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Introduction

The Community of Prince George

Established as a municipal library in 1955, the Prince George Public Library serves the residents of the Regional District of Fraser-Fort George including those in the city of Prince George, British Columbia. Altogether this represents a service population of approximately 90,000.

Due to its strategic location at the confluence of the Fraser and Nechako Rivers and at the junction of major provincial highways 16 and 97, the city of Prince George has long served as a major artery connecting the natural resources of northern British Columbia with the rest of Canada. To date, both forestry and mineral extraction remain key components of the local economy. Nevertheless, the economy has become increasingly diversified with growth occurring across a number of sectors including retail, health and social assistance, accommodations, and food services. This economic diversification reflects the rising importance of Prince George as a regional hub for residents of north central British Columbia wishing to access products and services that otherwise might not be available due to the remoteness of this region relative to other major urban areas.

Given its relatively low cost of living, especially when compared to real estate prices in the Lower Mainland, Prince George has become an attractive destination for older Millennials, Generation Xers wishing to raise young families, and retiring Baby Boomers wishing to live more comfortably off their limited retirement incomes. Although the region's population is predominantly White, it does include a sizeable number of people who are neither Indigenous nor Caucasian. Approximately eight percent of residents come from visible minority populations

consisting primarily of South Asians, Chinese, Blacks, Filipinos, Latin Americans, Arabs, Southeast Asians, West Asians, Koreans, and Japanese. Roughly another 15% of residents identify as Indigenous. It is important to note the city of Prince George (and therefore also the Prince George Public Library) is itself situated on the unceded territory of the Lheidli T'enneh. Thus, the Prince George Public Library serves a demographically diverse population that covers multiple generations and ethnicities across a broad socio-economic spectrum. This diversity stems from historical and economic forces that continue to shape the social fabric and the labour force of this region.

Overview of Prince George Public Library

The Prince George Public Library has a staff of approximately 65 employees that work across two locations: The Bob Harkins Branch in downtown Prince George and the Nechako Branch in the Hart neighbourhood of northern Prince George. With an annual budget of approximately \$4.3 million, the Prince George Public Library has amassed a physical collection of over 170,000 books and other materials. Each year, patrons borrow approximately 800,000 items and visit both locations a total of 350,000 times. In addition, the Prince George Public Library's website draws around 350,000 visits per year, where patrons gain access to thousands of eBooks, online articles, and other digital resources.

Prince George Public Library's Strategic Plan

Currently, the Prince George Public Library is in the final year of a five-year strategic plan that identifies five priority areas. These are:

- 1) Creating welcoming and physical spaces by making these more accessible and comfortable for our patrons

- 2) Enhancing community well-being and engagement by providing venues for gathering people of various backgrounds to celebrate common interests and discuss issues
- 3) Expanding and safeguarding access to information and ideas by providing patrons with tools and skills to find what they need to achieve the quality of life they desire
- 4) Nurturing an innovative and adaptive organization by developing staff and partnering with outside groups to increase the reach and impact of the Library
- 5) Communicating and celebrating the Library's achievements and impacts to increase awareness, interest, and support for our organization's mission

The Prince George Public Library's activities over the past year spring from those strategic priorities, but they also align closely with the priorities laid out by the Ministry of Education's Libraries Branch in its vision for public library service in British Columbia. Those strategic priorities are:

- 1) Improving access
- 2) Developing skills
- 3) Collaborating on shared goals
- 4) Enhancing governance

Strategic Priority #1 – Improving Access

Improving access focuses on linking people to the knowledge, ideas, and resources they need to be successful. This can include investments in infrastructure to expand affordable access to reliable, high speed internet but it can also refer to any effort to overcome barriers – whether geographic, economic, physical, mental, cultural, or otherwise – that directly inhibit the participation of individuals and households in society and the greater economy.

One way that public libraries increase their reach is by designing services tailored to meet the unique needs of marginalized populations who otherwise might find accessing the library to be highly impractical or even impossible. In 2019, library staff made a concerted effort to develop programs that would target two historically marginalized groups: elderly adults

living in senior homes and families with children on the autism spectrum. What follows is a description of those two initiatives and the public's response to them.

Senior Readings

While the proportion of Prince George's population considered to be senior (approximately 14% in 2018) is comparatively small relative to the rest of Canada and British Columbia, demographic trends indicate that this percentage is steadily increasing. This may be caused by Baby Boomers entering retirement who find it makes more economic sense to remain in Prince George than to relocate elsewhere. Many seniors have disabilities that impair their physical mobility and prevent them from traveling around on their own, and are thus unable to physically visit the library's facilities to gain access to the many resources and services available to them.

