Greater Victoria Public Library Board
Regular Meeting
March 23, 2021
12:00p.m. – 1:00p.m.
MS Teams Meeting Online
The GVPL Board recognizes and acknowledges the traditional territory of the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations on which the Central Branch is located and Board Meetings take place.

Mission Statement
We build community and support literacy and lifelong learning by providing free access to information, space, tools and expertise.
1. Call to Order

2. Indigenous Acknowledgement

3. Chair’s Remarks

4. Consent Agenda
   4.1 Approval of Agenda
   4.2 Approval of Minutes – February 23, 2021 – Attachment 4.2

5. Officers Reports
   5.1 Chair Report – Attachment 5.1 For Information
   5.2 CEO Report – Attachment 5.2 For Information

6. Business Arising from Previous Meeting

7. Committee Reports
   7.1 Planning and Policy Committee Meeting March 16, 2021 – Oral Report
   7.1.2 Strategic Planning Working Group Update For Discussion

8. New Business
   8.1 2020 Provincial Library Grants Report – Attachment 8.1 For Information

9. Board Correspondence
   9.1 Patron Letter to the Board – L. Takata – Attachment 9.1 For Information

10. Board Liaison Updates
    10.1 Friends of the Library
    10.2 BCLTA
    10.3 IslandLink Federation

11. Future Business
    Facilities Planning – Consultant’s Report

12. In Camera Meeting

13. Next Meeting Date
    April 27, 2021 12:00pm – 1:00pm

14. Adjournment
An electronic meeting of the Greater Victoria Public Library Board was held on the above date. The following individuals were in attendance:

**Board Members:**
- Trustee A. Appleton
- Trustee E. Beaton
- Trustee D. Begoray
- Trustee M. Boyd
- Trustee T. Chung
- Trustee J. Davis
- Trustee E. Glover
- Trustee K. Harper
- Trustee A. Holthuis
- Trustee D. Kobayashi
- Trustee G. Lemon
- Trustee J. Loveday
- Trustee A. MacKinnon
- Trustee K. Roessingh
- Trustee K. Santini
- Trustee D. Seaton
- Trustee B. Thompson
- Trustee J. Vermeulen

**Regrets:**
- Trustee M. Sahlstrom

**Staff:**
- M. Sawa, CEO/Secretary
- P. McKinnon, Director Finance and Facilities
- D. Main, Director People and Culture
- A. Polinsky, Acting Director Communications and Development
- J. Windecker, Director Library Services, Innovation and Delivery
- D. Wood, Privacy Officer, Director, Planning and IT
- K. Marshall, Recording Secretary
- F. Ferreira, President CUPE 410

1. **CALL TO ORDER**
   
   Trustee MacKinnon called the meeting to order at 12:04 p.m.

2. **INDIGENOUS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**
   
   Trustee MacKinnon provided the Indigenous acknowledgement.
3. APPROVAL OF CONSENT AGENDA

Moved by Trustee Lemon, Seconded by Trustee Kobayashi

THAT the February 23, 2021 consent agenda be approved.

MOTION CARRIED

4. CHAIR’S REMARKS

Trustee MacKinnon provided the chair’s remarks. Trustee MacKinnon welcomed the new City of Victoria Councillor Trustee, Marianne Alto. 2021 budget presentations are proceeding. Trustee MacKinnon thanked Trustee Begoray for presenting remarks on behalf of the board for the Central Saanich council presentation on February 22, 2021.

Trustee MacKinnon expressed his thanks and appreciation to Kristine Marshall, Executive Assistant, for her work at GVPL and the support she has provided to the Board. Ms. Marshall has tendered her resignation, effective February 26, 2021.

5. OFFICERS REPORTS

5.1 CEO Report

M. Sawa, CEO provided the CEO report. M. Sawa thanked councillor representatives for their support at council budget meetings.

The strategic planning 2021 process is being developed and additional information will be provided in item 8.1 Strategic Planning Process.

GVPL has acquired a new shuttle van. It has been decaled and is in operation.

A temporary Executive Assistant will be starting on March 1, 2021.

5.2 Chair’s Report

Trustee MacKinnon provided the chair’s report. Additional budget presentations are forthcoming with confirmed dates for the Township of Esquimalt council on March 1 and the District of Saanich council on March 11.

6. BUSINESS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

None

7. COMMITTEE REPORTS

7.1 Planning and Policy Committee Meeting February 16, 2021

Trustee MacKinnon thanked Trustee Kobayashi for accepting the position of Committee Chair and to Trustee Appleton for accepting the position of Committee Vice-Chair.

