

LIBRARY NOTES



First the good news...

Through the efforts of the Friends of the Library, the Ann Farwell Library has enjoyed a spring makeover with the donation of a bathroom mirror, more bulletin boards, a comfy reading chair, and some bright, new shelves for our reference section. With a bit of persuading, they have even managed to bring in some original works of art by the Milford Group of Seven, some talented artists who have captured our favourite local landscapes on canvas.

Meanwhile, the Milford Friendship Circle has donated a lovely quilt for our Story Time kids to use when they visit the library. And local craftsman Bob York has given us one of his wonderful wooden rocking horses, in memory of Jim Keogh, for a fundraising raffle. We were a little concerned at first when Bob said he was giving the library a horse, but Patches has been very well behaved so far and is looking forward to going to a good home.

Ain't life grand?

But now the bad news.....

Apparently the provincial government has seen the need for some spring cleaning in terms of legislation affecting libraries, but the changes they are contemplating are not merely cosmetic, having serious implications for the future of libraries all across the province.

Bill 109 is in the last stages before becoming law. Some of the changes in the legislation are quite far reaching, and as a result of lobbying by the provincial library community, public hearings on the legislation are

being held next month. In my opinion, here is how the proposed legislation will affect our library.

First of all, provincial funding for libraries is being "phased out".

Last year we took a 20% cut to our provincial funding, this year we took another 20% cut, and next year we cannot expect any provincial funding at all. Conditional provincial funding meant that even small libraries in remote areas could aspire to provincial standards while serving their communities.

Provincial funding represents about a quarter of the Ann Farwell Library's operating budget. With each cut in funding we have trimmed our budget, mostly in our expenditures on books, but there is really nothing left to cut. The shift in financial support by the province means that municipalities will be expected to pick up the shortfall, challenging the continued existence of many of these libraries, including our own.

With the impending amalgamation of municipalities in the County, the new Corporation will be responsible for funding all six County libraries. If other legislation is enacted, municipalities will be taking on new fiscal responsibilities at the same time. With these other pressures, money may not be available to maintain the libraries at their present level of service. With so many undetermined factors, the information is simply not available to make any predictions about the future.

Bill 109 also makes a provision for libraries to charge user fees, perhaps in an effort to address the recent funding crunch. While the new legislation supports free access to the building and to on-site print materials, it opens the door to user fees on videos, tapes, computer

resources and possibly services like interlibrary loans. While it is true that library collections primarily contain books, a great deal of information is only available on the computer or on tape, and this will only be more prevalent as time goes on. Implementing user fees will mean that some people will be able to afford to access information and some will not. Those who cannot, especially if they are younger people, will be at a distinct disadvantage as we enter the Information Age. The concept of the free public library will be a thing of the past.

The new legislation also affects how decisions affecting local library service will be made. Right now there are provisions governing the composition and size of the library board. Volunteer citizen board members, with the approval of municipal councils, direct the policy and business decisions of the library. The new legislation does not ensure citizen participation and leaves the size and composition of library boards up to the discretion of the municipalities. Volunteer citizen participation on library boards means that elected officials aren't burdened with fundraising duties and the need to deal with sometimes controversial issues about the content of the library collection. Citizen involvement helps the library stay very responsive to the needs of the community it serves and frees municipal councillors to deal with other important community issues.

If you are concerned about these new developments and would like more information, the full text of the new legislation is available at the library. While it is not yet law, it will likely be so before the year is out. What will happen next is anybody's guess.

- Janet Elson