To reach this marginalized population, the Library has designed a regularly recurring program series that targets patrons in this demographic. In 2019, Library staff visited a number of local senior living facilities about six times every month to read books to their residents. This initiative produced approximately 72 hours of programming, and reached approximately 10-12 people at each reading. Feedback is universally positive. Common themes include appreciation for the companionship and communal feeling that comes from a group coming together to read and the joy of escaping temporarily in one's mind to other times and places. One care worker mentioned that one of the residents who suffers from Alzheimer's actually remembered and recognized the Library employee who frequently visits and delivers these readings. She remarked that "it was great to see [a senior resident] remember who you were and that you come here frequently to read books to them. They have Alzheimer's so that's not something

you would typically expect to see from them.” It’s a small but important example of how important and appreciated such library programs can be.

Sensory-friendly Services

Another major issue affecting public libraries in North America is an increase in demand for services that respond to the needs of families with children on the Autism spectrum. Since 2004, the Center for Disease Control’s estimate for Autism prevalence has increased by around 10% every year. At this point, we can estimate that approximately one in every 50 children in BC between the ages of 6 and 18 years old is on the Autism spectrum. As community awareness of this issue has increased, so have patron requests for specialized Library services and programs to serve these patrons.

In fact, it was partly through input contributed by a patron that Library staff decided to plan and implement a series of sensory programs and services in 2019. This was the subject of an article published in the BC Library Associations February 2019 issue of YAACING (Young Adults and Children’s Services Section of the British Columbia Library Association). The idea was to design a literacy program for children with sensory sensitivities that as much as possible eliminated or minimized excess stimuli. This included dimming lights, providing patrons with sunglasses, creating calm and quiet environments, and ensuring a generous amount of personal space for each program participant. It also meant providing more obvious structure to a program by highlighting a visual schedule and repeating songs across sessions. Doing this makes such programs more predictable and therefore less stressful to children with sensory sensitivities.

To begin, the Library hosted a sensory workshop in January 2019 where children and their caregivers were guided through the creation of a sensory box that would help them engage their five senses. Approximately 30 people attended that event. After that, the Library launched an inaugural Sensory Storytime program that ran three more times and reached an average of 11 people per session. The program was only discontinued due to staffing changes. We are anticipating relaunching the program again in the second half of 2020 once disruptive building renovation work at the downtown branch is completed.

Public feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Parents and caregivers greatly appreciate having access to such a service. Here are some quotes from program attendees:

- “It is so nice to have a safe space for children with sensory issues.”
- “I have a hard time getting my son to the library as it a hard place to be for him. This helps a lot.”
- “There isn’t much else in this town for our kiddos.”

Strategic Priority #2 – Developing Skills

The Libraries Branch strategy of developing is about inspiring communities to create new products, develop new ideas, and share knowledge. It advances the notion of the public library as a place of learning, particularly in the context of a fast-changing world.

One topic that has recently attracted much public interest is the concept of sustainable living as a means to confront the challenge of human-caused climate change. The US Environmental Protection Agency has estimated that roughly 42% of all greenhouse gas emissions are caused by the production and use of goods, including food, products, and

packaging. The effects of climate change have been acutely felt in the community of Prince George, which has seen in its critical forest and logging industry decimated largely because of the mountain pine beetle epidemic, which attacked more than 53 percent of the merchantable pine in BC during the early 2000s. At least one study suggests that the negative impact in store for the BC economy will be a \$90 billion decline from 2009 to 2054. These predictions have already begun to be realized, with multiple sawmills and lumber processing plants closing, in many cases permanently, throughout this region over the year. For perspective, consider that Prince George's unemployment rate rose from 4.3% in August 2019 to 7.6% in February 2020.

Recognizing that the Library has a role to play in helping the community respond to the challenges of human-caused climate change, staff planned a unique program that identified some ways patrons could support environmentally sustainable living practices. *Refashion without Rules* demonstrated how patrons could reuse old clothes or modify unattractive ones to save money and reuse materials that would be saved from the local landfill. A description of that program as well as its impact on patrons who attended follows below.

Refashion without Rules

In March 2019, Library staff offered the *Refashion without Rules* program. Promotional material described it as an opportunity to “turn old, ill-fitting or just plain ugly clothes into fashion pieces.” Those attending would learn about the tools they would need to get started and get ideas for where they could find clothing supplies to refashion. A Library staff member then provided step-by-step walkthroughs for several projects to concretely demonstrate how easy and affordable it was to do this. The curriculum was designed to be as unintimidating as possible. The advertisement for the program confirmed that “no sewing experience necessary.”

Approximately thirty-five people attended this event, prompting support for the idea of repeating similar programming in the future.

There were a number of enthusiastic and supportive comments from program attendees. One participant remarked, “Who knew it was so easy and inexpensive to recycle old clothes? I can save money and play a small part in helping the environment by not perpetuating wasteful commercial clothing practices.”