Trustee Kobayashi provided the planning and policy committee report. The planning and policy committee met on February 16, 2021 to determine 2021 committee priorities. The committee’s primary focus this year will be the strategic planning process and will present the strategic
planning process recommendations in today’s meeting agenda item 8.1 Strategic Planning Process.

8. NEW BUSINESS

8.1 Strategic Planning Process

D. Wood, Director, Planning and IT, reviewed the staff recommendation for the strategic planning roadmap, consisting of the following elements:

- A plan duration of 24 months, October 2021 – October 2023;
- A process timeline beginning in February 2021 and concluding in June 2021;
- An engagement process including market research, interviews and a community survey; and
- A measurement tool

A strategic plan working group of the planning and policy committee is required.

Moved by Trustee Roessingh, Seconded by Trustee Begoray

| THAT the GVPL Board of Trustees approve the strategic planning roadmap, and its related components, to guide the 2021/2022 strategic planning process. |
| THAT the GVPL Board of Trustees assemble a Strategic Plan Working Group to provide staff with direction and guidance for the duration of the planning process; specifically, at the point of initiation (February 2021) through to the public launch of the plan (October 2021). |
| THAT the GVPL Board of Trustees assemble for a half-day retreat in March or early April to generate and approve the strategic priorities and the specific, measurable goals for the plan. Further, with health and safety precautions in mind, the half-day retreat would be delivered via Microsoft Teams and/or other digital engagement platforms. |

MOTION CARRIED

Trustee MacKinnon called for volunteers for the strategic planning working group. The following trustees expressed interest:

Trustee Begoray
Trustee Vermeulen
Trustee Lemon
Trustee Glover
Trustee Boyd
Trustee Kobayashi
Trustee Harper
Trustee Appleton
Trustee Chung
Trustee Davis
Trustee Beaton
Trustee MacKinnon
8.2 Facilities Planning Priorities 2021

A regional service delivery master plan for GVPL was completed by consultants in February 2020. The report will inform discussions for future facilities planning.

9. BOARD LIAISON UPDATES

9.1 Friends of the Library

Trustee Santini provided the Friends of the Library update. The Friends are looking forward to contributing support for public engagement activities and the enhancement of children’s spaces at branches.

9.2 BCLTA

Trustee Glover provided the BCLTA update. BCLTA continues to work with its library partners on advocacy and connecting with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, the new home of the Public Libraries Branch.

BCLTA is hoping to partner its 2021 annual conference with the Beyond Hope Conference.

Trustees were encouraged to attend the BCLTA workshops being offered in March.

9.3 IslandLink Federation

Trustee Davis provided the IslandLink Federation update. The IslandLink Federation Board met on February 18 to discuss 2021 priorities and will soon be planning its Fall AGM.

Trustee Boyd left the meeting at 1:00p.m.

10. NEXT MEETING DATE

March 23, 2021 12:00p.m. – 1:00p.m.

11. ADJOURNMENT

Moved by Trustee Roessingh, Seconded by Trustee Glover

THAT the regular meeting of the board adjourn.

MOTION CARRIED

Meeting adjourned 1:01p.m.

______________________________  ______________________________
Board Chair                                Board Secretary

MINUTES - BOARD
Maureen, Paul McKinnon and I continue to make the rounds of GVPL’s municipal partners’ Council meetings for our 2021 budget presentations. In the past month we presented at the Township of Esquimalt March 1, and the District of Saanich March 11. Responses to these presentations have been very positive, and Councilors have provided great feedback. I’d like to particularly thank our Board representatives from these municipalities.

Planning & Policy Committee had a very productive meeting March 16. Thanks to this Committee’s Chair Doug Kobayashi and Vice Chair Andrew Appleton. At this meeting we met consultant Rebecca Jones, and reviewed the strategic planning process. The Committee also confirmed membership of the Strategic Planning Working Group. Thanks to all Board members who enthusiastically volunteered to participate on the Working Group, and in particular thanks to Andrew Appleton who will Chair it.

The Strategic Planning Working Group had its first meeting with the consultant last Friday (March 19). I’m looking forward to the Group’s report later on today’s Board agenda.

