

Looking back at the 2017 Budget Cuts Crisis to Public Libraries

This was a landmark year for public libraries in Saskatchewan. While the actions of the general public overturned the government's decision to cut library funding, I'd like to acknowledge key individuals (alphabetical order) who played a significant role during the crisis this past spring:

Joylene Campbell - former Provincial Librarian of Saskatchewan and currently a library consultant. She chaired a group called Concerned Citizens of Regina whose mandate was to promote the VOTE petition and work with any group to help reverse the budget cuts.

Christine Freethy - from a small town in northern Saskatchewan, created and helped moderate a 7,000 member sized Facebook group called Save Saskatchewan Libraries. She was interviewed by the media several times.

Merrilee Rasmussen - Regina based lawyer with a long standing history of library work in Saskatchewan. She drafted the VOTE Library Petition in accordance with Saskatchewan's The Referendum and Plebiscite Act and provided voters to petition the government to restore funding to current levels with a province-wide vote.

James Richardson - Regional Branch Manager, Southeast Regional Library, Weyburn. He was interviewed by the CBC and drafted much content for SLA's Fact Sheets
<https://saskla.ca/assets/Budget-Cuts-FAQs.pdf>.

All had a passion for saving public libraries and were invited to participate on a panel at SLA's annual conference in May 2017 at Waskesui. It was an opportunity for them to discuss their activities during the crisis and for conference attendees to ask questions. James Richardson was unable to attend but he had provided a letter that summarized his thoughts and actions during the crisis. Here are some fun facts about them.

James Richards – Remarks for SLA

"Provide a brief overview of your advocacy work in the Save Saskatchewan Libraries campaign and particularly why you chose to get involved and what you did."

Dear Friends and colleagues:

Thank you for inviting me to present a few remarks at this year's conference. I am sorry I cannot be with you this year. I am flattered to have been invited to sit on the panel for today's discussion and I hope whatever you hear from me today will add even just a little value to your conference experience.

I chose to get involved in the campaign to save Saskatchewan's public libraries for a few reasons. My primary and strongest motivation for wanting to defend Saskatchewan's public libraries was because I *believe* in public libraries. I believe in them so much I have dedicated my professional career to them and believe they are worth fighting for.

In 2016 Southeast Regional Library celebrated its 50th anniversary. When I think back on the years of effort and sacrifice from staff, trustees and volunteers to first establish the region and then to keep it functioning, I felt we could not betray their efforts by allowing the regional library system to be eliminated with one budget announcement. Also, our younger generations deserve to have a strong public library system in this province too. So for the people who have come before us and for the untold generations yet to follow us, I felt we owed the public library system our best efforts to try and save it.

As some of you know I served for many years in the Canadian Army. During my years with the army I heard a saying that goes like this, "If you're going to die, die with a hot gun in your hands." During the budget crisis I used that phrase to motivate me to do my best come what may.

In coordinating our efforts at Southeast Regional Library, credit is due to our Board Chair, Vice-Chair and Library Director. Immediately following the budget announcement on March 22, there was no doubt in their minds that Southeast would make an immediate response to attempt to counter this decision by the provincial government. I think this response from our leadership set the tone for Southeast's efforts from the earliest days. They could have despaired, but instead their first reaction was to roll up their sleeves and enter the fray.

Our first response was to educate everyone who would listen of the major implications of this budget announcement for regional libraries. We were concerned the average person would not truly realize what this level of cutback meant until it was too late. To that end we wrote a document called *Public Library Budget Cuts: Fact Sheet*. The *Fact Sheet* was distributed to all of our staff, trustees, municipalities and the media. In one page it outlined the loss of services, the level of funding that would

be required from our municipalities if the shortfall were to be made up, and encouraged everyone to contact their MLA to express their opinion on the matter of public library funding.

To say “we utilized the media” would be a misnomer in my opinion. I think a more accurate statement would be, “the media utilized us.” We were fortunate that once word of the implications of the budget cuts started to take root, the media *came to us* at Southeast for stories, information, quotes and interviews. I am sure many other public libraries experienced a similar phenomenon. I was of course happy to speak with them and share Southeast Regional Library’s frustrations and anxieties. So in this regard it was not so much what I did, as much as it was just trying to keep up with the media’s desire to have public library funding in the forefront. SLA has linked much of the media coverage on their website if you are interested in following events as they unfolded.

The next key initiative came after the government started to respond to some of the pushback they were receiving about the cuts to public library funding. At the end of March the Minister of Education was in the media defending the government’s actions to cut public library funding. His reasons are likely familiar to many of you by now: there are too many public libraries in Saskatchewan, use of public libraries is declining, the number of card holders is dropping, public libraries could co-locate with school libraries, public libraries have large cash reserves, there are more efficient ways to operate public libraries, we had to balance the budget, etc. etc.

Like many of you, I was astonished at how shockingly ill-informed and paper thin the Minister’s arguments were. However, to the average person who does not understand all the complexities of public libraries, the Minister’s rationale was appearing sound and well-reasoned. I felt some rebuttal of the government’s arguments was due so that average people could make up their own minds about public libraries once they understood the depth of the issues. For this reason I drafted a refutation of the government’s arguments for justifying the budget cuts. I quoted each justification, then offered some counter points that I hoped would professionally but systematically dismantle the argument. SLA kindly posted this document on their website during the crisis. My intent with the document was to offer encouragement to library supporters and remind everyone that there is more to this issue than just a slogan or a sound bite.

Our final major initiative was contacting the MLA’s in our region and having face-to-face meetings with them to discuss the crisis. I was part of a contingent from Southeast that arranged for meetings with 5 of the 7 MLA’s whose constituencies overlap our service area. Once we could discuss the matters in person with our MLA’s we were able to clear up many of the misconceptions they had about public libraries as well as simply inform them of how the public library system operates. I think these meetings provided much clarification for our MLA’s and I hope it created some “library advocates” behind closed doors once the government started discussing further responses to the crisis.

I will close by saying that saving Saskatchewan’s public library system was truly a province wide effort. People from all walks of life from all over the province, not just library trustees, staff and patrons, spoke up for our public library system. Everyone who signed the petition, contacted their MLA, wrote a letter to the editor, tagged the Premier on Facebook, called in on a radio talk show, showed up for a DEAR

event or even offered a prayer or just a word of encouragement had a role to play in saving our public libraries. The people of Saskatchewan genuinely value public libraries and it was the people who saved us. We as library workers and trustees could not have done it without them.

Thank you for your attention and support of Saskatchewan's public library system. Thank you to SLA for the invitation to present a few remarks. Enjoy the rest of the conference and safe travels home.

Sincerely,

James Richards

Regional Branch Manager, Southeast Regional Library, Weyburn.