



BUDGET 2010 CONSULTATION

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Submission to:
**The Select Standing
Committee on Finance
and Government
Services**

Submission by:
**The BC Library
Association and the BC
Library Trustees
Association**

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Introduction

BCLA and BCLTA welcome the opportunity to make a formal written submission to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services. In this document, we will be advocating for three things:

- 1) Equitable access to library and information resources for all British Columbians;
- 2) Predictable, adequate and sustained funding;
- 3) Support for deferred maintenance and infrastructure funding.

The British Columbia Library Association (BCLA) is the provincial organisation for library and information sector workers, primarily in public and academic libraries. It represents 700 members, and the interests of over 2.6 British Columbians who hold public library cards. The British Columbia Library Trustees Association (BCLTA) represents the 69 library boards and over 675 trustees governing local public libraries in BC.

The importance of public libraries

British Columbia's public libraries help BC residents find critical information in an increasingly online world, assist newcomers to Canada in their settlement process, encourage children and families to value literacy, give the socially excluded and disadvantaged opportunities for learning that can assist them in changing their lives for the better, promote Canadian literature and culture, and much more. Libraries are needed more than ever in difficult economic times. British Columbians made over 27 million visits to their public libraries, borrowing over 4 million books, DVDs and other materials and resources in 2008.

Literacy and access to accurate, relevant and timely information are key ingredients to enabling a citizenry who can participate in decision-making and can contribute to social, cultural and economic prosperity for British Columbia. Libraries and library staff contribute to an informed society by acquiring, organizing, archiving, retrieving, using, synthesizing and analyzing information, and thereby empowering users.

Equitable access to resources for all British Columbians

Public libraries have been the conduit for the provision of province wide initiatives that ensure equitable access to information regardless of the size of the community or its geographical location. BC public libraries work together and with academic libraries in cross-sector collaboration to achieve the greatest common good for all library users in the most cost effective way. Provincial funding for coordination of these collaborative initiatives is critical to the continued health of our public library system. We are grateful for the Province's continued funding for the Summer Reading Club and the development of Sitka – an open source integrated library system. However, important initiatives will end in 2010 due to recent cuts in provincial funding. Here are three:

CORE Databases: The Province funded a core suite of electronic resources that enabled residents across British Columbia to have access to articles from thousands of magazines and newspapers and information on auto repairs, business, health and more – authoritative and current information that would not have been available to residents, particularly in small rural

and remote communities, without this initiative. Without provincial funding, these databases will cost libraries hundreds or thousands of additional dollars depending on the population served. Cutting other needed electronic resources will be necessary to afford purchase of these databases.

AskAway: 200 BC public library staff handled over 80,000 sessions with the public in the 2.5 years since this province-wide virtual reference service began. The Province provided startup funding and has since provided annual funding for coordination and some core staffing (the rest being provided by BC public libraries) – until this year. AskAway ensured that a student in Alert Bay had access to the same homework help as a student in Burnaby – it was a key factor in equalizing access to library services, especially for those in remote communities.

BC Books for Babies: This program provided a librarian-selected book, a music CD and information on literacy and local library resources to every child born in British Columbia. It impresses upon their parents the importance of reading and literacy to early childhood development. Research supports the importance of early literacy in contributing to success later in life. The jointly funded program (Ministries of Education and Children and Family Development) is one of several initiatives aimed at supporting Premier Campbell's stated goal of making British Columbia the most literate jurisdiction in North America by 2010 so it is unfortunate the program will cease in 2010 unless core funding is replaced.

Predictable, adequate and sustained funding

Adequate, predictable funding is required to ensure the public library remains the primary freely available community access point for publicly available print and audiovisual resources, electronic information, and government digital-only resources. Use of public libraries increases during difficult economic times and this recession is no different as library statistics across North America prove. Reliable funding allows libraries to plan for and maintain infrastructure, resources and staffing so that they are available when communities need them most – to give much-needed help to small business owners, job searchers, new immigrants, students, parents, among others.

Many people rely on libraries' computers and access to the web for access to and submission of job applications and government forms such as unemployment insurance claims, for example. When libraries cut hours and reduce staff as a result of inadequate funding, a critical piece of the social services spectrum of support is reduced to vulnerable people. BCLA and BCLTA hope that this government recognizes predictable, adequate and sustained funding to BC's public libraries is necessary to ensure all citizens have equitable access to information.

Support for deferred maintenance and infrastructure funding

BCLA and BCLTA support ongoing investment in an information infrastructure with public libraries as a critical conduit for a sustainable knowledge economy.

Public libraries are so much a part of the fabric of British Columbia's communities that they can be overlooked in terms of infrastructure. They are, however, a crucial part of a community's social, cultural and economic capital. Few other publicly funded services have the multiplicity of roles, the user range and diversity, or the potential to influence so many lives.

The state of libraries' physical infrastructure is important as libraries provide room for children's programs encouraging early literacy, space for students to study and conduct research, a place to introduce settlement programs for new immigrants, areas and equipment for instruction in Internet use and computer skills, and room for community gatherings, in addition to the traditional role of housing print and audiovisual material.

A recent public library infrastructure survey conducted by an independent consultant on behalf of BC's library community showed British Columbia to have a library infrastructure deficit of almost a million square feet – this is the gap between existing facilities and what BC's public libraries require based on population growth in their communities. Key among the existing deficiencies reported by libraries across the province are those related to accessibility and sustainability. The study found that the number one issue for the libraries surveyed was "insufficient capital funding for facilities renewal." It is important to note that in today's economic climate, local governments are already hard-pressed to fund needed library infrastructure improvements – let alone begin to cover programming and resources lost due to provincial funding cuts.

Conclusion

BCLA and BCLTA believe that it is in the public interest for the provincial government to support and fund libraries as providers of public information, both directly through provincial funding for capital, operating and one-time projects, and indirectly through funding to municipalities. The people of British Columbia look to the Province to uphold their democratic right to equitable access to information regardless of where they live, and to support the key democratic value of free access to information in our society and for our economy.

An investment in public libraries is an investment in BC's future; provincial re-investment must occur sooner than later in order to protect the many gains achieved under the Ministry of Education's 2003 Strategic Plan for Public Libraries. Public libraries and their supporters were willing to accept a temporary cut in funding in light of the provincial economic situation, but British Columbians will accept nothing short of a 100% reinstatement of the operating and targeted funds previously supporting BC's library system – as evidenced by the over thirty thousand postcards sent to Premier Campbell in support of libraries and the many thousands of signatures collected in a summer petition to protect library funding in the most recent provincial budget.

If the Province stands behind its stated commitment to literacy, it must find the resources to support BC's public libraries...institutions which are indeed on "the front lines" in providing literacy services and support to British Columbians. If Premier Campbell truly believes that libraries are a great investment then BCLA and BCLTA call on this government to increase per capita library funding so that British Columbia ranks among the highest provinces in this measure, not among the lowest, as it currently does.

Our libraries are a great investment in community, learning and literacy. They open doors of opportunity for minds hungry for knowledge and adventure. They are the front lines of the effort to make British Columbia the most literate place in the world. - Premier Gordon Campbell