I had the opportunity to meet with the GVPL staff leadership team March 16). I brought them greetings and thanks on behalf of the Board in recognition of the outstanding efforts made this past year in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and service restoration

Past Chair Deborah Begoray and I had an opportunity to make an in-person presentation of thanks to Kristine Marshall, Executive Assistant, on her final day with GVPL. We’ll certainly miss Kristine! The process of hiring her successor is underway at present, and Kristine has kindly volunteered her time and experience to help with the transition.

And finally, there’s been a lot of GVPL activity this month. I really appreciate the support of Vice-Chair Annemieke Holthuis and Past Chair Deborah Begoray.
CEO Report
March 2021

As we enter the second week of Spring Break, and mark the one year anniversary of the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, I would like to recognize the efforts of staff who have so effectively reimagined GVPL’s Spring Break programming this year.

Our Spring Break virtual programming lineup was featured on CFAX with a terrific interview with librarian Aiyang Ma: https://www.iheartradio.ca/cfax-1070/audio/greater-victoria-public-library-launching-virtual-programs-1.14799516?mode=Article

‘Take and Make! bags have been specially designed by GVPL librarians to ‘take the library home’ as well. Our most recent ‘bag’ features origami, the joyful art of paper folding. All materials and instructions are provided.

A complete listing of current and upcoming programs for all ages can be found at https://www.gvpl.ca/gvpl-programs/

Our work with community partners continues to flourish. For example, for each Belfry Theatre production, our librarians develop a resource list of books, films and recordings to enrich the theatre experience. Here is link to the Belfry Librarian booklist for the Belfry Theatre’s recent production of ‘Being Here: The Refugee Project’ https://programs.belfry.bc.ca/belfry-librarian-being-here/

As well as our programming and community outreach activities, there has been much activity relating to our virtual branch.
On March 25, GVPL patrons will be transitioned from Lynda.com to LinkedIn Learning.

LinkedIn acquired Lynda.com in 2015 and has been working with library systems across the country to make the upgrade from Lynda.com to LinkedIn Learning. With the rebranding to LinkedIn Learning, patrons will have access to all the same resources, plus additional courses including courses in English, French, German, Japanese, Spanish, Mandarin, and Portuguese.

GVPL’s digital magazine collection is being transferred from RBdigital to OverDrive. This is because OverDrive acquired RBdigital last year. With this transition, we’re also preparing to move our eBooks and e-audiobooks from cloudLibrary to OverDrive – providing our patrons, with access to the world’s largest and most popular eBook platform.

In other collection news, I am pleased to report that previously reported federal funding cuts to the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) and the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS) have been reversed for 2021-22, thanks to an effective national advocacy campaign. Long-term, sustainable federal funding for alternate format materials for persons with print disabilities will enable access to alternate format materials, such as braille, e-books, and audiobooks, while Canada’s independent book publishing industry continues to increase the production and distribution of accessible books.

We continue to move forward on restoration of services in our physical spaces. Along with extended open hours, washroom access and browsing space at all branches is expanding and public computer service is being re-established on a branch-by-branch basis.
Greater Victoria Public Library

2020 PROVINCIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY GRANTS REPORT (PLGR)

Introduction

It is impossible to review 2020 without acknowledging the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has profoundly disrupted public library service delivery. Through the dedication and resilience of our staff and board of trustees, we have adapted and adjusted to the new normal of ‘business as possible’.

Greater Victoria Public Library (GVPL) is grateful for the support of the Public Libraries Branch and the BC Partners - BC Library Association (BCLA), BC Library Trustees Association (BCLTA), Association of BC Public Library Directors (ABCPLD), and the BC Libraries Co-operative.

The GVPL service area encompasses ten of the thirteen municipalities and five of the ten Indigenous communities in the Capital Regional District. From urban centres to districts with proud cultural, agricultural, and rural traditions, GVPL’s service area includes a combined population of approximately 352,000 residents of:

- The District of Central Saanich
- The City of Colwood
- The Township of Esquimalt
- The Esquimalt Nation
- The District of the Highlands
- The City of Langford
- The District of Metchosin
- The District of Oak Bay
- The District of Saanich
- The Scia’new First Nation (Beecher Bay)
- The Songhees Nation
- The Tsartlip First Nation
- The Tsawout First Nation
- The City of Victoria
- The Town of View Royal

2020 marked the final year of GVPL’s Strategic Plan 2016-2020 and signalled the beginning of a new planning cycle. The events of the past year have highlighted our strengths and our weaknesses. We are well positioned to take what we have learned and to ‘build back better’ in both the short and long term.