Beginner Piano

Another topic that always has popular appeal is exposing young children to new concepts that stimulate their curiosity, intellectual development, and personal growth. Approximately 17% of Prince George’s population is aged 14 years old or younger, compared to 14% for the rest of the province.

Research has long demonstrated that exposure to music theory correlates strongly with growth in various aspects of human development, particularly in youth. Brain scans and electroencephalography (the measurement of electrical activity of the brain) suggest that music may build neural pathways throughout the brain, but especially in the corpus callosum, a band of tissue that connects the left brain to the right. Neurologists who study this phenomenon believe such development produces an array of benefits, including increased problem-solving ability and greater emotional resilience.

Recognizing these benefits and the interests of the community, the Library developed *Beginner Piano*, a unique program series that taught musical concepts to children between the ages of 7 and 9 years old. The goal of this program was to teach musical concepts rather than specific songs. Instead of learning pieces by rote, the students were encouraged to compose

their own songs over a six-week period. To help guide young patrons through this process and minimize any barriers to participation, the Library contracted local music instructors and rented piano equipment. The chosen theme was animals, which prompted interesting and creative approaches to music development. One student chose a lizard and used a slow, repetitive rhythm and melody to suggest the lizard sunning itself on a rock, occasionally interrupted with bright staccato notes when it caught a fly! Another student chose a cougar, and her stealthy creep up the octaves of the keyboard ended with a dramatic pounce pounding on the keys. These pieces showed a thoughtful consideration of how to translate an animal's behaviour into sound using lessons about pitch, dynamics, tempo, and style. Eight families and their ten children benefited from this program series, which culminated in a recital attended by 37 people. Here are some quotes capturing the impact it had on patrons:

- “Really enjoyed! Thank you! Love our library for these opportunities. <3”
- “I saw an improvement of my child’s musical knowledge. Her understanding of the piano keys has grown tremendously as has her self-confidence especially after the recital.”
- “It’s so great to have a free way to determine how interested your child is in music and learning how to play a musical instrument. It saves me from having to invest in an instructor or buy a music instrument unnecessarily.”
- “You should do more of this. Intro to guitar or ukulele would be fantastic too.”

Strategic Priority #3 – Collaborating on Shared Goals

The Libraries Branch strategy of collaborating on shared goals focuses on developing and nurturing relationships with outside organizations to advance common values and interests. It reflects a recognition that in a world of limited resources, it is important for like-minded organizations to work collaboratively to maximize both their individual reach and collective impact on the issues that most concern us.

One area of common interest with local organizations is nurturing an appreciation of the performing arts. It is a well-established fact that the non-profit arts and culture industry is an economic driver in communities because it supports jobs, generates revenues, and attracts tourism. According to the Arts Consulting Group, when patrons attend an arts event, they pay for parking, eat dinner at a restaurant, enjoy dessert after the show, and return home to pay the babysitter. One study found that the typical attendee spends \$31.47 per person, per event, beyond the cost of admission. The reality is that a vibrant arts community not only keeps residents and their discretionary spending close to home, it also attracts visitors who spend money and help local businesses thrive.

Recognizing the importance and value of a thriving local arts scene, the Library took the opportunity to partner with organizations from the surrounding community to support the Cold Snap music festival that takes place annually in Prince George and to increase awareness and interest in theatrical productions offered by Theatre Northwest, the largest arts organization in the northern region of British Columbia. A description of these partnerships and the impact they had on patrons follows below.

Cold Snap

Since 2003, the Prince George Folkfest Society has each year organized a unique nine-day music festival that draws in musicians and visitors from around the world to Prince George. The daily concerts feature performers from a wide range of music genres. These include indie, blues, jazz, Celtic, Canadiana, folk, hip-hop, etc. To minimize barriers to accessing such music, the Library partners with Cold Snap's organizers to provide a free concert at our downtown branch targeting audiences of all ages, including families with young children. Over 100 people attended this event in January 2019, which continues to be one of the highlights of the Library's winter program offerings. Here are some comments that capture how pleased patrons were to be able to experience this type of event:

- "One of the highest quality musical shows I have seen in a very long time."
- "This is amazing!"
- "So great to have this in our city and to make it available for free to everyone."

Reading between the Wines

The Library continued its long-standing collaboration with Theatre Northwest by introducing a completely new library experience in October 2019 that promoted works of art by pairing these with various wines. To increase awareness and interest in Theatre Northwest's production of *Dracula: The Bloody Truth*, Library staff created a curated collection of novels, music, and movies that fit with the theme and mood of that play. And to make the experience of enjoying these works more enticing, Library staff presented each of them with a particular type of wine whose flavours and aromas complemented their stories, moods, and tempos. This fun event provided an excuse for people to gather together, and a great opportunity to boost

interest and awareness in local art while also promoting content available in the Library's collections. More than 20 people attended the program and plans are in place to develop similar events in the future. Here are some typical quotes that capture how well-received the program was by patrons:

- “So much fun. What a creative way to get people to check out Library books and go to the theatre!”
- “I never thought of pairing wines with books. But it actually makes perfect sense.”
- “Please do this again. My friends and I really enjoyed it.”

