

The Value of Libraries – Questions and Answers

You may find the following talking points helpful when discussing the library with political candidates and members of the public.

Cost of Cards: Why are library cards free?

1. Citizens have paid for the library, and access to it, by paying their municipal taxes
2. Multiple levels of government see value in funding the library because an informed and educated population is the foundation of democracy
3. Multiple levels of government see value in funding the library because library use saves money in police and social services
4. Some libraries have found that the staff time and money they spend administering cards is not worth the amount of income they generate
5. Many of the users who rely on library services the most are also the least likely to be able to afford a card fee. By making cards free, libraries remove a barrier that might prevent people from accessing a vital service.

Cost of Cards: Why aren't library cards free?

1. Legislation allows libraries to charge for a card in Alberta, and many do so because it is seen as an important source of income to maintain/improve services and collections
2. Some library staff/boards feel that charging a card fee helps convey to library users that library services are valuable.¹
3. Non-members use the library too. People who do not have a library in their community do not pay taxes toward libraries. They must pay for their membership when they join a library in another community.

Background:

Alberta is the only province in Canada that allows libraries to charge for a membership (except for portions of Quebec). Although an increasing number of cities and towns in Alberta have made library memberships free to their residents, this is not always possible. Many libraries rely on the revenue generated by library membership fees. The majority of any given public library's funding comes from its municipality, and the amount allocated for library services varies widely from one community to another.

In the age of the Internet, why do we need libraries?

1. Not everyone has equal access to the Internet, or the skills to use it effectively. This disparity is very visible worldwide, with only an estimated 59.55% of people worldwide having access to the Internetⁱⁱ; but even in Alberta, 10% of people do not have access to home internetⁱⁱⁱ. Even those that do, often rely on the library for help navigating the world of online information, using mobile devices effectively, etc.
2. Libraries are where anyone can go to get the right answers. Whether it is access to information or assistance with negotiating information and “fake news”, libraries are Albertans’ conduit to accurate information.
3. Libraries are so much more than just information: Libraries build community. Libraries are gathering spaces that help level the socio-economic playing field and allow people from all backgrounds to be together in a manner that builds relationships regardless of age, gender, gender identity, socio-economic background, religion, etc. They are a safe, friendly space for people to meet with others or spend time alone.
4. Libraries are efficient. Libraries make Albertans’ tax dollars go further by sharing the cost of access to information, programs, and content, allowing municipal dollars to serve more people.

>>The Maine State Library’s calculator estimates how much money you save every year with your library card:

<https://www.maine.gov/msl/services/calculator.htm>

For example...

Let’s say your family subscribes to Netflix, Disney+ and Kindle Unlimited.

Netflix	\$9.99/month	For just three subscription services, you could be paying \$383/year, and that is
Disney+	\$11.99/month	

Kindle Unlimited	\$9.99/month	without purchasing any additional books, renting on-demand movies, etc.
TOTAL MONTHLY	\$31.97	
TOTAL YEARLY	\$383.64	

By comparison, in 2016 (the last year published data are available), Alberta’s libraries circulated over 38 million items, approximately 9.5 items/person; and spent an average of \$3.53 per person on their collections.

What value does my local library get from the regional library system? Isn't that just duplicating the same work in two places?

1. The Regional Library Systems are not libraries in the sense of loaning materials or providing programs – they don’t serve the public directly. Rather, each regional library system provides services that help their member public libraries operate more efficiently, through economy of scale. The specific services offered vary from one system to the next and depend on the needs of their members. Here are some examples of what regional libraries do in Alberta:

- Some regional library systems share a single catalogue for all member libraries and facilitate lending items between libraries for enhanced variety and fast, efficient service
- Some regional library systems negotiate licenses for electronic content at a cost savings
- Some regional library systems purchase physical materials and catalogue them centrally
- Some regional library systems provide central support for programming like summer reading games and storytimes
- Some regional library systems provide centralized staff and services, such as IT, where it might not make sense for an individual library to employ specialized staff
- Some regional library systems provide training for staff of their member libraries

2. The regional library systems are of particular benefit to small and rural libraries, and they allow those libraries to offer much more than they might be able to on their own

Why does a library need trained staff? (Why can't volunteers run the library?)

Library staff have specialized skills and knowledge that allow them to deliver effective library service.

Libraries are both a financial and social asset for communities. Because the financial asset, primarily the collection, is developed over time, it is easy to forget its value. Like any other major asset, it needs to be managed by qualified staff. Librarians are trained in the operation of libraries, including:

- Evaluation of community needs
- Strategic and business planning, including budgeting
- Development of a collection of material that is specific to the community
- Negotiating access to electronic information resources, including developing partnerships to reduce costs
- Facilitating access to the online information environment for all members of the community
- Implementing new technologies effectively
- Doing all of this in an ethical manner, in accordance with the values of the profession and in a way that is accountable to the community

Additionally, libraries may hire other qualified staff, including library technicians. They have industry-focused, skill-based training in the following areas:

- The processes of collection building and management, including cataloguing
- Providing service to the public to assist in finding and using the information they need.
- Providing programming for all ages.
- Supporting the use of information technology in the library.

What is the role of the library board?

The Alberta Libraries Act enables the establishment of public library boards to provide municipal and regional library service. A library board is a formal governance board appointed by the municipal council. The Board exists as the decision-making and legal authority of the library and has full management control of the municipal library.

It is the Board's responsibility to establish the mission, vision and values of the library, and set goals and objectives of the library (often called a Plan of Service). This is required by library legislation as well as the needs of the community. The library board must be able to provide detailed information of how these goals and objectives have been carried out and that results that have been achieved.

While the board is accountable for a whole range of activities of the library and what it achieves, it is important to note that they are not responsible for the day to day running of the library.

The important roles of the public library board include:

- Operating within the legal framework established by the Libraries Act
- Assessing the community's needs and creating the Plan of Service
- Creating and confirming the library's role in the community through advocacy

Other responsibilities of a board include:

- Creating bylaws and policies to enable delivery of public library service
- Securing library funding, including requesting municipal appropriation and applying for provincial grants
- Providing the space and staff required for public library service delivery
- Keeping financial records and bank account
- Preparing and managing the library budget
- Handling finances appropriately and arranging regular review of financial records

ⁱ Hammond, Jason. Cash Cow: User Fees in Alberta Public Libraries. 2007

<https://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/perj/article/view/281>

ⁱⁱ Statista. Worldwide digital population as of January 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Statista. Leading types of home internet connections in Canada 2020, by province.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/544959/internet-home-connections-canada-province/>