

Spring 2017 Crisis for Saskatchewan Public Libraries

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The Fall 2016 issue of ELAN had an article about the crisis in Newfoundland and Labrador Public Libraries. [Source](#). On March 22, 2017 the Government of Saskatchewan tabled its budget for fiscal year 2017-2018. One of the biggest budget cuts, percentage wise, was to public libraries. The Ministry of Education announced that 100% of operating grant funding (\$1.3 million) to the province's two largest municipal library systems (Regina and Saskatoon) would be eliminated. Additionally, seven of eight regional library systems would have a 58% reduction of \$3.5 million in operating funding from the government. Funding for the Paskisimom Nuyehah Library System (PNLS) in Saskatchewan's North remained unchanged at \$974,000. [Source: Ministry of Education Budget Backgrounder](#). Reaction to the news was immediate. A huge groundswell of grassroots-led emergency advocacy led to the government reversing its decision one month later.

The Saskatchewan Library Association (SLA) quickly published a media release in response to the cuts. SLA's board reacted with deep concern, citing the many resources and services libraries provided to all residents of the province and that the provincial government should meet with keystakeholders to discuss the cuts. [Source](#). Public library directors had not been consulted about the cuts. SLA realized the importance to be available to the media, help raise public awareness of the issues, and invite stakeholders to join the cuts discussion.

The association also created a [resource page](#). It was initially called Save Public Libraries and the site included a letter writing toolkit, listing of articles published by the media, letters of support from other organizations, letters to the government and other stakeholders, etc. The site's name changed to Public Libraries Saved after the budget cuts were reversed, and it's now called Supporting All Libraries. Information has been archived and the site continues to be updated. However, SLA couldn't undertake emergency advocacy alone and only the general public could make an impactful statement and confront the government.

The provincial government defended its decision by making some interesting comments. One alluded to there being too many libraries compared to Manitoba and Alberta. Another was that libraries should reconsider being in brick and mortar buildings and that the number of library cards had been steadily dropping. These sound bytes were picked up by media outlets and prompted some libraries like Regina Public Library and SLA to publish fact sheets. Part of this goal was not to shame the government but rather clarify statistics, showcase numerous innovative public library programs, and help explain the unique characteristics of Saskatchewan's public library system.

What is ironic is that the government likely believed the cuts would go virtually unnoticed. Four events occurred that likely pressured the government to reverse its decision. The first action, to save money, was that the regional libraries agreed to shut down the province-wide library catalogue. This ended interlibrary loan in that a card holder could no longer request an item from any branch in the province and have it sent to any branch for pick up. People were ready to throw the book at the government.

The second act was that social media was very effective in mobilizing the public to act. One resident, Christine Freethy, from a small town in northern Saskatchewan, created a Facebook (FB) group called

Save Saskatchewan Libraries. FB membership grew exponentially and peaked at 7,428 during the height of the crisis. As of July 12, 2017 membership in the group had hardly dropped (7,166) and people still actively post. The FB group was instrumental with encouraging citizens to participate in a silent reading protest called Drop Everything and Read (DEAR). People were invited to show support for their local public library by reading their favorite book for 15 minutes at their local MLA office. It occurred on April 7, 2017 and 5,835 people participated in 85 communities across the province. Media coverage was wide-spread.

A third action was the availability of two Saskatchewan-based petitions. One, through the FB group, allowed anyone, regardless of age, citizenship, or residency, to submit an online or hardcopy petition. These were presented in the Legislative Assembly by the Official Opposition. A second, called VOTE Library Petition was prepared by Merrilee Rasmussen, a Regina lawyer and who also had a long standing history of library work in Saskatchewan. The petition was drafted 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. Fifteen percent of voters (approximately 125,000 people) were needed to sign and bring the issue to the legislature. A group of concerned citizens in Regina formed (chaired by Joylene Campell, library consultant and former Provincial Librarian) with the goal to help promote the VOTE petition. More than 16,000 signatures had been collected when the cuts decision was reversed. The final tally was 32,094.

The fourth phenomenon was the campaign encouraging people to contact the Premier, Minister of Education, and local MLAs to send letters, emails, and phone call. Politicians were inundated with personal stories from people who explained why libraries mattered. The government drafted a form letter to reply to people.

On April 24, 2017 the government made an unprecedented announcement that it would reinstate all funding to current levels for one year and that it would review The Public Libraries Act, 1996. The government has also raised the issue of co-locating some school and public libraries to reduce inefficiencies. Reviewing the act and addressing inefficiencies brings new issues but discussions can be helpful if they are done in good faith, there is open consultation with key stakeholders such as public library directors, rural and urban municipality associations, and school boards. Finally successful public library advocacy, in the words of Ken Haycock, needs to be planned, deliberate, and sustained over time. [Source](#). Stay tuned!

(Note: a shortened version of this article will appear in an upcoming issue of ELAN, a newsletter published by the Ex Libris Association (ELA). The ELA is a national association that is interested in historical and current issues about libraries and related institutions in Canada.)