

As TPL has done for the municipal elections in 2018 and 2022, it will deliver *Know Your Vote T.O.*, a user-friendly website that helps Toronto voters learn about mayoral and Council candidates and their perspectives on the city's most pressing issues.

Alongside *Know Your Vote T.O.* TPL will offer a suite of programs under the *Celebrate Democracy* banner, a series of companion events developed in partnership with non-partisan democracy sector organizations that foster civic engagement, dialogue and informed participation. Programming plans include:

- **Launch Event on International Day of Democracy:** A public conversation and participatory activation about engaging in everyday democracy.
- **Activations to encourage people to make a vote plan:** A series of events throughout the month of October such as “Dance for Democracy” and “Drag for Democracy”.
- **Demystifying municipal government:** Panel presentations that help Toronto residents understand how their local government works and what it does (and doesn't do).

2027 Expected Programming

Democracy Fitness Expansion

Building on the anticipated success of the Democracy Fitness pilot in 2026, TPL will expand Democracy Fitness to offer more sessions across the city, with a particular focus on engaging adults and teens, exploring its use within Youth Hub service.

Democracy Sector Convenings

TPL will host three convenings over the course of the year to bring together practitioners and funders in the democracy sector to develop a collective theory of change and implementation plan to improve collaboration and ensure better outcomes for the people of Toronto.

Re-Imagined On Civil Society

TPL's popular ideas-based program series On Civil Society takes audiences deeper into the issues affecting our world today and encourages them to take part in conversations where they can expect to challenge their own perspectives and learn from one another through civil discourse. Conversations focus on local, national and international issues and perspectives featuring leading experts and thinkers from all over the world on the most critical topics of our time.

In 2027, TPL will be reimagining the series to explore the essential pillars that make democracy possible — bringing world-class thinkers into the city's most trusted public space to have in-depth dialogue with Torontonians, where diverse generations come together to examine big ideas through the lens of daily life,

challenge their own thinking, and discover what it actually takes to make democracy stronger.

2028 Expected Programming

TPL Centre for Democracy Opening

In 2028 TPL will bring together library customers, community partners and supporters for a participatory and inclusive celebratory event to mark the opening of the TPL Centre for Democracy at the Toronto Reference Library.

In collaboration with core partners, this full-day event will showcase the space, offer a variety of skill-building, connections-based, and learning programs, and introduce all to this new hub for civic engagement in Toronto.

Launch of Civic Solutions

TPL will develop and introduce a new core program in 2028: *Civic Solutions*. Derived from [Ghent Comon](#), the successful program at DeKrook library in the Netherlands, this initiative is aimed at bringing experts, practitioners, and members of the public together to collectively problem-solve on local issues. Focused on partnership building and program design in 2028, TPL will engage Toronto-area academic, tech, design and democracy sector partners to develop this initiative.

Further Expansion of Democracy Fitness Training

In 2028, with deepened internal capacity, TPL will deliver Democracy Fitness in more branches to increase geographic equity across the city. Programming will be delivered in the newly opened TPL Centre for Democracy and in select district and neighbourhood branches, widening focus to newcomers and other groups.

City Hall School

Pending successful receipt of donor funding and informed by successful models in Calgary and Edmonton, TPL will design and develop a City Hall School program for Grades five to eight students. Participants will learn how municipal governance works and hear directly from elected officials and/or senior public servants with specific connection to a relevant civic issue. This program aims to foster civic

engagement and provide students with a deeper understanding of their local government, community, and opportunities to participate in democracy.

Philanthropic Development

Over the past several months, the TPL Foundation has led philanthropic development efforts to secure additional funding for the TPL Centre for Democracy, with active support from TPL. This collaboration has included the joint development of fundraising materials for prospective supporters, coordinated conversations with funders in the democracy and civic engagement sector, and participation in conferences and networking events. Together, these efforts have helped raise the profile of the TPL Centre for Democracy and highlight the breadth of TPL initiatives that contribute to a strong and thriving democratic society.

Next Steps

TPL will work over the coming months to support and/or lead all of the aforementioned initiatives and continue the essential strategic work to support the TPL Centre for Democracy. This includes establishing and managing the International Advisory Committee for the TPL Centre for Democracy, developing governance, programming, partnership, and community engagement strategies, and developing an identity and brand for the Centre.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

Moe Hosseini-Ara
City Librarian

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: TPL Centre for Democracy Update Presentation

TPL Centre for Democracy Update

Toronto Public Library Board

Pam Ryan – Director, Service Development & Innovation

Sarah Yaffe – Senior Manager, TPL Centre for Democracy

May 25, 2026

Purpose of today's update

- Confirm alignment with strategic priorities
- Share progress to date
- Indicate where we are headed

Strategic alignment



The TPL Centre for Democracy aligns directly with item C1.2.1 of the strategic plan which specifically calls for the development of a Centre focused on civic engagement and democracy.

As we plan for the physical Centre we will seed and support programming across the system.



What is the TPL Centre for Democracy?

A welcoming inclusive space where people come together to build, strengthen and practice the knowledge and skills needed to actively and meaningfully participate in everyday democracy, and foster civic health.

The TPL Centre for Democracy will:

- Build **skills and knowledge**
- Foster **connection and trust**
- Offer opportunities for engagement and collaborative **solution-finding**
- **Convene** the democracy sector
- **Showcase** the work of other organizations in a way that is meaningful for the public
- Provide **leadership** for libraries across the country



Who is the Centre for?