Strategic Priority #4 – Enhancing Governance

The Libraries Branch strategy of enhancing governance is concerned with continuously updating and improving the way in which public libraries deliver value to taxpayers. This goes beyond conventional usage statistics and tallies of reference interactions. It speaks to efforts by public libraries to share best practices, demonstrate how they are adapting to changing community needs and demands, and helping patrons participate in democratic processes.

To advance this strategic priority in 2019, the Library hosted its Beyond Hope Conference, which primarily serves library professionals who live and work in libraries that are located outside of the Lower Mainland of the province. The Library also partnered with the City of Prince George to host a public engagement session at the downtown Bob Harkins Branch to solicit input on how best to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. More information about these two events appears below along with some feedback from patrons who had an opportunity to participate in them.

Beyond Hope Library Conference

In 2019, Prince George Public Library organized its biennial Beyond Hope conference, which primarily caters to the needs of library staff in northern British Columbia, which for geographic and economic reasons often struggle to access the professional development opportunities typically happening in the Lower Mainland. Taking place from June 3 to 4, Beyond Hope brought in over 130 attendees who were able to access more than 30 conference sessions dealing with topics like The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, managing eBooks and digital collections, the working relationship between library trustees and library directors, and using analytics to influence decision-makers. The conference cost around \$27,000 to organize and host. Much of this money came from conference registration fees, but more than half of the funding came from sponsorships that Prince George Public Library received from the Libraries Branch of the Ministry of Education, the North Central Library Federation, and the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre at the University of British Columbia. A highlight of the event was a keynote presentation by Library Journal's 2019 Librarian of the Year, Skye Patrick, the director of the Los Angeles County Public Library.

Here are some comments submitted by people who were able to attend the conference:

- "One of the best conferences I have attended in the past couple of years!"
- "I met a lot of people I would have otherwise never had the opportunity to meet.

Thank you for such a wonderful learning experience!"

- “It’s wonderful to have such a professional and well-organized conference here in the north. Nobody else is going to make sure we have access to this quality of experience if we do not do this ourselves.”

Climate Action Plan

For reasons already mentioned, the City of Prince of George also recognizes that it has a strategic interest in combating the effects of climate change. To help guide their efforts, the City launched a public engagement campaign to consult with general public about the best ways to do this. The initiative began with an open house session at the Bob Harkins Branch of the Library on June 12, 2019. Residents were asked to assign priorities to thirteen actions City staff had already identified, which aligned with provincial and federal commitments. To contextualize these actions, they were presented as affecting five general areas: buildings, transportation, waste and food, land use, and renewable energy. Nearly 70 people attended this event, providing valuable feedback to local government about the needs and interests of its constituents. Some input provided by Library patrons included:

- Encouraging the use of wood in more buildings since it would support local industry and expertise while using a natural resource that is less energy-intensive than other products like steel
- Improving transportation infrastructure to reduce vehicle use and make it easier for people to walk and bike around the city
- Adding transit routes with improved schedules to increase the use of public transportation options

- Diverting more yard, garden, and kitchen waste from landfills by expanding education about and access to organic composting options and looking into converting such organic waste into a renewable source for natural gas
- Supporting local food production by investing more in the development of local farmers markets
- Encouraging compact community growth around hubs like transit, shops, parks, and other amenities rather than continue traditional development that requires people to drive cars to access many of these types of things
- Planting more trees to protect and expand existing urban forests.



Residents check out information boards during an engagement session at the library for the City's climate action plan. (Photo from Prince George Citizen)

Summary

2019 was a busy and challenging year for the Prince George Public Library. Planning and hosting the Beyond Hope Library Conference takes a tremendous amount of staff time and energy, but provides so many great opportunities for staff learning and collaboration during

both the planning and the attending of the event. While staff were busy making last minute arrangements for the conference, they also learned about the news that two long-serving colleagues would be retiring from the library, including Chief Librarian Janet Marren. Janet retired from library service in June of 2019 after a distinguished career, including 14 years at the Prince George Public Library. The summer of 2019 also saw the beginning of construction work on a new entrance addition to the Bob Harkins Branch of the library. This long awaited project will permit the Library to introduce a number of safety and accessibility benefits for visitors to the branch, and will provide an attractive addition to the other civic facilities whose entrances also open onto downtown Prince George's Canada Games Plaza. The renovation project is scheduled to be completed in the summer of 2020. We look forward with enthusiasm to the opportunities and challenges of 2020, and will continue to look for creative and supportive ways to provide resources, programs, and services to our community.