

Provincial Public Library Grant Report – 2020

New Westminster Public Library

Introduction

New Westminster Public Library is a 2-branch Municipal Library. The main branch is in the busy Uptown commercial district, and the smaller Queensborough Branch is located in the Queensborough Community Centre, within close proximity to an elementary and a middle school. The library also has book return kiosks at City Hall, and at a busy Community Centre. The library has an average of 55 permanent and auxiliary staff, and unionized staff are members of CUPE 387.

New Westminster is a community of approximately 71,000 residents, and is located in the heart of Metro Vancouver. A hub for commercial traffic, with easy access to major bridges and highways, New Westminster is a rapidly growing community. Multi-unit developments in the downtown area, and sustained development in the Queensborough neighbourhood have increased density, and added to the diversity of our already multi-cultural community. New Westminster has a thriving arts community, excellent shopping and entertainment, well-regarded public and private schools, and large campuses of Douglas College and the Justice Institute of British Columbia. New Westminster is also home to Royal Columbian Hospital, one of the province's most important critical care centers, and the City's largest employer. Royal Columbian is also in the midst of significant expansion that will see significant growth of services, research and teaching facilities built over the next decade.

In 2018/2019 the Library's Main Branch underwent a significant renovation. While the work was 95% complete at the end of 2019, there were still some elements of the renovation that were underway early in 2020, including the signage project and the installation of some of the self-check technology. It should also be noted that after such a significant change, including periods of closure and significant disruptions throughout the project, in early 2020 the Board and staff were still recovering from the renovation, and library operations were still moving back to normal.

The Library Board's most recent Strategic Plan ended in December of 2018. At that time, however, the Main Branch was undergoing a major renovation, and a decision was made to delay the start of a new planning process until after the renovations were complete and library operations were normalized. These renovations were the largest project in that Strategic Plan, however, and from a practical sense extended the timeline of the plan. A new Strategic Planning process was underway at the beginning of 2020, and two full Board Planning Days were scheduled in April 2020. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 situation, the Board was forced to postpone this process until it was safe and practical to proceed. In November of 2020 the Board decided to move forward with this process, and plans were made to start work on the new plan early in 2021.

The existing plan Strategic Plan was still relevant in 2020, however, and many of the goals were still being moved forward in the beginning of 2020. The 4 Strategic Goals were:

1. Create inviting and safe spaces where everyone is welcome
2. Foster a culture of Community Engagement
3. Support New Westminster residents as they engage with the digital world
4. Enrich lives by providing a diverse range of programs that inspire, surprise and delight.

Supporting Provincial Priorities

1. Improving Access for British Columbians

During 2020 the COVID Pandemic and related closures caused the library to direct new and existing funding into significantly increasing the number of digital resources available to our users. As the library was not open for some time and borrowing was not available, most of this additional funding was used to increase the number of eBooks and eAudio books available to borrow. We increased the variety of titles, and the number of copies of popular titles.

In order to ensure that all residents could borrow these titles, not just people with existing memberships, we created a new online process that allowed residents to get cards virtually so they could access our many digital resources when the library was closed, or if they did not feel safe coming to a public space. During the March – December 2020 period staff processed 1500 eCard applications. It should be noted that that eCard application rates remained robust until year end, as residents did their best to remain at home, keeping their family and our community safe.

We also know that during this same time period use of our other digital services and products increased significantly. While 2020 was a very challenging year for New Westminster residents, we are glad that it gave us a chance to highlight all of our electronic resources, and that these resources helped our community as they navigated the pandemic.

2. Building Capacity

One of the most significant areas of capacity improvement we experienced in 2020 was related to our need to move many services, staff and meetings into a virtual environment. The pandemic and facility closures forced us to reimagine how we do business, and gave us an opportunity to try new things and move the rate of change forward more quickly.

As mentioned before, one of our first actions was to create a process for a library card with a completely online application and approval process to allow residents to access our wide range of eResources. We made this decision and created a process very quickly, and it was a highly successful initiative that will remain in our service suite after the pandemic.

Working with our colleagues at the City of New Westminster IT Department, we were able to get staff set up to work at home much faster than expected. Depending on what technology staff already had at home, they were provided with laptops, actual PCs, or Security Tokens that allowed them to access the secure RDS environment. This was time consuming and expensive, but allowed us to keep staff safe and working on important projects and services. We also learned that in some cases, library work can easily be done from home, and while the majority of our public-facing work requires staff to be in the buildings, creating WFH options for staff will make us a better, more flexible employer, and will serve us well in times of normal service and times of emergency.

The need to stay at home caused many people in our community to discover the joys of eBooks, eAudio, and other eResources provided by the library. While these collections were always reasonably popular, during 2020 this popularity skyrocketed. Thanks to the Technology Grant we were able to significantly increase the size of our collection, and meet the reading and information needs of so many more people. We continue to see these collections used heavily into 2021, and expect the pandemic has permanently made these materials more important to our users. Over the next year we will have to review our spending practices to ensure both our physical and electronic collections are vibrant and meet community needs.

One of the elements of our recent renovation was the redesign of our service desks and the installation of self-check out technology. This technology had a rocky integration, and some library customers felt it was anti-staff and anti-service. During the pandemic, however, having this technology allowed us to reopen much faster, and allowed library users to check out materials in a safe and secure manner. Both staff and customers came to realize that this technology actually provides many enhancements, and that it frees up staff time to provide a wider range personal service to users. While some users will always need check-out assistance, we feel this technology is now fully embraced, and that we will continue to add customer service improvements to the range of services provided at the stations.

An important service provided by our library is our free and unlimited Wi-Fi access. This network has helped to create an environment that welcomes the community to use the library as their third space, studying, exploring, creating and relaxing online. When the facility was shut however, and all the local restaurants and coffee shops that also provide Wi-Fi access were closed, the lack of available access became critical in the community. We were able to use the funds from the Technology Grant to expand our Wi-Fi coverage to include all of our outside spaces. During the April – October period, especially when the weather was good, our plaza was always busy with residents logging on to their devices and staying to work. This new service not only provides excellent service to the community, but allows us and our programming partners to envision new and creative ways of programming in the great outdoors.

3. Enhancing Governance

The New Westminster Public Library Board did not stumble for a second during this very difficult year. In fact, it is fair to say that like so many Boards, library organizations and library staff, they pivoted quickly, and provided leadership in creative and strategic new ways. Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges was moving all meetings to the Zoom platform. This meant the loss of collegiality and friendship Trustees were used to experiencing at Board meetings, and dealing with the technical issues this platform can have. It was also more challenging to provide leadership and guidance to the management team when they couldn't do it in person. All Trustees rose to the challenge, however, and provided support, encouragement and community feedback to staff throughout the year.

Trustees also kept their eye on their own work during the pandemic, and by the fall, even though COVID restrictions were still fully in place, the Board had its eye on recovery, Board development, and the need to move back to their Strategic Planning process. Even though each Trustee was dealing with their own COVID-related personal and work issues, their commitment to the library and the community expanded as the need increased.

The pandemic experience also taught library staff and the Board that virtual meetings can enhance and improve the experience and opportunity for some Trustees. One of our new Trustees in 2020 has small children, for example, and attending meetings virtually meant that she did not have to deal with as many child-care issues, and was probably able to attend more meetings than if they were in-person. Overall the attendance and on-time rate for Board meetings was improved in 2020 over prior years. This experience also informed some of the Strategic Planning discussions in early 2021 regarding creating a more barrier-free and inclusive Board.

Covid 10 and Public Libraries

It is impossible to overstate the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on every element of governance, staffing operations and services of the New Westminster Public Library throughout the year. Starting early in 2020 when news of the Corona Virus was circulating, the library started working with other departments in the City of New Westminster to review the situation, address emerging safety concerns, and review possible paths of action should the situation worsen.

In Mid-March 2020 the New Westminster City Council was one of the first Councils in the Province to open their EOC and make the decision to close all civic facilities. This was done out of an abundance of caution, but the actions were quickly followed by other municipalities.

Both Library facilities were closed within 24 hours of this Council decision, and the following actions were taken:

- The Library Board was informed of the Council decision, and of the action plan created by the Leadership team.
- All unionized staff were told not to report to work until notified
- Management staff continued to work at the library, installing signage, dealing with in-person and virtual communications regarding the closures, closing the external book return bins, and making technical changes to the Library's computer system to allow books to remain with customers for longer loan period, and remove the application and accrual of overdue fines.
- Both facilities were secured to ensure safety
- Preparations were made to allow management staff to work from home.

It should be noted that at this time no one expected the closures to last longer than a few weeks, and we anticipated our COVID-related work to be temporary in nature.

When it became clear that the situation was more serious than we realized, and that the closures could go on for some time, library staff moved to create virtual services that would allow residents to access our services in a safe way. Some of these included:

- Creation of eCards – library cards that could be applied for online, and that would allow new users to access our wide array of eBooks, eAudio, eMagazines, online databases and online learning services from the safety of their homes
- Expanded remote information services. While library users had always been able to call or email staff for information assistance, we now had to find a way to provide this service using staff who were working from home. While challenging in the beginning, this vital service was soon running seamlessly, and users had a wide range of options in terms of how they communicated with staff.
- Significantly expanding the funds being spent on e-materials, especially eBooks and eAudio for both adults and children.
- Creating a wide range of virtual programming, especially for children. This was a completely new type of programming for our staff, and required them to think on their feet, learn new skills, and do programs in their own homes. The programs were very popular, and ranged from basic storytelling, STEAM programs, to Barn Storytime, featuring stories told with a book-loving horse.

Staffing and Redeployment

One of the first issues the Chief Librarian and the City's Senior Management Team (SMT) had to grapple with was the issue of continued staff employment during a sustained period of facility closures. City Council, the Library Board and the Police Board were all hoping to avoid layoffs wherever possible, even as the City started to experience catastrophic financial problems caused by the pandemic.

The SMT created an essential staffing list for each department, worked with all of the City's unions to make pandemic-specific concessions, stopped the use of non-essential auxiliary staff, and moved to redeploy any non-essential permanent staff to COVID-related tasks. As there were not many library staff considered essential while the facilities were closed, many were redeployed to a variety of other areas, including the following:

- Librarians formed the **COVID Research Group**, providing time-sensitive information to the EOC and the City's four COVID Taskforces regarding pandemic information from around the world
- The **Electrical Payment Relief Program** – providing phone information services to City electrical utility customers, and processing payment relief applications
- The **COVID Information Line** – helping residents find information about City services, closures, relief, and social services assistance.
- The **COVID Enforcement Line** – taking tips and information from residents as the city struggled to enforce the ever-changing rules from the PHO.
- **Safety Ambassadors** – working with staff from across the city assisting By-Law Enforcement Officers to share in-person COVID safety information to resident and businesses.
- **Help Desk Support** – 2 of our staff assisted City Help Desk staff in providing support to the many staff who were having to work from home.

Some staff did this redeployment work full time, and some were able to combine this work with other library work, such as processing eCard applications and providing information services to library users.

Creation of the Library Takeout service

During April, library staff worked to create a Library Takeout Service that would allow users to visit the library and borrow materials in a safe, physically-distanced way. After careful planning and the creation of service-specific Safety Plans, the service was launched on May 13th and quickly became oversubscribed. Although users were restricted in the number of items they could borrow and the number of times they could visit, the pent-up demand for physical materials caused more and more staff hours to be dedicated to the service, and required the library to begin the process of bringing staff back from redeployment.

The Move to Reopen

The Province of BC's release of the BC Restart Plan on May 6, 2020 was a surprise to the City and the Library. We did not expect public libraries to be allowed to open so quickly, and the City's financial plan for 2020 was based on a Q4 limited opening of some facilities. Based on the excellent work already done by the library to provide services, however, City Council voted to

support a faster reopening of the Main Branch of the library, based on their understanding of the vital role the library plays in the community. The Library Board supported this decision, as they were also eager to see some areas of in-person service return if it could be done safely.

Some of the many areas where work needed to be done included:

- Creating COVID Safety Plans for all areas of the building and all expected services
- Moving the work areas of staff to allow for physical distancing
- Creation of a service plan for the building
- Working with other City Department to have redeployed staff returned to the library
- Doing facilities work including the installation of physical barriers, removal of furniture, signage, one-way movement plans, and technical work to determine the capacity limits for each area of the building.
- Creation of a COVID Concierge Service to ensure customers entering the building were safe and informed of the services available to them
- Doing comprehensive staff safety and service training

The Main Branch reopened to the public on August 4, 2020, with the following services available to the public:

- All in-person circulation services, including the ability to browse 100% of the physical collection
- In-person information and readers' advisory services
- Access to public internet stations and Wi-Fi
- Limited seating for reading newspapers and magazines
- Limited seating at study carrels and tables

Services that continued to be offered virtually or not at all included:

- Programming for adults, youth and children
- School visits or other outreach activities
- Use of meeting and study rooms
- Casual seating in public areas
- Home Library Service deliveries

In late September the Queensborough Branch reopened when the Community Centre it is located in reopened to the public. Library staff worked collaboratively with the Parks and Recreation Department to create safety protocols for library and community center users.

During the remainder of 2020 the library constantly adjusted services, hours, and staffing levels, striving to provide as many services as possible to the public, while keeping the focus on creating a safe environment for staff and library users. We are pleased to report, that although we opened at a more robust level than many libraries, we did not have one single staff member contract the COVID virus, nor any community transmissions related to the library.

As the pandemic moved from crisis to maintenance, the Library and other City Departments started thinking about what recovery might look like, and how we would maintain our vigilance and safety protocols while still looking to a future without COVID restrictions. The City formed *The New Normal Committee*, comprised of a number of Deputies and other subject-specialists from across the city. The Deputy Chief Librarian was one of the first members of this committee, and starting in the late spring of 2020 helped to guide the city on many fronts, including reopening processes, health and safety issues, staffing issues, facility concerns, and a wide variety of other pandemic-related topics.

We would like to acknowledge that as pandemic novices, we were significantly supported during these difficult times by a number of stakeholders, partners, organizations, and levels of government, including:

- The Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Municipal Affairs, particularly Mari Martin and the staff of the Libraries Branch
- WorkSafe BC
- Public Library InterLINK
- The Association of BC Public Library Directors
- The BC Library Association and the BC Library Trustees Association
- The City of New Westminster

Without all of these partners we would have never been able to serve our community as robustly as we did, and would not have made it through this very difficult year as safely nor as well informed as we were. This year, more than any, proves that the sharing, open and generous world of public libraries serves British Columbians well.

Technology Grant – Final Report

Spending of our Technology Grant matches the information provided in the mid-year Interim Report. Spending focused on four critical areas:

Expansion of the eBook Collection

- As mentioned at other places in this report we expanded our collection of Overdrive Advantage eBooks considerably in 2020 thanks to the Technology Grant and reassigning existing collections budgets. In 2019 we spent \$10,000.00 on this collection, and in 2020 that increased to \$44,200.00. This spending resulted in a 34% increase in the use of the collection, and all the increased use happened between mid-March and year-end.

Improvement to the Main Branch Wi-Fi Network Coverage

- Funds were used to expand the coverage of our public Wi-Fi to include exterior areas of the library property, and to increase the number of hours each day the network is running.

- The project was more complicated than expected due to some changes made during our recent renovation, but through the work of our colleagues at the City of New Westminster IT Department and the utility company, we were able to overcome these issues and start the service faster than expected.
- Due to the months-long closure and restricted service plan, it is difficult to show an increase in use from this expenditure. Anecdotal and visual evidence were clear, however, and our exterior coverage continues to be very popular with residents and neighbours.

Purchase of Equipment to Support Digital Programming

- Funds were used to purchase a variety of recording equipment, including microphones, lights, stands and cameras. This area of programming was completely new to us, so none of this equipment existed in the library before 2020.
- The digital programs created by staff were very popular, and as described above, included Virtual Storytimes, Virtual STEAM programs for children, Book Club and information programs for adults, and even a Virtual Author's Festival in the spring
- 2020 showed us that while library users miss in-person programs very much, virtual programs can play an important part of our service delivery strategy.

Summary

While the New Westminster Public Library and all public libraries across the province have always provided innovative and excellent services, there can be no doubt that we were tested and tested again during 2020. The very nature of what we do and our role in our community had to evolve, and our relationship with our users, our partners and stakeholders, and our city developed in ways we could never have imagined. What at first seemed like a catastrophe that would stop us in our tracks turned into a case study in creativity, innovation, public service and community development. The passion and dedication of library staff and Trustees in New Westminster and across the province proved once again, and in ways we never imagined, that public libraries are integral pillars of our community.

We faced unimaginable challenges in 2020, but as the year drew to a close we were able to see more clearly that many of those challenges had become long-term successes. Virtual programs, more robust eCollections, enhanced ideas of service flexibility, staff and Trustees who proved to themselves how good they are at pivoting – these are all things that will benefit our library and our community for years to come. While the COVID-19 pandemic had terrible consequences for so many British Columbians, at least we can begin to see a return to normal in 2021, and have learned many valuable lessons as we navigated through the year. We look forward to putting these lessons into practice in the coming year.

2020 LIBRARY TECHNOLOGY GRANT REPORTING FORM: NEW WESTMINSTER PUBLIC LIBRARY

Total Technology Grant Amount: \$24,711.00

Area of Need	Outcome	Metrics	Strategic Links	Actions	Collaborative Links	Timeframe	Project Budget	In-Kind/Leveraged funds	Comments
Electronic collections (licensing) Expansion of eBook collections	When the library was forced to close due to COVID-19, we saw an immediate need for additional titles in our digital collection. At that time we had no sense of how long the closure would last, and wanted to ensure residents had the ability to borrow materials, especially those who are living on a limited income, and have no ability to purchase their own materials from retail providers.	Support a 25% increase in use of eBook borrowing.	This project enhances the Province’s Strategic priority to Improve Access for British Columbians.	<p>Additional title added to Adult, YA and Children’s eBook and eAudio Advantage collection.</p> <p>Additional titles added during the period between the beginning of the closure, and the start of our Library Takeout Service.</p>	No collaboration was involved in this project.	March – July 2002	\$18,000	N/A	
Connectivity (internet speed, connection capacity, etc.) Improvements to Wi-Fi access for exterior of Main Branch.	<p>Mandatory closure of library facility meant no access to interior Wi-Fi for area residents.</p> <p>Library situated in a neighbourhood with many marginalized residents and low-cost rental housing. The loss of library Wi-Fi during closed times highlighted this need.</p>	Increase range of Wi-Fi access (approx. 90%) so that it is easily accessible from plaza, and users don’t have to huddle around the entrance to try connecting.	This project enhances the Province’s Strategic priority to Improve Access for British Columbians.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Review and test access points on west of building. Purchase new devices, bring in external company to created connection.Testing of new access.Review of access fall 2002.	We worked with City of New Westminster It dept. No community collaboration for this project.	Install and testing – April 1 – April 15, 2020. Fall testing October 2020.	\$2,500	N/A	

	Improvements allowed excellent connectivity on the public plaza.								
Patron hardware upgrades (public computers, printers, etc.) Purchase of loanable devices	<p>Expansion of our loanable device program.</p> <p>At-home use allows customers who have Wi-Fi to use an up-to-date computer.</p> <p>In-house use of these devices allows users without their own device or Wi-Fi at home to access our Wi-Fi network without the time restrictions of our PC stations.</p>	Purchase of 4 additional Chromebooks for in-library use and home use.	This project enhances the Province’s Strategic priority to Improve Access for British Columbians.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review existing devices for use deficits. Select new devices and cases etc. to allow safe loaning. Purchase and format with City of NW IT staff. Catalogue and process for lending. 	No collaboration was involved in this project.	Fall 2020	\$5,000	N/A	
Digital programming Purchase equipment to allow library staff to create digital programs.	<p>Before the closure we did not do any staff-based digital programming, and had no appropriate hardware or equipment.</p> <p>Equipment purchased allows staff to produce and upload content from home, and from the library.</p>	Purchase variety of equipment including microphones, lights, stands, and cameras.	This project enhances the Province’s Strategic priority to Improve Access for British Columbians.	<p>Determine types of programming and necessary equipment.</p> <p>Purchase and test.</p>	Equipment was purchased with grant funds, but we partnered with community groups on program content. Example – recent NW Author Fest was completely digital, and we partnered with the Arts Council of New Westminster and the BC Arts Council.	Spring 2020	\$2,500	N/A	