

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION | 2 |
| The City of Prince George | 2 |
| Overview of the Prince George Public Library | 2 |
| Prince George Public Library's Strategic Plan | 3 |
| PROVINCIAL PRIORITIES | 3 |
| Strategic Priority #1 - IMPROVING ACCESS FOR BRITISH COLUMBIANS..... | 3 |
| Eliminating Overdue Fees | 4 |
| Accessibility and Serving Patrons Where They Are | 4 |
| Safe Internet Use | 4 |
| Building Social Connection in Long Term Care Homes | 6 |
| Serving Patrons Who Use Substances..... | 7 |
| Strategic Priority #2 – BUILDING CAPACITY | 7 |
| Learning About Homelessness | 8 |
| Technology Training | 8 |
| Engaging Community | 11 |
| Priority #3 – ADVANCING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT | 11 |
| Transit Future Action Plan | 11 |
| Increasing Access to Digital Resources | 12 |
| Priority #4 – ENHANCING GOVERNANCE | 13 |
| Trustee Development | 13 |
| COVID-19 AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES..... | 13 |

INTRODUCTION

The City of Prince George

Established as a municipal library in 1955, the Prince George Public Library (PGPL) serves the residents of the Regional District of Fraser-Fort George and the City of Prince George, British Columbia. Altogether, this represents a service population of approximately 90,000. Located in central BC, the city of Prince George has a population of 74,003 and is the largest city in a region of nearly 320,000. The community is located at the junction of major provincial Highways 16 & 97 and also at the confluence of the Fraser and Nechako Rivers. The Prince George economy is well-diversified across all sectors. 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. Over recent decades, Prince George has developed from a mainly forest-based economy to a city that has a strong natural resource base, but also supplies goods and services for a broad range of sector activities throughout Northern BC, within Canada and internationally. The region's largest employment sectors are: healthcare and social assistance, wholesale and retail trade, and manufacturing. The community is served by two post-secondary facilities with a combined 11,000 students: the College of New Caledonia (CNC) and the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). The Regional District of Fraser-Fort George and Prince George have a relatively young population in comparison to BC as a whole, with 38.6% of the population aged 24 or younger in the Regional District and 35.9% in Prince George.

The Prince George Public Library conducts its work on the unceded ancestral lands of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation. The Lheidli T'enneh First Nation has occupied this area for over 9,000 years according to lithic evidence. Over 15% of the population of Prince George identifies as Indigenous; this is significantly higher than the provincial average of 6%. The largest visible minority population in the community are that of the South Asian, making up 40% of the total visible minority population. The second largest group are the Filipino, making up 1,035 people, followed by the Chinese who constitute 15% of the visible minority population.

Overview of the Prince George Public Library

The Prince George Public Library has a staff of 65 employees who work across two locations: Bob Harkins Branch in downtown Prince George and 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 its strategic planning process for 2021-2026. In the interim, the library continues to focus on five priority areas from the 2015-2020 Strategic Plan.

These are:

- Creating welcoming and physical spaces by making these more accessible and comfortable for our patrons.
- Enhancing community well-being and engagement by providing venues for gathering people of various backgrounds to celebrate common interests and discuss issues.
- 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.
- Nurturing an innovative and adaptive organization by developing staff and partnering with outside groups to increase the reach and impact of the Library.
- 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 for British Columbians
- 2) Building Capacity
- 3) Enhancing Citizen Engagement
- 4) Enhancing Governance

PROVINCIAL PRIORITIES

Strategic Priority #1 - IMPROVING ACCESS FOR BRITISH COLUMBIANS

Improving access for British Columbians includes supporting a connected library network that leverages its strengths and structure to deliver user-centred programs and services through the

province. Connecting with community members where there are at was particularly important in the pandemic conditions imposed by COVID-19.

Eliminating Overdue Fees

Because of the impact of COVID-19 and associated health and safety measures implemented in the spring of 2020, the Prince George Public Library was able to move forward several months early on a scheduled plan to permanently eliminate fees charged on overdue materials. This move was championed by the Library Board and key staff advocates for several years. These fees represent a barrier to accessing library services for many in our community, particularly during times of financial hardship. Eliminating these fees represents a significant service enhancement for our community members in 2021 and in future years. Existing overdue charges will also be eliminated from library accounts, and we expect that this will enable thousands of patrons to be able to access borrowing services once again.

Accessibility and Serving Patrons Where They Are

After considering various approaches to service delivery taken by public libraries across Canada and the US, a committee representing a cross-section of staff agreed that merging circulation and information services was the best way to serve our patrons. This new service integration was introduced in 2020. Patrons can now access borrowing, account, and information services at any service point. Patrons expect to receive assistance at their point of need from any available front-line staff. Rather than perpetuating a service model that requires patrons to conform to how the library has always done things, the committee recommended adapting to patrons instead. The vision is to meet patrons where they are and satisfy all their needs in that initial interaction. Cross-training began in the fall of 2020, and continues into 2021.

“I just want to say that I am really excited about this change! I think it affords us the opportunity to fundamentally improve the experience our patrons have when they visit us. Thank-you to Leadership for bringing this about, and thank-you in advance to Sheila! I’m looking forward to learning with you all!” (Leslie, Library Assistant)

Safe Internet Use

In 2020, children and teens spent more time than ever before connecting virtually. According to the Vanier Institute of the Family, approximately 64% of the parents who responded to a Statistics Canada crowdsourcing survey in Spring 2020 were worried about their children’s amount of screen time use. According to UNICEF, however, the most robust studies suggest that moderate use of

digital technology tends to be positive for children and youths' mental well-being, while no use or too much use can have a small negative impact. Internet and digital technology, while providing a positive source of help and a sense of inclusion, can also open up possibilities of cyber-bullying, impact mental health, and exacerbate sleeping problems. In addition, BC's Integrated Child Exploitation (ICE) team saw a 45% increase in reports of exploitation, including child luring, grooming, and child pornography between March and May 2020 over the same months the previous year. They attribute this to the impact of the pandemic.

To provide local youth with the tools and knowledge to make good choices, PGPL's Youth Services team planned two programs. *Smart Choices Online* focused on teaching 5-19-year olds how to be good digital citizens and protect themselves online. Topics included privacy, online etiquette, internet safety and using the internet effectively.

"Virtual interactions and experiences have become more important than ever to people of all ages in the era of COVID-19, but it is important to have the skills to ensure these interactions happen safely and kindly for everyone." (Larissa Clotildes, Library Assistant – Youth Services)

In the second program, *Screens, Fatigue and Breaking Free*, Teen Librarian Christopher Knapp offered strategies for coping with internet fatigue. Focusing on the importance & benefits of positive mental health for youth, the session explored fun and engaging meditative activities and movement techniques. Twenty-one youth participated in the two programs. Participants gained new understandings about the risks of virtual interactions, and how to take precautions to keep themselves and others safe online. After the session, youth were given additional resources to further their learning, including the web-based game *Interland*, an initiative by Google that helps kids be safe, confident explorers of the online world.

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On Our Radar: Prince George Public Library to host free online program on internet safety

Class will teach kids how to be good digital citizens

Nov 9, 2020 4:15 PM By: [Hanna Petersen](#)









A teen girl working at her computer. (via Getty Images)

TRENDING TODAY

1592 VIDEO: Lynx lectured by the scruff after killing several northern B.C. man's chickens

1326 Prince George's Brett Connolly placed on waivers by Florida Panthers

945 Opinion: Prince George case shows massage therapists need more public oversight

533 'A questionable basis': B.C. airsoft and paintball players speak out against proposed gun law changes

Building Social Connection in Long Term Care Homes

The Prince George Public Library has strong partnerships in Long Term Care (LTC) homes throughout the city of Prince George. In 2020, the library transitioned from offering in-person to virtual book readings through a program called *Senior Reading*. PGPL's Outreach staff offered this program twice a month at two centres: Gateway Assisted Living and Laurier Manor. Both facilities are long-term living facilities with supports. Residents are supported to maintain their independence through hospitality services, therapeutic recreation programs and personal care plans. With restrictions on visits during the COVID-19 pandemic, library staff were still able to connect with seniors through Skype. During one-hour sessions, library staff would read heartwarming short stories, share personal stories related to the text, and encourage LTC residents to do the same. Studies suggest that regularly reading aloud to people with Dementia can have positive impacts on attention and memory. With many restrictions on visitors at LTC homes throughout the province, the opportunity to connect and share stories was an important way to maintain social connection in 2020.

Serving Patrons Who Use Substances

According to the CBC, overdose deaths in Prince George were 50 times higher in 2020 than they were a decade ago. Tragically, 58 people died from illicit substance overdoses in Prince George last year, according to numbers issued by the BC Coroners Service. The count is more than double the 25 deaths recorded in 2019 and eclipses the previous record of 51 seen in 2018.

To further the library's aims in understanding how to support people who use substances, library staff began developing relationships with a local organization called The POUNDS Project (Preventing Overdose, Undoing Stigma). The POUNDS Project is a non-profit organization that uses a trauma-informed lens to examine and creatively problem-solve community-identified issues that impact people who use substances. This work is done in line with principles of harm reduction, decolonization, and collective community care. By empowering people who use substances, The POUNDS Project creates opportunities to lead with change and to manifest positive community relationships.

In 2020, the library and the POUNDS Project signed a memorandum of understanding to increase access to information services in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic to marginalized and vulnerable populations. This was accomplished through the coordinated setup and distribution of smartphones with top-up usage plans to individuals lacking access to such technology and services. Providing smartphones to people who use substances and lack access to such technology and services will make it easier for them to access information and internet-based services, which could prevent avoidable deaths. All phones distributed included the *Lifeguard* app, a new made-in-BC resource championed by the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA), in partnership with regional health authorities. The app is activated by the user before they take their dose. After 50 seconds the app will sound an alarm. If the user doesn't hit a button to stop the alarm, indicating they are fine, the alarm grows louder. After 75 seconds a text-to-voice call will go straight to 9-1-1, alerting emergency medical dispatchers of a potential overdose. Staff are also able to share information on the POUNDS Project and its harm reduction services with library patrons.

Strategic Priority #2 – BUILDING CAPACITY

Building capacity means reducing barriers for library staff and board members to the educational and training they need so that they can continue to provide quality and future-focused library services.

Learning About Homelessness

The 2018 Report on Homeless Counts in BC provides important baseline information on the estimated number, key demographic, and service provision needs of people experiencing homelessness in communities across BC. At the last point-in-time count, there were 160 people experiencing homelessness in Prince George. Of these individuals, 64% were chronically homeless (homeless for 6 months or more of the past year), and 79% identified as being of Indigenous descent. In order to better address the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, the library partnered with the North Central Library Federation. Through this partnership, twenty staff were able to participate in Ryan Dowd's Librarians Guide to Homelessness Core Training through Niche Academy. The training included a series of self-paced modules that covered a range of topics to help library staff practice an empathy-driven approach when interacting with all patrons, but especially with those experiencing homelessness. Staff learned about empathy-driven enforcement, which uses scientifically based principles to secure voluntary compliance with the library Code of Conduct. Practical lessons provided tools for how to deal with specific situations, including those involving individuals with mental illnesses or substance use disorders. This training reiterated many principles staff had already learned in past capacity building initiatives, including the Fiore Group's sessions on Violence Prevention in the Workplace and Respectful Workplaces.

Technology Training

The Prince George Public Library ceased offering in-person programs in mid-March 2020. Within a week of the library's closure due to COVID-19, staff had shifted their offerings online, introducing virtual programs for children and teens, including *Baby Time*, *Storytime*, *Double Digits*, and *Tens to Teens Gaming Hour*. By mid-May, the library was offering an average of 10 virtual programs each week.

Because of the funding support provided by the provincial Digital Initiatives grant in 2020, PGPL was fortunate in being able to purchase the audio-visual equipment needed to create streaming programs that improve accessibility and expand the library's reach beyond the limitations of its physical facilities. The library staff developed a plan to create pre-assembled audio-visual kits for program staff and permanently integrate virtual program options into program development plans.

This was an entirely new format for staff who had never before offered digital or virtual programs. To address the need for technology training to support virtual program development, Laura, a Library Assistant on the Community Engagement team developed five classes for staff. These classes covered both theoretical and practical skills for video production, including:

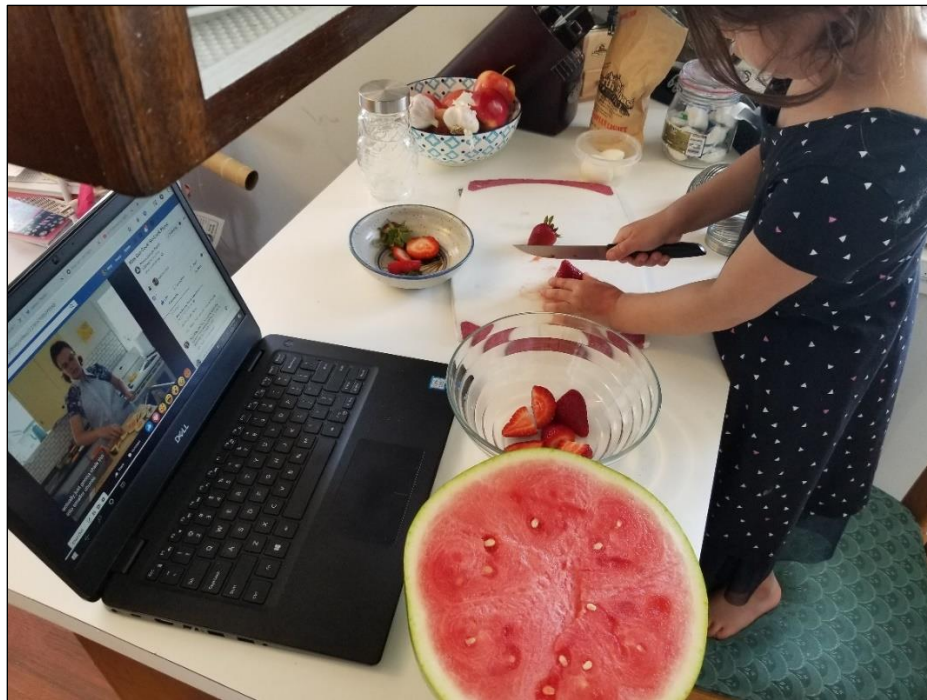
- Film Grammar Basics
- Lighting Basics
- Sound Basics
- Editing Basics
- Wrap Up Overview (A Learn by Doing Class)

The courses helped staff to gain understanding of how to use new technology tools acquired by the library. In turn, staff developed more confidence in offering pre-recorded and live video programs and the quality of those programs improved markedly in the following months. By December, the library had revitalized its YouTube channel with 60 new videos featuring library staff and community partners including the City of Prince George, Northern Bear Awareness Society, and students from UNBC. The library's Facebook page experienced a 350% increase in video views that same month, and overall increase in engagement of 87%.

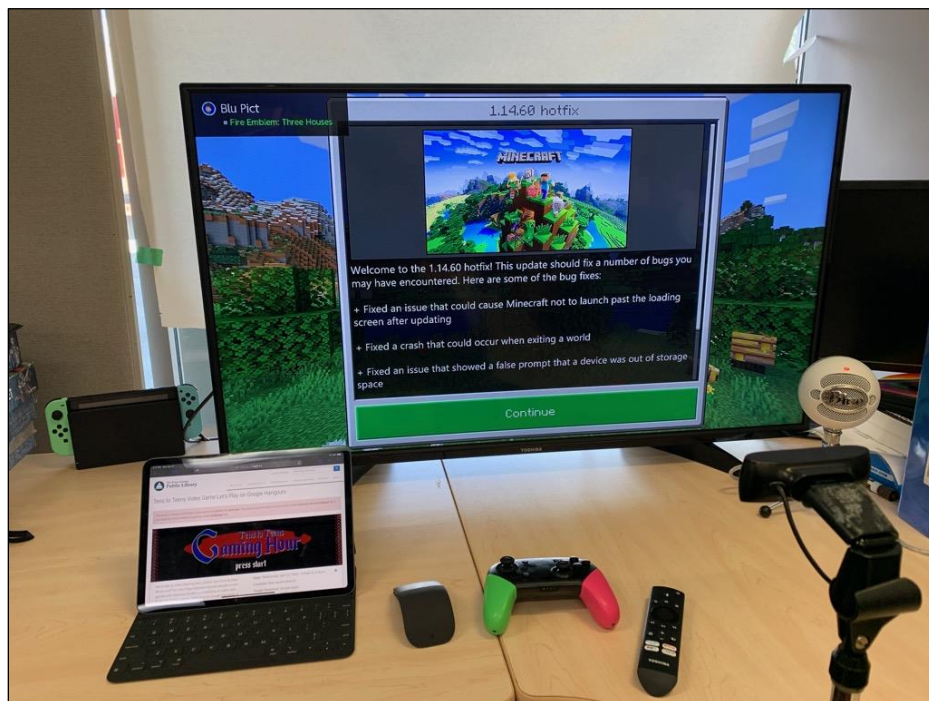
In addition to new technology tools such a microphone, Lume cube, and new camera kit, library staff also gained familiarity with a number of online platforms including Google Hangouts, Zoom, YouTube Live, Facebook Live, Discord, Steam, and Roll20.



Caption: Behind the scenes of one of the Prince George Public Library's first ever Facebook Live *Storytimes* in March 2020. Photo by Amy Dhanjal.



Caption: A child learns how to make fruit salad during the virtual Kids Can Cook program.



Caption: Tens to Teens Gaming Hour has been a staple program for the Prince George Public Library. It was one of the simpler programs to transition to online.

Engaging Community

In the fall, PGPL's Manager of Communications and Engagement enrolled in the Tamarack Institute's Foundations of Community Engagement – an online course designed to build a foundation of knowledge and practice for community engagement work. Through video lessons, case studies, readings, and activities, the course explores the role of community, who should be engaged, community engagement techniques, how to overcome challenges, and how to evaluate engagement activities. This education helped to influence the philosophy and workplan of the newly formed Community Engagement team, and also influenced the 2021-2026 strategic planning process.

Priority #3 – ADVANCING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Advancing citizen engagement supports increasing opportunities for people to access the information and resources they need to thrive as engaged individuals, workers and lifelong learners.

Transit Future Action Plan

In early March, prior to the library being closed due to the pandemic, PGPL hosted BC Transit and the City of Prince George for a public consultation and information session on the future of transit in Prince George. The partner organizations were seeking the public's feedback on how to improve transit across the Prince George Transit System. The purpose of the session was to seek input from the public to identify transit priorities to help develop a Transit Future Action Plan to support transit decision-making, service, and infrastructure improvements. In addition to the open house, the library also helped to promote a digital survey for those who could not visit the library branch to provide their input in person.



Caption: Citizens engage with City of Prince George and BC Transit staff to learn about the city's transit plan, and to help prioritize service and infrastructure improvements.

The City of Prince George's Select Committee on Poverty Reduction advises Mayor, Council, and City staff on the priorities, policies, and strategies affecting poverty reduction in Prince George. The Committee identified access to affordable, accessible, and safe transit as one of 20 preliminary recommendations on how to reduce poverty at the local level in Prince George. Hosting the information session at the library ensured that a cross-section of citizens of all experiences and all socio-economic demographics had access to and input into the Transit Future Action Plan.

"Thanks for having us in your wonderful space! I've attached a couple photos of the engagement that I just snapped on my phone. Regarding numbers, I'm going to say we spoke with between 20 and 30 people over the two days just in the library. The conversations we had with library patrons covered a wide range of transit suggestions and concerns, and were particularly fulsome and in-depth."

(Michael, Transit Planner)

Increasing Access to Digital Resources

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020, PGPL, like other public libraries, closed its doors to the public and ceased lending of physical collections. There was immediate concern that we must continue to deliver books, music, film, and other resources into the hands of our community members. This became even more crucial given that many of us were confined to our places of residence and encouraged not to venture out. We quickly shifted our focus to ensuring that we were

providing access to as many remotely accessible digital resources as we could. The one-time funding support provided by the BC government's Digital Initiatives grant allowed us to purchase expanded access to digital collections that would not have been possible for PGPL to acquire without this funding. We were able to increase our monthly spending limit on our hoopla digital collection, immediately permitting our library patrons to access hundreds of thousands of popular digital resources in a variety of different formats. This significantly enhanced access for British Columbians during a challenging period of crisis when the library facility was closed and our community members were unable to access our physical resources or venture outside their homes. By the end of 2020, borrowing of digital resources via our hoopla digital platform had increased by 64% over 2019.

Priority #4 – ENHANCING GOVERNANCE

Enhancing governance refers to leading at the provincial level and supporting governance education.

Trustee Development

The Prince George Public Library's Board Chair, Mike Gagel, serves as the Chair of the BC Library Trustees Association, and has served on the BCLTA since 2016. The Prince George Public Library relies on the governance and other trustee development sessions offered by BCLTA to help develop trustees' knowledge and appreciation of their appropriate roles and responsibilities as board members. In addition, the education sessions presented to board members by PGPL staff also demonstrate the library's commitment to orienting new trustees to the values, activities, and impact of the public library in our community.

COVID-19 AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries have faced unprecedented challenges and service disruptions. In response, they have developed new ways to continue delivering services and supporting the people in their communities and member libraries.



Caption: A staff member wears a mask and stands behind plexiglass at the library's Nechako Branch. These are two safety measures implemented to protect staff and patrons during the pandemic. These measures have a negative impact on our ability to communicate with patrons.

The pandemic has impacted all aspects of library operations at PGPL, including (but not limited to): staff morale, patron morale, borrowing numbers, the ability of the library to operate at full capacity, the ability of staff to communicate with patrons, Home Service, staffing levels, strategic planning, the library's ability to serve as a community hub, exam invigilation, technology troubleshooting programs, fundraising opportunities, internet access for citizens, ability to offer a safe space out of the cold for vulnerable citizens, community engagement, relationship building with outside organizations, and professional development. The pandemic stalled several projects planned for 2020, including the introduction of Community Integration Specialists to assist patrons with accessing government services, a renovation to the Teen Space at the library's Bob Harkins Branch, and a partnership with the Immigrant Services Society of BC that would have provided regular access to employment programs for newcomers to Canada.

The Library Director, in consultation with the Library Board, made the decision to close both branches to the public on March 16th 2020, following the Provincial Health Officer's order prohibiting the gathering of people in excess of 50 people. The library closed on the same day as other civic facilities in Prince George. The Prince George Public Library reopened its branches for limited use in

late July 2020, after being closed to the public for nearly five months. In its initial reopening stage patrons noticed some major changes to the facilities. Seating was removed and patrons were encouraged to keep their visits brief. Strict health and safety protocols were in place. Access to children's computers all meeting spaces was and continues to be unavailable into 2021. The number of computer stations were reduced to facilitate physical distancing and capacity limits.

Throughout the pandemic, the library has taken a careful, phased approach to increasing library services, beginning with offering virtual programs and reference services in March, followed by Curbside Holds Pickup service that launched on May 25th.

Phase 1 (April): Open return drops to permit borrowed materials to be returned to the library.

Phase 2 (May): Resume lending of physical library materials via curbside pickup.

Phase 3 (July): Permit limited access to branches, including browsing of collections. Pickup service will move inside the branches. Limited computer and internet access.

Phase 4 (January 2021): Entire collection opens for browsing.

Phase 5 (unknown): Resume in-person programs.

Phase 6 (unknown): Resume full access to library facilities, with physical distancing and other measures remaining in effect.

Throughout this challenging year, PGPL staff responded quickly and enthusiastically to adapt existing practices and create new ways of delivering valuable services and support to the residents of this community. PGPL's flexibility and creativity underline the valuable role that public libraries perform in building community resiliency during times of crisis and hardship. The expertise in public health and safety measures provided by the provincial Ministry of Health, and the funding support provided by the provincial Public Libraries Branch have been key factors in the success of PGPL's efforts during the pandemic response of 2020.



Prince George Public Library


2020 Digital Initiatives/Technology Grant

Interim Report

The Prince George Public Library (PGPL) is grateful for the additional funding support provided by the provincial government to enhance digital/technology initiatives in 2020. PGPL was able to devote this funding to three key areas that improve access to programs and collections for community members, and help the library to increase staff capacity to offer services and technology support beyond the walls of our physical facilities.

PGPL is focused on developing program offerings that are more inclusive and welcoming to community members who may be unable to or uncomfortable attending in-person programs at a library branch. The suspension of in person programs at the beginning of the pandemic and the additional funding provided by this grant presented a unique opportunity to integrate virtual programs into our ongoing program development planning. Securing the needed equipment and staff training enables PGPL to continue offering accessible virtual program offerings even after in-person programs resume.

Like other public libraries in BC, when the pandemic arrived in March of 2020 PGPL immediately began to look for ways to improve access to digital resources, so that our community members would be able to access books, music, movies, and other content while borrowing of physical items was not possible. The additional funding provided by the province enabled us to devote more resources to our hoopla digital collection. Since hoopla’s access model permits multiple simultaneous use of their content, we were able to significantly increase the number of titles available to community members without requiring long wait times for popular resources. This was crucial to providing much needed and timely support during a difficult crisis period for British Columbians.



2020 LIBRARY TECHNOLOGY GRANT REPORTING FORM: PRINCE GEORGE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Total Technology Grant Amount: \$26,501

| Area of Need | Outcome | Metrics | Strategic Links | Actions | Collaborative Links | Timeframe | Project Budget | In-Kind/Leveraged funds |
|--|--|---|--|---|---------------------|---|----------------|--|
| Digital programming audio/visual hardware for streaming | Pre-assembled a/v kits provide the necessary equipment for staff to create high quality streaming programs that improve accessibility and expand the library’s reach beyond the limitations of physical facilities | Add ongoing digital programs to reach at least 10% of total program offerings | Increasing the reach of library programs and improving accessibility for those with mobility limitations supports the provincial strategic priority to improve access for British Columbians | Purchase microphones, cameras, lighting kits, tripods, and assemble into kits; provide training and support for staff; develop procedures and quality standards | | July/August 2020: research and obtain price quotes, purchase equipment September/October 2020: train staff and deploy equipment to support virtual programming | \$7,000 | Outstanding balance for additional equipment covered by PGPL |
| Staff hardware upgrades laptops to support staff working from home | Increasing the number of laptop computers available for staff use provides flexibility and mobility for staff to conduct their work outside of the library office environment. | Increase availability of hardware for staff working from home by 30% | Supporting staff to continue to perform library work from a home environment helps to build our capacity to provide library services even when the library facility is closed to the public | Purchase and configure laptops | | September 2020: research and obtain price quotes, purchase equipment | \$10,000 | |
| Electronic collections (licensing) increase borrowing options on hoopla digital resources | Increasing monthly spending limits on hoopla’s pay-per-use collection permits library patrons to access a large database of digital resources to alleviate the loss of access to physical resources during the COVID-19 pandemic when physical borrowing was suspended | Increase hoopla borrowing by 15% over 2019 usage | At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to immediately redirect library patrons to a huge collection of popular digital resources in a variety of different formats. This significantly enhanced access for British Columbians during a challenging period of crisis when the library facility was closed and the public was discouraged from venturing outside the home unnecessarily | Configure hoopla digital database to remove restrictions on maximum price per title and increase the monthly spending limit between April and December 2020 | | March 2020: configure hoopla admin database Ongoing: promote the use of hoopla digital to library patrons | \$9,501 | Outstanding balance for additional usage absorbed by PGPL |