Equity as a design principle

- The TPL Centre for Democracy is for everyone, especially those historically excluded from civic life.
- We will advance Equity Goal #6: *Ensure spaces, collections, and services reach, engage and reflect equity deserving groups and help them express and amplify their voices.*
- Include deep and ongoing consultation with these groups for design and development, programming partnerships, and ensure representation on the Advisory Council.



Artist rendering of the proposed TPL Centre for Democracy space at the Toronto Reference Library.

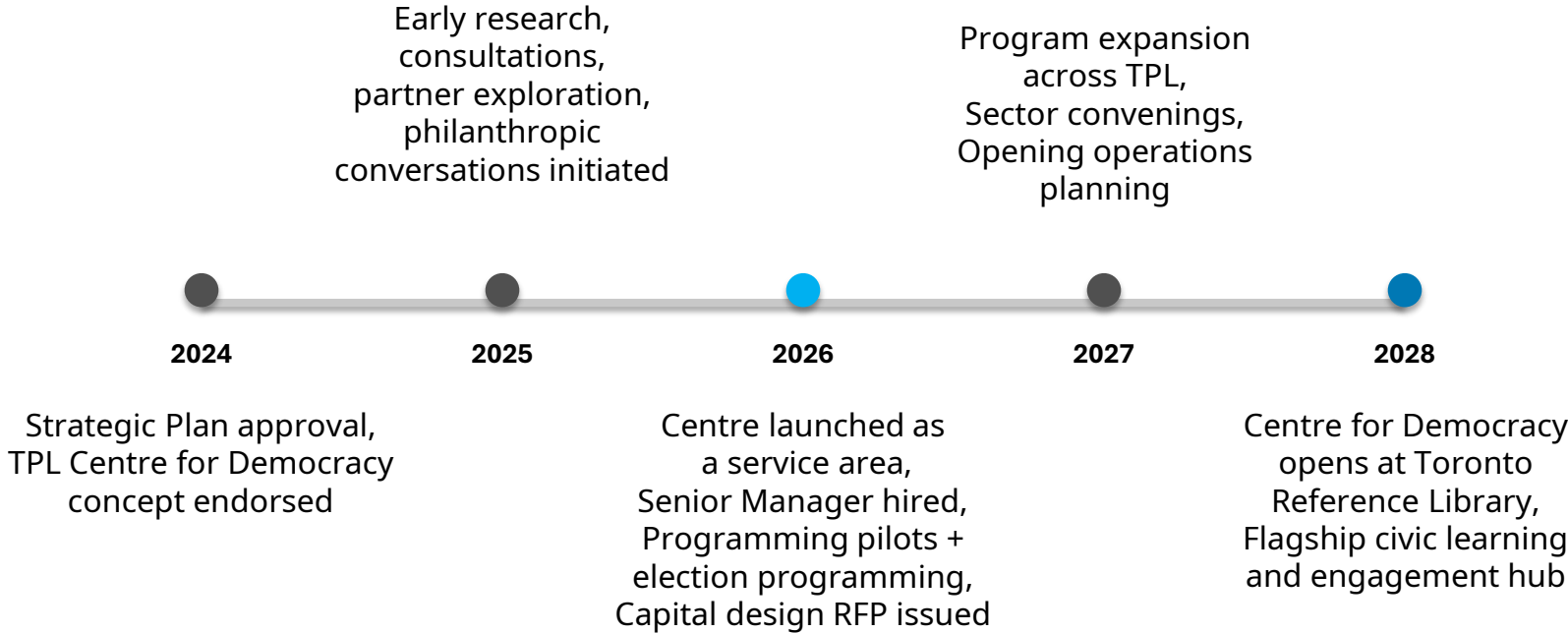
Work to date

From January 2026 to now

- Initial Goal Setting and Emerging Theory of Change
- Capital Project Launch including public art
- Network and Partnership Building
- Programming Audit
- Philanthropic Development
- Program Planning for 2026-2028



High-level timeline



Program planning

Impact begins before doors open

2026:

- **Democracy Fitness** in branches (Pilot)
- **2026 Election as a civic moment:**
 - **Know Your Vote TO** voter-education website
 - **Celebrate Democracy** programs
 - Launch on **International Day of Democracy** (September 15)

2027:

- **Democracy Fitness** in branches (Expansion)
- **Democracy Sector Convenings**
- **On Civil Society** at the Bram and Bluma Appel Salon (Re-Imagined)



Program planning


2028 Launch Year

- **TPL Centre for Democracy Opening**
- **Civic Solutions** (New Program)
- **Democracy Fitness** (Further Expansion)
- **City Hall School** (Proposed)
- **Partner programs**
- +++



Next steps

- Selection and award for **architect** and **public art consultant**
- Community and stakeholder **engagement**
- Develop the **identity and brand** for the TPL Centre for Democracy
- **Strategy-building** for governance, programming, and partnership
- Sustained **philanthropy** and partnership building
- **International Advisory Council**



"Libraries are not solely about books... they are locations of civic infrastructure that we can use as conversational meeting places to reinvigorate our democracies."

Ian Williams, *What I Mean to Say*



Questions?

tpl: