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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. The latter 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 accessible due to the remoteness of this region relative to other major urban areas.

Given its relatively low cost of living, especially when compared to the Lower Mainland – and in particular the latter’s increasingly prohibitive real estate prices – Prince George has become an attractive destination for older Millennials and young Generation Xers wishing to raise young families as well as retiring Baby Boomers wishing to live more comfortably off their limited nest eggs. Although the region’s population is predominantly White, it does include a sizeable number of people who are neither Aboriginal 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 Aboriginal. 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. On an annual basis, patrons typically borrow around
800,000 such items and visit both locations a cumulative 350,000 times. In addition, the Prince
George Public Library’s website draws around 350,000 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 into the fourth-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 information that follows will not only show how the efforts of the Prince George Public Library over the past year stem from its own strategic plan, but also more importantly show how they align directly with the priorities as laid out by the Ministry of Education, Libraries Branch in its vision for public library service in British Columbia. Those strategic priorities are:

1) Fostering connecting communities: advancing access to information and resources
2) Building capacity: enabling inspiration and innovation
3) Working together: creating lasting and sustainable partnerships
4) Sustaining our success: enhancing governance and demonstrating impact.

Strategic Priority #1 – Fostering Connected Communities

The Libraries Branch strategy of fostering connected communities has to do with 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, cultural, or otherwise – that directly inhibit the participation of individuals and households in society and the greater economy.

One way that public libraries serve to foster community connections is by serving as third spaces – places that are neither one’s home (first place) nor workspace (second place). Public libraries have taken on this role in large part because of their established reputation as
welcoming, friendly spaces. Just as importantly, public libraries have over the years steadily expanded the range of services that they offer. The truth is that public libraries today do a lot more than lend out books. Library staff increasingly find themselves helping local people navigate through an array of social challenges, including substance abuse, homelessness, mental illness, and unemployment.

One problem, of course, is that most library staff are not trained to handle these types of issues and requests. To help address this shortcoming, the Prince George Public Library in 2018 successfully pursued funding for internships from the Federal government through the latter’s Young Canada Works and Canada Summer Jobs programs. What follows is an account of what Prince George Public Library accomplished through these efforts and an argument for how each contributed to fostering a more connected community in Prince George.

Aboriginal Perspectives Library Intern

Knowing that Reconciliation is a national priority and that Prince George’s Indigenous population has grown over 50% in the last decade, Prince George Public Library recognizes that it should be more intentional about how it engages with the Indigenous community. To that end, it created the Aboriginal Perspectives Library Internship position with support through the Federal Government’s Young Canada Works program. The position, which lasted from July to October 2018, was filled by a recent college graduate of Indigenous heritage and encompassed analyzing and evaluating all facets of public service offered by the library from the perspective of Indigenous patrons. Up to now, this represents the most serious effort by our public library to understand what it needs to do to effectively serve Indigenous people in our community.
During this four-month period, the Aboriginal Perspectives Intern actively participated in the selection of library materials in all areas of the collection to ensure that information offered to the community also reflected the values, beliefs, and perspectives of Canada’s Indigenous peoples. The intern engaged directly with selectors and helped identify titles and authors that would be appropriate to include in each of their designated spending areas. Through this work, the intern played an important role in influencing collection development decisions for roughly $100,000 worth of library materials.

This influence came about in two major ways. One was creating a general awareness among staff that non-Indigenous authors have historically played a disproportionate role in deciding how Indigenous people are portrayed in literature. As a consequence, much of the information disseminated through public library collections that touches on Indigenous matters does so from a non-Indigenous perspective that many Indigenous audiences find inaccurate and offensive. The intern encouraged to selectors to evaluate their existing collections with a critical eye and to consider whether it made sense to retain titles that were possibly perpetuating harmful stereotypes and misinformation about Indigenous peoples. Just as importantly, the intern also directed selectors to resources that help identify recent publications that reflect authentic Indigenous voices. Being intentional about adding content written from an Indigenous perspective is one other way that the intern helped shape how the library went about managing its materials. Here are some examples of materials that were added to the library’s collections as a result of this initiative.

*As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*
by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

Una Huna?: What is This?
By Susan Aglukark

In addition, the intern was able to present an overview of her work at a staff development day training in December 2018. As a result of this presentation, nearly all 60+ members of our organization had the opportunity to learn about the challenges of advancing reconciliation efforts in Canada and specifically how public libraries like ours can help. This presentation also helped reinforced training that our library staff received earlier in June 2018 when Bev Best, the Manager of Aboriginal Engagement at the University of Northern British Columbia delivered a workshop on cultural safety training.

Summer Social Engagement Assistant

Another major issue affecting urban public libraries in North America is an increase in demand for services from marginalized populations that are often in dire need of social assistance. The fact is that many patrons who frequent the Prince George Public Library endure an everyday reality grounded in homelessness, poverty, and drug addiction. Although not technically part of our mandate, practical considerations dictate that our organization become well-versed in understanding the causes of such social problems and more adept at helping
respond to these challenges. To that end, the library created a Summer Social Engagement Assistant position with support from the Federal Government’s Canada Summer Jobs program.

For eight weeks starting in early August 2018, a student pursuing an undergraduate degree at the University of Northern British Columbia spent approximately 30 hours per week analyzing the problems facing vulnerable populations in our community and trying to identify steps that our organization could take to better address these. The student began by reviewing incident reports, records of situations when library staff had to intervene with patrons as a result of the latter’s disruptive behaviours. She found that a disproportionate number of incident reports involved patrons from marginalized groups experiencing challenges with poverty, housing, and substance abuse. It turns out that a large percentage of the patrons who get their library privileges suspended (i.e. who are asked to leave and not return for an extended period of time) come from the most vulnerable sectors of society, which tragically have the most to lose by being denied access to the services of the public library. For such patrons, it is no exaggeration to say that libraries help satisfy some of the most basic human needs by providing reliable access to public washrooms and shelter from the outside elements.

To help address this issue, the student gathered information from both internal and external sources. She interviewed patrons and staff about their personal experiences. She surveyed the community and connected with various local agencies, both non-profit and governmental, to understand their challenges when it came to serving such vulnerable populations. And she looked to examples from other public libraries in Canada and the United States to see what best practices could be gleaned from their attempts to fill this service gap. In
the end, she prepared an eight-page final report and delivered a presentation to staff that recommended that our organization take the following courses of action:

- Develop staff training around mental health first aid, trauma-informed care and de-escalation, and naloxone administration.
- Form strategic partnerships and collaborations with local community service providers.
- Get in the business of providing social service information and helping patrons navigate the various channels to obtaining social assistance.
- Actively engage vulnerable patrons so as to help them along the continuum of care by not only identifying their needs but by referring and connecting them with existing service providers.

Since August, our organization has looked for ways to follow through with these recommendations. We have started by creating training opportunities that better enable our staff to handle the trauma of stressful incidents and that teach them how to more effectively handle tense situations with patrons to reduce the likelihood of violence occurring or discussions from becoming highly emotional and antagonistic. While there is still much that remains to be done, this has been a critical first step to helping our library become more effective at overcoming some of the social barriers that prevent vulnerable populations from accessing our services and reintegrating into larger society.

In addition, the assistant was able to present an overview of her work at a staff development day training in December 2018. As a result of this presentation, nearly all 60+
members of our organization had the opportunity to learn about the challenges facing some our most vulnerable patrons and how public libraries like ours can help.

Takeaways:
  • Aboriginal Perspectives Library Intern worked over 400 hours between July and October 2018 helping the Prince George Public Library understand how it could better serve Indigenous patrons
  • The Aboriginal Perspectives Library Intern helped inform staff decisions about approximately $100,000 that was spent developing the library’s physical collections. This was done to help ensure that Indigenous beliefs, values, and experiences were fairly represented in the range of information materials that the library offers.
  • “I found [the Aboriginal Perspectives Library Intern’s] presentation to be quite informative. It helped me distinguish some of the complex vocabulary associated with the Indigenous community, which helped me become better about how I approach and speak of my collection area.” – Christopher Knapp, Teen Librarian
  • The Summer Social Engagement Assistant worked over 200 hours between July and August 2018 helping the Prince George Public Library understand how it could better serve the needs of vulnerable populations dealing with challenges like homelessness, poverty, and drug abuse.
  • Funding for these temporary positions came largely through the Federal government’s Young Canada Works and Summer Canada Jobs programs.
Strategic Priority #2 – Building Capacity

The Libraries Branch strategy of building capacity has to do with 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 an increasingly digital world.

Technology continues to evolve and is increasingly integrated into all facets of society including culture, economics, and politics. This change became dramatically apparent with the explosive popularity of internet-enabled mobile devices beginning around 2007. Since then, it has continued to grow exponentially with the improved availability of high-speed broadband internet, which enables the development and deployment of data-intense applications that can process vast amounts of information instantaneously in real time and empower consumers, producers, and governments to make decisions about how best to allocate scarce resources to achieve desired outcomes.

While the potential of such technology to do good is readily apparent, there is a real risk that many portions of society will not have the intellectual grounding to understand how these tools are or could be used. As a consequence, many citizens may not be able to actively participate in decisions affecting their everyday lives. Worse still, such disadvantaged citizens may fall victim to abuse by those who are privileged in terms of their knowledge about, access to, and control over such technologies. To minimize the threat of such inequalities and to democratize the development and application of emerging technologies, it’s important for public libraries to play a role in fomenting an appreciation and curiosity for all things related to science, technology, engineering, and math (a.k.a. STEM). It is for this reason that the Prince
George Public Library has and continues to invest staff time and energy to delivering STEM-related programs that appeals and increases the capacity of patrons of all ages.

**All Things STEAM**

Recognizing that parents need a way to occupy their children whenever schools close on account of non-instructional days, our library always makes it a point to develop special programming for such occasions. This was the case on Monday, January 29 when the library hosted an *All Things Steam* program at the Bob Harkins Branch. While teachers worked on professional development, the library invited parents and students five to twelve years of age to play with robots, create marble runs, build marshmallow towers, and participate in any of a number of activity stations that focused on making science fun. It was a wildly successful program that attracted an audience of approximately 125 people. Given the popularity of this event, members of the library youth services team decided to develop a similar series of STEM-related programs later in the year. They created *STEAM Saturdays*, which took place over three weekends in October 2018. Each of these smaller events was also well attended. Collectively, they drew in another 74 people to participate.

![Online promotional material for the library’s All Thing Steam event in September 2018](image)
Prince George Mini Maker Faire

Following a similar vein of nurturing a love of science through fun activities, the library continued and deepened its partnership with Two Rivers Gallery by helping to organize a free public event on September 22, 2018, the *Prince George Mini Maker Faire*. The event is part of a wider international movement that encourages young people, especially teenagers but also adults, to connect with inventors of all ages by providing a venue for the latter to showcase their latest contraptions. The inventions demonstrated are typically fun and playful. They are meant to inspire observers to embrace a do-it-yourself mentality and pursue creative projects that combine elements of engineering with artistry. Not surprisingly, the single-day event was a popular draw. It attracted an audience of approximately 180 people.

Takeaways:

- The Library hosted an event *All Things STEAM* in late January 2018 at the Bob Harkins Branch targeting households with children who were not at school as a result of a planned non-instructional day by School District 57. The event, which was attended by well over 100 people, consisted of a number of program stations where students could
participate in a variety of STEM-related activities. Due to positive feedback from the community, the Library launched a *S.T.E.A.M. Saturdays* program series in October 2018, which brought in more than 70 participants.

- The Library partnered with Two Rivers Gallery to co-host an annual *Prince George Mini Maker Faire* in September 2018. The event itself, which drew nearly 200 participants, showcased a variety of contraptions invented by local “makers” to highlight the creative potential of individuals when they harness their artistic talents and couple them with a love of engineering and technology.

- “It was impressive to see how adaptive the public library can be. I never figured my kids would be playing Minecraft here. But it makes sense. It’s a great way to get kids interested in technology, science, and all that stuff. Good job.” – Anonymous parent attending Prince George Mini Maker Faire

**Strategic Priority #3 – Working Together**

The Libraries Branch strategy of working together has to do with 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.

**Gwynne Dyer Lecture**

Libraries have always had a role in supporting civic engagement and encouraging citizens to participate in democratic processes. One way to do this is by connecting patrons
with intellectual leaders who can properly explain the state of contemporary politics and how it stems from a variety of historical forces coming together. It was with this aim in mind that our organization partnered with the University of Northern British Columbia to bring in award-winning journalist, author, and historian Gwynne Dyer to visit Prince George in May 2018 to discuss why he thought Donald Trump was able to become President of the United States and why the people of the United Kingdom had voted in favour of withdrawing from the European Union.

Around 150 people attended Mr. Dyer’s lecture on May 14, 2018 and listened to his argument that globalization and the automation of work was exacerbating social inequalities and eroding quality of life standards for the middle class. The event itself as well as its high attendance was made possible because of the library’s joint collaboration with the University of Northern British Columbia. Only by pooling financial resources could our two organizations hope to recruit such talent to visit Prince George and deliver such a presentation. Additionally, the active involvement of both the library and the university made it easier to spread awareness and interest in the event.
Gardening Workshop Series

A key part of our library’s programming strategy is to support the City of Prince George’s aim of developing and attracting the type of talent that will spur socio-economic renewal in our region as the latter seeks to transition away from an exclusively resource-based economy. In our case, part of taking this approach means doing our part to nurture an ecologically-friendly community ethos that calls for the protection of wildlife, ecosystems, and natural resources while still embracing the perks of modern living. The idea is that many workers and entrepreneurs will appreciate the virtues of small-town, rural life as long as they can still benefit from and remain integrated with the larger tech-centric economy.

To that end, our library has worked to establish partnerships with outside groups that promote a green lifestyle. A great example of that is our collaboration with the David Douglas Botanical Garden Society, which delivered a series of workshops at the Bob Harkins Branch Library in January, February, March, April, October, and November 2018. Topics covered included composting, urban farming, seed saving, greenhouses, and winter gardening.
Collectively, well over 200 people attended all these workshops over the course of the year. As a result of overwhelming positive feedback, plans are in place to continue this line of programming well into 2019. Thus, this is probably one of the best examples our library has of developing an effective partnership to effectively respond a well-established public need.

**Takeaways:**

- Through partnership with the University of Northern British Columbia, the library was able to recruit renowned journalist, author, and historian Gwynne Dyer to deliver a lecture in Prince George in May 2018 about the rise of populist politics in the United States and Europe. Around 150 people attended this event.

- The library partnered with the David Douglas Botanical Garden Society to deliver a series of workshops throughout 2018 to teach patrons about a variety of gardening topics. Well over 200 people attended these programs over the course of the year.
Strategic Priority #4 – Sustaining Our Success

The Libraries Branch strategy of sustaining our success has to do with continuously updating and improving the way in which public libraries measure success. This goes beyond raw circulation figures and quantities of reference interactions. It speaks to efforts by public libraries to share best practices and demonstrate how they are adapting to changing community needs and demands.

British Columbia Teacher-Librarians’ Association Conference

One of our organization’s core values is inclusivity. We strongly believe that a core part of our job is to provide welcoming and respectful spaces. This includes serving the LGBTQ+ community. To help lead the charge in this area we have relied heavily on the knowledge and experience of our Teen Librarian Christopher Knapp. Such is his reputation that Mr. Knapp has been sought by various other organizations to come and present on this subject matter. In fact, in October 2018 he was invited to present at the British Columbia Teacher-Librarians’ Association Conference in Richmond, BC. With funding support from our organization, Mr. Knapp was able to fly down to Vancouver to attend the conference and present on the following topics: curating collections so as not to only include heteronormative content; weeding materials in a manner that honours the LGBTQ+ community and its history; using accepting, open body and verbal language; being mindful of bias and self-censorship; and defining inclusivity in a way that does not involve “accentuating” or “othering.” As a result of this conference more library professionals are aware of the needs of LGBTQ+ patrons and familiar with best practices for serving this historically marginalized patron segment.
Takeaways:

- The library subsidized travel and accommodations for Teen Librarian Christopher Knapp to present at the British Columbia Teacher-Librarians’ Association Conference in October 2018. Mr. Knapp is a well-regarded authority on how libraries can develop more welcoming and inclusive spaces that cater to the needs of LGBTQ+ patrons.

- “Thank you for this timely presentation. It’s such a difficult and complicated topic, but you managed to present it in a simple to understand way. I definitely learned a lot and hope more of my colleagues have the opportunity to hear from people like you. So much work that remains to be done.” – Anonymous conference attendee commenting on Christopher Knapp’s presentation at the BCTLA Conference.

Summary

2018 was a year of challenges and opportunities for Prince George Public Library. With funding support from the Federal government, the library was able fill two temporary positions: the Aboriginal Perspectives Library Intern and the Summer Social Engagement Assistant. The intern position helped focus attention on the barriers that are preventing our organization from more effectively serving Indigenous patrons. In particular, it helped bring to light shortcomings when it comes to developing collections that accurately portray the history, culture, and values of Indigenous peoples. The assistant position helped library staff better understand the socio-economic conditions that are leading to an uptick in the number of patrons seeking assistance from the library to address the challenges of homelessness, poverty, and drug addiction. It also helped identify courses of action that the organization could take to better serve this growing, vulnerable segment of the population. In doing so, the Prince George Public Library fulfilled the
Libraries Branch strategic mandate to connect communities with the information to care for their households and families.

In addition, the Prince George Public Library invested staff time and resources toward developing programs that enhanced the community’s capabilities by exposing individuals of all ages to inspiring, new information. Emphasis was placed on developing highly interactive and entertaining programs that center on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). In late January 2018, the library delivered an All Things STEAM program on a non-instructional day when public schools were closed so that approximately 125 parents and students could participate in a number of fun, educational STEM-related activities. Then in September 2018, the library partnered with Two Rivers Gallery to host the Prince George Mini Maker Faire. This event, which attracted around 200 attendees, showcased contraptions invented by local “makers” that demonstrated the creative potential of individuals when they merge their artistic talents with knowledge of science and engineering. In doing so, the Prince George Public Library fulfilled the Libraries Branch strategic mandate to build capacity by inspiring individuals in communities to learn and participate in the emerging economy.

Our organization also recognized that fulfilling its mission could best be accomplished via strategic partnerships with individuals and groups who share common values and interests. With this in mind, the library collaborated with the University of Northern British Columbia to recruit well-known journalist, author, and historian Gwynn Dyer to deliver a lecture about the rise of populist politics in the United States and the United Kingdom. Around 150 people attended this event. Separately and in addition to this, the library connected with the David Douglas Botanical Garden Society to deliver a series of workshops relating to gardening throughout the calendar year. As a result of this partnership, more than 200 people were able to
gain valuable insight into urban farming practices. In pursuing these joint ventures, the Prince George Public Library fulfilled the Libraries Branch strategic mandate to expand the reach and impact of public libraries through strategic partnerships with outside organizations.

And last but not least, the Prince George Public Library continued to fulfill its leadership role by supporting in-house talent so that other workers in the field of libraries could benefit from their knowledge and experience serving historically marginalized patron segments. Specifically, the library subsidized travel and accommodations for its Teen Librarian Christopher Knapp so that he could present at the British Columbia Teachers-Librarians’ Association Conference in Richmond in October 2018. Mr. Knapp’s presentation was about what libraries could do to create more welcoming and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ patrons. In doing so, the Prince George Public Library fulfilled the Libraries Branch strategic mandate to continue updating and improving the ways in which public libraries measure success by encouraging discussion within our profession and the sharing of best practices.