

increasingly understood as one of the pillars of community sustainability, along with environmental stewardship, culture, and economic development. Based on the premise that universal access to information is a human right and a cornerstone of a functioning democracy, the very mission of the public library as an institution is to level the playing field for literacy, lifelong learning, and access to information and information technology.

Every day, public libraries help bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots with staff who know how to assist people in finding information, public workstations and free access to the internet, guidance in using technology, collections that meet people's information and leisure needs, literacy classes and collections, and an endless variety of educational programming. Public libraries make it possible for all members of society, including those living in poverty, to access the information and ideas they need to conduct their lives.

In fact, public libraries ensure everyone has access to the information and ideas they need at every age and stage of life. At this time in human history, when change is inevitable and lifelong learning an imperative, public libraries help citizens and communities adapt. Even in this era of ubiquitous technology, people continue to turn to public libraries when faced with personal decisions and the need to learn or understand something new. In essence, public

libraries help residents build resilience and get good at change.

Community Identity and Culture

Because of their expansive reach and broad appeal, public libraries are deeply and inextricably connected to community identity. In planning and delivering library service that is truly responsive to local needs, those who work in public libraries become intimately familiar with the community's cares and concerns, interests, and aspirations. In collaborating with other agencies and key players in the community, they learn even more. In turn, this knowledge is used to ensure library services remain relevant to changing needs.

This knowledge of the community is, in and of itself, an important library service as residents frequently approach the library seeking information. They do so even when there are other community information services available. Whether putting a question to staff, browsing pamphlet racks and bulletin boards, or engaging other program participants in conversation, library users turn to the library as a means of connecting with the community. Libraries help connect individuals with the community resources that meet their needs.

This knowledge of the community is also used to reflect the community back to itself, generating a strong sense of identity and culture. Library facilities,

collections, exhibits, programs, and special events all serve to cultivate community identity and connectedness. Art exhibits profile the work of local artists. The community's love of hockey and fiddling are reflected in the library's collections. The reading garden is a favourite hangout on summer afternoons and evenings. Local authors and musicians are featured in library events. A local history display generates pride in the community's response to a natural disaster. The library-sponsored dragon boat race has become a popular annual event, drawing thousands every year. The library's meeting room is used by municipal leaders for a community-visioning exercise. A new branch library anchors a neighbourhood renewal project.

Communities with a well-developed sense of community and a strong social fabric are healthier communities. They are more resilient, more creative, and more capable of thriving, even in turbulent times. Municipalities and public libraries are natural partners in their efforts to build community and nourish local culture.

The world will continue to change, and the ability to learn and adapt will only grow in importance. Regardless of the particular challenges presented locally, municipalities can rely on public libraries to be part of the solution and share in the work of building the community's capacity to respond with resilience and optimism. MWV

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