The events of the past year have shone a light on our strengths and weaknesses. We are well positioned to take what we have learned and to ‘build back better’.
PROVINCIAL STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1 - IMPROVING ACCESS FOR BRITISH COLUMBIANS

Public libraries are an integral part of Government’s commitment to a province that works for everyone. GVPL’s 2016-2020 strategic goal to engage passionate library members, funders, and partners to expand the library’s reach and impact was at the foundation of an action plan that focused on enhancing community collaborations and highlighted GVPL’s commitment to ‘doing more with more’. This included work with the BC Library Association (BCLA), Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC), BC Libraries Cooperative, IslandLink Federation, and the South Island Prosperity Partnership (SIPP), as well as local indigenous communities, newcomer and literacy groups, cultural and recreational organizations, and educational institutions, to name a few. This commitment allowed GVPL to deliver 588 programs to 13,695 people in the first two months of 2020.

With a core value of inclusiveness, GVPL is dedicated to reaching, and engaging, diverse communities. In early 2020, we held a joint screening of the film Picking up the Pieces: The Making of the Witness Blanket in partnership with the Bruce Parisian Library at the Victoria Native Friendship Centre. We also hosted the Monthly Dinner with the Support Network of Indigenous Women and Women of Colour.

GVPL is an active partner in the Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership group and continues to work with the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society to support two transitional housing projects in the region. Other key projects supported included working with Together Against Poverty, Downtown Service Providers, UVIC’s Chapter of the Pro-Bono Students Canada, Peers Victoria Resources Society, and PACE Society on ID Clinics for people who have barriers to accessing replacement ID and transgender people who want to legally change their name and gender marker.

GVPL staff is working with local community partners to re-imagine how programs are delivered. In the wake of the pandemic and the cancellation of regular in-person services, librarians connected with local schools via Zoom and worked with cultural organizations to offer virtual programs. As an alternative to in-person programs, and to encourage community involvement, we integrated the online BC Summer Reading Club with seasonal information tables and displays at library branches. Victoria Seed Library seed swaps were moved outside to adhere to provincial health orders.

A Seed Swap event was held in the Central Branch courtyard in November 2020 as part of the Seed Library program.
GVPL’s 2016-2020 strategic goal to inspire discovery through programs, collections, and services that enhance literacy and lifelong learning has created a culture of excellence for staff and board members who strive to access training opportunities that allow them to provide quality and future-focused library services.

Staff adapted to different ways of working in 2020 and investment in new software and equipment gave them the tools to participate in online collaboration and learning. Combining new equipment with existing and recently acquired online learning platforms such as Lynda.com and Niche Academy, increased our capacity to deliver services in creative ways. One example is the Ideas to Go series, which was launched in late 2020 and is ongoing. The series features short videos by librarians that combine their passions, interests, and GVPL resources. All the resources highlighted in the videos are available on gvpl.ca, which is available 24/7.

Microsoft Teams, and the ability of staff and board members to swiftly adapt to this technology, allowed for the seamless transition to remote work during 2020. Everything from committee and board meetings, to working groups and portfolio collaborations, as well as engagement with community partners, went online using Microsoft Teams. One of the advantages of using online meeting tools was that distance and travel restrictions were removed and the sharing of information and knowledge continued uninterrupted.

The encompassing philosophy of lifelong learning at GVPL is embodied in the Community-Inspired Library Service Model, as well as participation in the Library Leadership Excellence and Development (LLEAD) program, BCLTA webinars, and ABCPLD peer-to-peer sharing. Two librarians participated in the LLEAD program as emerging library leaders and CEO Maureen Sawa continued to share her expertise and knowledge as a mentor. During the lockdown, staff contributed to the CULC Think Tank’s COVID-19 Toolkit on Recovery and Reimagined Public Library Services.
GVPL’s 2016-2020 strategic goal to create great library spaces included the development of a virtual branch, which was instrumental in allowing library services to pivot to digital platforms at the onset of the pandemic. With a full-service virtual branch, the demand for digital collections and services soared. While the physical branches were closed, GVPL staff continued to provide community members with service through the Comments and Questions form on the website, helping patrons access their accounts online and borrow digital materials. In June alone, staff answered 751 questions through this service point, which represented a 265% increase over the previous year. Our customer service telephone line has also proven to be an invaluable and popular support, particularly for new users of our virtual branch. In addition to transactional support such as assisting with library account questions, GVPL staff helped many patrons learn how to access digital resources by walking them through the process, step-by-step over the telephone.

To better serve members of the community, policies were amended to allow for extended borrowing periods, deferred account expirations, and suspended fines.

GVPL adapted its collections and programs to ensure the health and safety of patrons and staff. We created a new collection for the vending machine at the Langford Heritage Branch to allow safe, contactless access to library materials. GVPL remodeled its community engagement approach by providing seasonal Grab and Go tables at branches, setting up Storywalks™ in parks, and moving school visits and community partner meetings online. The BC Summer Reading Club was redesigned into a hybrid model using the online BCSRC website and Grab and Go tables to register children in the self-directed reading program.

The investment in Niche Academy in 2020 further supported patrons’ growing use of digital resources by providing ready-to-use tutorials and custom-made staff tutorial videos.
STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4 - ENHANCING GOVERNANCE

GVPL’s 2016-2020 strategic goal to *Lead with the support of innovative ideas, service models, and governance* was accomplished in 2020 with no less than three awards and multiple invitations to share our expertise and knowledge on provincial and national taskforces.

GVPL staff participated in the City of Victoria’s Welcoming Cities Taskforce, the BC Library Branch’s Data Collection Working Group, the CULC Think Tank on Recovery and Reimagined Library Service Post COVID-19, and the virtual Pacific Northwest Conference. Librarians from GVPL were also invited to contribute a chapter for the American Library Association’s upcoming book on Libraries and Sustainability, highlighting the Seed Library and Repair Café.

As a member of the South Island Prosperity Partnership, GVPL was represented on the Economic Recovery taskforce promoting the library’s leadership in remote learning through online platforms such as Lynda.com and Niche Academy. Staff also provided a Virtual Booth in the Project’s Rising Economy Week and mentored girls and young women as part of Soroptimist International.

CEO Maureen Sawa received the Award of Excellence from the Association of BC Public Library Directors in recognition of her outstanding leadership in library advocacy and innovation and her contributions to the library community. Librarian Rachel Rogers won the BC Cataloguing and Technical Services J. McRee Elrod Leadership Award for her contributions to decolonizing subject headings used for Indigenous Peoples. Her work continues to support other libraries through this process and is recognized nationally as a model for demonstrating leadership and cultural sensitivity while moving terminology commonly used to refer to Indigenous Peoples forward and contributing to the reconciliation process.

GVPL also received second place in the prestigious IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) PressReader International Library Marketing Award 2020 for the Change Your Mind campaign, which used an integrated brand strategy to transform the way people think about libraries in Greater Victoria and beyond.

*The award-winning Change Your Mind campaign is predominantly featured on GVPL’s newest shuttle vehicle.*
COVID-19 AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

On March 16, 2020 GVPL closed its physical branches and suspended all in-person services and programs to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. In anticipation of the closure, patrons stocked up on library materials, borrowing more than 30,000 items in a single day; this total represents more than double the daily average circulation.

Within days of the closure, GVPL pivoted to offering virtual services. Maintaining critical services and infrastructure, increasing digital resources, supporting patrons virtually, and welcoming new patrons online became the focus for staff working remotely. GVPL had previously established online library card registration and this allowed new patrons to have instant access to digital collections. There was a 92% increase in the use of digital resources between April and June 2020 and funds from physical collections were relocated to digital resources to keep pace with the surge in demand.

The return to in-person service required considerable flexibility, ingenuity, and attention to detail in the face of evolving scientific information. GVPL began a phased service restoration for its physical branches in June 2020. Branches were re-opened with stringent health and safety protocols and a new service model that allowed for physical distancing and safe interactions. The last of GVPL’s physical branches opened on October 9, 2020.

Challenges

- Ensuring staff had the correct equipment and that the infrastructure could support large numbers of staff working remotely.
- Branches with anchored shelving reduced the ability to reconfigure spaces for social distancing.
- Aging IT infrastructure challenged the ability to meet the increased demand for digital resources.
- Significant time and resources were required to develop ‘gold standard’ WorkSafeBC-approved reopening plans.
- Profound changes to all services to meet safety protocols were required.

Innovation

- Online library card registration implemented in 2017 allowed new patrons to immediately access digital resources.
- Newer branches with mobile furniture and shelving could be reconfigured with all safety protocols in place.
- Socially distanced community engagement was possible with on-the-go programs such as Storywalks™ and takeaway activities at Grab and Go tables.
- Existing relationships facilitated participation in national virtual events that provided patrons access to big-name, international authors, i.e. One Page Literary Festival.
Over the last twelve months, we have seen how important connectivity technology is – for accessing information and staying connected to others. Even when people have adequate connectivity, many of those isolated at home lack the technical skills required to fully utilize the resources and tools available online. GVPL librarians are uniquely placed in that they have familiarity with the level of technical know-how in our community and what types of tools and skills the community both needs and wants. Public service librarians work daily to assist patrons with a variety of technical difficulties and to answer technology-related questions. Patrons have long expressed their desire for GVPL to provide more access to digital equipment that allows people of all ages to preserve their stories, research, and other records.

GVPL’s strategic goal to offer new tools and learning opportunities that support the creativity and self-expression of individuals in our community is being realized in the current planning of our first in-branch Digital Media Lab. As outlined in GVPL’s interim report, we have designated the 2020 technology grant to make significant enhancements to the design of GVPL’s Digital Media Lab, which will open in our new Esquimalt Branch in 2021.

Over the next six months, GVPL librarians will continue work on the selection and design of equipment for the Digital Media Lab, enabling patrons to convert photographs, slides, audio-cassette tapes, and VHS tapes into digital formats. This digital equipment will empower patrons to develop the skills needed to digitize their personal records.

The equipment housed within the Digital Media Lab will initially be made available for staff in a test environment at the Central Branch. This will allow time for the equipment to be configured and for staff training and the establishment of a digital service delivery model. The Lab will then be permanently relocated, for public use, to the newly reconstructed Esquimalt Branch. We look forward to increasing the community’s access to new and innovative technologies and providing guidance and training to help patrons acquire the skills to become confident and adept users of these technologies.
SUMMARY

GVPL’s Community-Inspired Library Services model continues to guide the organization in discovering and learning new ways to offer innovative library services, both in-person and virtually. Supported by dedicated staff, patrons have learned and adapted to new ways of accessing collections, programs, and resources. This is demonstrated by GVPL’s December circulation figures with overall circulation reaching 70% of 2019 levels and materials placed on hold at 89% of the previous year, despite limited hours. However, patrons continue to want access to physical spaces and amenities, and they yearn for the day when libraries can once again act as community living rooms and gathering spaces.

While the opportunity to look at library services in new ways is exciting, the task of leveraging them may challenge the capacity of GVPL’s resources. Resources that were redirected successfully to meet immediate needs during the height of the pandemic must now be reconciled. Decisions must be made on the sustainability of services patrons have adapted to. This leads directly into the preparation of a new strategic plan that will begin to address those challenges and opportunities.

GVPL appreciates the ongoing support the Public Libraries Branch provides for public libraries in our community and across the province.

2020 Key Facts and Figures

- 203% increase in online card registration.
- Over 10,000 new cardholders.
- 128% increase in the use of our online contact form (for comments and questions).
  - 223% increase in questions on digital resources.
- 2,630,162 virtual visits.
- Nearly 2 million physical items circulated.
- 641,136 holds on physical materials filled in eight months.
- 52% increase in digital circulation.
- More than 100 literacy and programming partnerships.
- 3,300 children registered in BC Summer Reading Club.
- Over 1,100 GVPL Books for Babies bags distributed to new parents in GVPL’s service area. The bags were funded by a *Times Colonist* literacy grant.
MEMORANDUM

Date: March 19, 2021

To: GVPL Board of Trustees

From: Andy MacKinnon, Chair

CC: CEO

Subject: Letter to the Board – L Takata

I will be circulating a draft letter of response to the attached letter to trustees for review in advance of the March 23 Board meeting.

Andy
February 23, 2021

Members of the Board of Directors
Greater Victoria Public Library
735 Broughton Street
Victoria, BC

Dear Members of the Greater Victoria Public Library Board,

I would like to express my gratitude for your very important work in support of our valuable public library system. However, I’m writing to share a number of concerns regarding the accessibility of library services as a result of GVPL's response to the pandemic.

I would first like to provide some personal background information for context. I have been a resident of Victoria (located on Lekwungen Territory) for the past few years, but my roots are on the mainland where I spent the first 20 years of my life living below the poverty line. My family, which consisted of a single mother raising four children on one modest income, lived in subsidized housing in low-income neighbourhoods with many other struggling families. Among my neighbours were racialized immigrants, refugees, underemployed individuals, and single-parent families. Two generations before this, my Japanese-Canadian family, as well as that of my husband’s, were exiled and dispossessed by racist Canadian policies (the War Measures Act) and complicit bystanders who did not speak up against the injustice of Japanese-Canadian internment. This is the lens through which I view our society.

