



December 15, 2008

The Honourable Gordon Campbell
Premier of British Columbia
PO Box 9041 STN PROV GOVT
Victoria, BC V8W 9E1

Dear Premier Campbell:

RE: The Importance of Public Libraries in Tough Economic Times

The BC Library Trustees' Association represents 70 library boards and over 675 library trustees in the province of British Columbia. I am writing on behalf of these member boards and trustees in acknowledgement of the worldwide economic situation that confronts us and the increasing pressure this places on government. I wish to remind you of the strong support that public libraries enjoy – especially in these tough economic times. As a recent Vancouver Sun article put it, “a return to library use may be just what [people] need to shave a few line items off the budget.”ⁱ

You may have heard that public libraries south of the border are being hit hard by the crash in the housing market and the corresponding drop in revenue from property taxes. The consequent economic crunch has resulted in library hours being reduced, staff being laid off, and branch libraries being forced to close their doors. Incoming President Barack Obama recently cited library closures as one of the drastic measures being taken to balance state budgets in the US, recognizing the negative effect of such closures on communities.ⁱⁱ In response to this crisis, the American Library Association (ALA) has requested \$100 million in stimulus funding from the federal government in order to “stem the bleeding of critical library services that help Americans with job searches, small business development, financial literacy and other essential assistance in hard economic times.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It is our hope that a similar situation can be avoided in BC, and that your government’s recent investments in public libraries and literacy – specifically under the 2004 Strategic Plan for Public Libraries – will be protected. Over the past three years, the Public Library Services Branch has worked hard to achieve the goals set out in the Strategic Plan and has implemented and encouraged many successful initiatives that have gone a long way to improving library service around the province – for example, the OneCard interlibrary borrowing system, technology grants, virtual reference services, the Evergreen Open Source IT system, staff training, library federations, etc. We need to ensure that these investments continue and that libraries are recognized as the crucial social, cultural and economic supports that they are.

A recent ALA article notes that “Investments in libraries often yield high dividends for communities. Studies show economic returns from salaries and wages paid to staff, construction costs, employment services and library purchases. A recent Pennsylvania study points out that for every dollar invested in the public library,

the community receives a return of \$5.50. A similar report from Florida shows a \$6.54 return on investment."^{iv} "Public libraries are people magnets and can play an important role in downtown and neighbourhood development."^v We're talking about a truly unique institution. Where else can you borrow books, music, movies, magazines, and instructional DVDs at no cost? What other institution allows you to log into its holdings remotely and enjoy these and other resources in the comfort of your own home? In what other single setting can job seekers get help with their resumes, seniors work on their computer skills, toddlers enjoy story time and teenagers research a school project? The library is going to be drawing in more and more people than ever in the coming months – helping with employment challenges; providing a safe and welcoming space to read, learn and use the computer; giving language and settlement assistance to new immigrants; and fostering all varieties of literacy. In these challenging times, when our services are needed most by British Columbians, we are counting on the provincial government to maintain – if not increase – existing library funding and support.

Thank you for your dedication to BC's public library system and for your understanding of the importance of public libraries in these tough economic times. I leave you with a quote from the *Prince George Citizen*, which really sums it all up:

Public libraries are invaluable during economic downturns. The unemployed can explore career options, track down job openings and visit employer websites on the Internet. New business owners can read how-to books on a wide variety of subjects. Librarians, who are professional researchers, can assist residents in tracking down and making sense of information... Public libraries are community enablers, places of personal empowerment and self help. Best of all, there are no fees, which allow everyone to use their services, regardless of background and personal means.^{vi}

Let's make providing these and other essential library services to British Columbians a continued government priority in the months ahead.

Sincerely,



Andy Ackerman,
President, BCLTA

CC: The Honourable Shirley Bond, Minister of Education

CC: Jacqueline van Dyk, Director, Public Library Services Branch

Enclosure: Various articles and news releases on the topic of public library funding challenges and the value of public libraries to their patrons and to communities at large.

Endnotes

ⁱ *Library Reaches Far Beyond Books to Music, Film and More*

www.canada.com/vancouver/news/westcoastnews/story.html?id=cd7884af-acfd-4da1-9bfd-7e1a3183929a

ⁱⁱ *Obama's Concern Over Closures Demonstrates Understanding of Libraries' Role in Economy*

www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2008/december2008/woobama.cfm

ⁱⁱⁱ *ALA Seeks \$100 million in Stimulus Funding as US Libraries Face Critical Cutbacks, Closures*

www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2008/october2008/WOstimulus.cfm

^{iv} *ibid.*

^v *Libraries Important During Economic Uncertainty*

www.princegeorgecitizen.com/20081210165529/opinion/letters/libraries-important-during-economic-uncertainty.html

^{vi} *ibid.*