The pandemic is disproportionately affecting those who are marginalized, including our BIPOC community members and those in financially vulnerable positions. The public library has been in a position to support these most vulnerable members of our community, but has failed them in the following ways.

1. Hours of Operation

It took 8 months for all GVPL branches to open, and when they did, what few services were offered, catered to middle class and affluent patrons. For several months, branches were open only in the middle of the day (11am-4pm), during regular work hours. Frontline and essential workers, many of whom are racialized Canadians, immigrants, refugees and migrant workers, were unable to access services with the exception of one day per week (Saturdays). Working on the frontlines means not having the freedom or flexibility to choose one's hours or to work from home. In contrast, white collar workers typically have such freedoms. Thus, they are more likely to be able to get to the library during their hours of operation. Families with very young children were also unable to use library services as the opening hours coincided with nap time. Single parents and families with earners on the frontlines were also less likely to be able to access services.

In an email to the CEO and directors in early August, I made simple suggestions to improve accessibility to services and collections. These included the shifting (not lengthening) of hours on one day per week, providing different hours at different branches, or lengthening the hold pickup period. Hours were not extended to serve working populations until January 2020, and at only five of twelve branches. All other library systems in BC offered evening hours from the beginning, at least one day per week. Many other library systems had branches that were open
both weekend days. Some systems, like Coquitlam Public Library, were offering curbside pickup even during lockdown.

2. Internet Access

Internet access is neither universal nor equitable. Access to this important resource is one of the core services that public libraries provide. With the release of BC’s Restart Plan, the provincial government identified libraries among a list of services that could prepare to open starting in mid-May. I expected the doors of our public library would be among the first to open, recognizing their role in supporting people who found themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide. Internet is crucial in providing a connection during a time when people are not able to physically gather, providing up-to-date information about Covid-19 and providing a means for the newly unemployed to search and apply for work or financial assistance.

Vancouver Public Library’s Central branch computer lab was reopened on May 25th, 2020, for those who rely on the library for computer and internet access. Like GVPL, VPL also took a phased approach to restoring services, but they prioritized services for vulnerable citizens. The urgent need for this population to stay connected and informed was balanced against the need to provide a safe environment for patrons and staff. In contrast, GVPL did not provide internet access at any of its branches until January 2021. At present, nearly one year after restrictions began, only a single branch out of twelve is currently providing this service.

Other public library systems have risen to the challenge during the pandemic with creative and inclusive service delivery methods. Vancouver Island Regional Library system, for example, has not only been offering traditional in-branch internet access for several months, they have embarked on a community outreach program to address the digital divide and the resulting isolation. They are sending “digital care packages” to residential care facilities, such as long-term homes for seniors, transition houses for women escaping abusive relationships, shelters and recovery centres.

3. Access to Washrooms

Nothing in the WorkSafe BC guidelines suggests that washrooms should be closed. The BC Centre of Disease Control requires that libraries clean and disinfect toilet handles, tap handles, door handles and counters twice per day. Full washroom cleaning and disinfection is only required once per day. These requirements do not greatly differ from normal circumstances. Occupancy limit signs can be posted and neighbouring stalls can be closed off to ensure social distancing as is routinely done in malls, grocery stores and workplaces.

On GVPL’s “Visiting the Library FAQ,” one of the new FAQ’s is “Do you have public washroom access?” The misleading answer provided is “Yes, we do,” even though only three out of the twelve branches currently offer access, and only began doing so in January. The fourth branch, the sx̱exwemxwtx̱enx̱ James Bay, only offers it for patrons using the computer lab. This is problematic for pregnant women, seniors, parents of young children, and for patrons with medical issues like Crohn’s. It is a barrier that discourages patrons from using services. If the branches are open, and staff are able to use the washrooms, the public should be able to use them as well. Public libraries are publicly-funded institutions, paid for by taxpayers and designed to serve them. Access to washroom facilities is a basic human need.

In contrast, with the exception of the initial few days of lockdown, Vancouver Public Library kept the washrooms on the lower level of the Central branch open throughout the library
closure so that underserved populations could access them. All washrooms are currently open at all VPL branches.

4. Browsing Access to Collections

The BC Centre for Disease control has stated that “there is no evidence that the COVID-19 virus is transmitted via textbooks, paper or other paper-based products” and that “the risk of transmission between users of borrowed items also with plastic covers is also very low.”

It is understandable that additional space would be required to house quarantined items and crates of holds. Aside from that, collections (especially the non-English language materials) should be made as accessible as possible for in-person browsing. Protecting access to all of the World Languages collections ensures that populations that are already vulnerable are not further marginalized by library policy. Most of the non-English language resources have sparse bibliographic records. They lack both cover art, and complete descriptions which assist users in making borrowing decisions. While GVPL boasts access to hundreds of thousands of resources through the online catalogue, this service does not function well with non-English language resources. Patrons are asked to contact staff for special assistance in helping them select and access these resources — another barrier for those who do not speak English as their first language.

In contrast, access to physical collections in other library systems (such as VPL, CPL etc.) is no longer restricted.

5. Transparency and Accountability

Months ago, in sharing the inequities I was observing, I was told by GVPL CEO, Maureen Sawa, “We are doing our best.” That may have been the case, but many library systems were somehow doing it better. Their priorities were more in line with their mandates, providing accessible services to the vulnerable populations who desperately need them.

In an effort to hold GVPL to account, I was recently interviewed by CBC Radio’s Gregor Craigie. Maureen Sawa was also invited to speak. My expectation was that there would be more transparency if she was answering to the wider public. This was unfortunately not the case. A former public library colleague of mine, upon hearing the interview, described Maureen’s response as that of a “slippery politician.” “When asked about the lack of internet access, she gets away with talking about the United Way, browsing, quarantining books, adequate space in the back for staff, and new opening hours,” she commented. Another librarian acquaintance described the interview as “infuriating,” “tight-lipped and opaque rather than transparent.” The issue of internet access was skirted and vague reference to hardware upgrades was provided as an excuse for the delay in public computer access restoration. The public should be able to expect more transparency from the head of a publicly-funded institution that exists to service the public and to help level the playing field. The CEO also demonstrated her privilege by misusing the term “digital divide.” While I spoke about lack of access to information and opportunity for the unemployed, underemployed and other vulnerable members of society, she spoke only of privileged seniors having trouble with their gadgets and wanting to talk on the phone. Success should be measured by how well we are serving the needs of our most vulnerable community members. Pats on the back are premature if services and spaces are only made available to the loudest and most visible of constituents.
Going forward, public institutions such as libraries need to start moving past the performative gestures like assigning a Lekwungen name to library branch, or naming a study room after a black pioneer. These are meaningful gestures only when there are inclusive policies in place. From a collection development point of view, GVPL has an extensive and impressive collection of diverse materials that provide mirrors for its BIPOC community. We must consider though, that pandemic policies may be making those mirrors difficult to access for the population who would benefit most from them. Curating collections and creating reading lists are not enough when there are barriers preventing whole populations from accessing them.

It would serve our public libraries well to analyze the makeup of our boards and those in senior leadership. Does it reflect the community it serves? If not, are there discussions going on as to why? Are there current efforts for diversifying? How can a board anticipate their diverse community’s needs without the lived experiences needed to understand them? Public libraries are not beyond critique, from the outside or from within. In fact critical analysis is necessary to support a continued battle against unconscious bias, blind spots and institutional oppression. However unintentional, libraries play a role in sustaining hegemonic values and white supremacy, partially a result of librarianship and policy-makers being dominated by white people. Feedback from other lenses needs to be continuously and actively sought out to prevent the type of classist policies that ignore and passively-aggressively discourage vulnerable populations from coming to the library, through denial of internet service and closure of public washroom facilities.

It is time to advance a new library service model — one that prioritizes the narrowing of the digital divide, and one that ensures that all citizens, regardless of background, can stay informed amidst a continuing crisis. One that considers first the marginalized instead of leaving them as an afterthought. Are all branches truly open when they are not accessible to all patrons? Are the digital collections accessible to the majority or all patrons? Should serious consideration be made to removing barriers for low-income patrons, such as fines? It’s time to recommit to the values set out and approved by the board, specifically those involving inclusiveness, innovation and public accountability.

There are biases inherent in current GVPL priorities and systems that need to be addressed. These include:

• Consideration of staff and institutional needs before community needs.
• Prioritization of community members with the most privileges (financial cultural, racial, etc)
• Lack of diversity in library leadership (e.g. Board, CEO, directors), resulting in the running of a public library by and for white, English-speaking, middle-class people.
• Digital resources accessible only to people with expensive devices (e.g. smartphones, laptops, tablets) and internet connection
• Misplaced priorities and impractical service delivery methods including opening hours that cater to the privileged
• Institutional racism and classism

Sincerely,

Lisa Takata