

A Brief

Presented To

The Taskforce on  
Municipal Legislative Renewal

By

Saskatchewan Library Trustees' Association

12 April 2000

The Saskatchewan Library Trustees' Association is the umbrella group that represents over 2,550 public library trustees in the province of Saskatchewan. In this brief, we are responding to the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal's Interim Report that was released in February.

### **The Saskatchewan Public Library System**

Saskatchewan has a unique public library system. The Cities of Regina and Saskatoon operate municipal public libraries and the remainder of the province is divided up into eight library systems. Pahnkisiimon Nuyeyáh Library System (PNLS) serves the northern part of the province and is based in La Ronge. In the south and central parts of the province there are seven regional library systems:

Chinook Regional Library—headquartered in Swift Current  
Palliser Regional Library—headquartered in Moose Jaw  
Southeast Regional Library—headquartered in Weyburn  
Parkland Regional Library—headquartered in Yorkton  
Wapiti Regional Library—headquartered in Prince Albert  
Lakeland Library Region—headquartered in North Battleford  
Wheatland Regional Library—headquartered in Saskatoon

The Regina and Saskatoon Public Libraries have specific legislation tailored to meet the needs of a large urban public library system. PNLS has legislation that is designed to support a federated public library system, which works best in northern Saskatchewan where cultural and social demands have resulted in a high number of remote, joint school-public library service points. In the remainder of the province, a regional library system has emerged where the seven public library regions support the branches within the boundaries of their service areas. The regional system balances the need for local involvement in service delivery with the coordination and technical support provided by a central office.

The province's public library system has been carefully layered over time to provide an extremely cost effective but high quality public library service. The focus on public library service in each community is backed up by centralized technical services and administrative support for each library system with a coordinated provincial focus on facilitating resource sharing between each library system and each library branch. Each library system is overseen by an autonomous library board that works cooperatively with the other library systems in the province to achieve a high level of effectiveness that is seldom seen in the provision of services to the general public.

In 1995, the Provincial Government, public library trustees and the public library systems went through a thorough legislative renewal process that saw input from SARM, SUMA, Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, local municipalities

and the general public. As a result of this renewal, the Public Libraries Act and Regulations were rewritten and the Libraries Cooperation Act and Regulations were created. Both Acts and Regulations were enacted in 1996. The Public Libraries Act and Regulations, 1996, were built on the right of individuals to receive public library services and the framework within which public libraries shared their resources and worked together. The Libraries Cooperation Act extended the principles of cooperation and partnership to all types of libraries in the province.

A thorough review process that examined the role, mission and services of Saskatchewan's regional library systems followed the landmark legislative initiatives of 1996. The two municipal libraries and PNLs participated in the review whenever there were overlapping issues. This further renewal process resulted in the Review of Regional Libraries Committee releasing their Report in 1997. The key concerns of the report centred on funding formulas, service structures and the involvement of municipalities in determining their desired level of public library services.

The Review of Regional Libraries Committee Report energized the public library community in this province and has resulted in numerous service and resource sharing initiatives. Province-wide database licencing, on-line reference, public access computers in most public library branches, joint electronic gateway to public library catalogues, inter-library and inter-branch resource sharing systems, various municipal consultation processes, and many more initiatives have resulted from this renewal process. Public libraries are working hard to integrate this changing service landscape into their service structures.

Saskatchewan's Public Library system is one of the best in North America. The municipal library systems in Regina and Saskatoon are routinely ranked among some of the very best municipal library systems in North America. Some of our regional library systems have been on the leading edge of delivering automated library services in rural areas. The Federal Government has written up a number of Saskatchewan public library initiatives as examples of "best practices." Such recognition is all the more remarkable when the sparse rural and northern population levels are considered along with the relatively low costs incurred in delivering these services. Saskatchewan's Public Libraries could not attain such recognition without the uniquely Saskatchewan network of cooperation, partnerships and sharing that allows the residents of Saskatchewan to receive public library services that are among the best there are.

Given that Saskatchewan's public library systems have just completed a thorough renewal process and require time to consolidate the benefits from the process and that Saskatchewan's public library systems are successfully delivering public library services to the general public:

**The Saskatchewan Library Trustees' Association recommends that the Municipal Legislative Review Committee support the maintenance of the current province-wide public library system.**

### **Non-Municipal Functions**

The Interim Report of the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal lists three service areas that are seen as non-municipal functions. They are health, education and welfare. The rationale for this recommendation, as stated on page 35 of the report, is that “these functions have substantial provincial public interest issues and are thus better performed by separate local or provincial authorities with an environment of good cooperation, coordination and communication with municipal governments.” This explanation sets an extremely aggressive target for these areas but it precisely describes the current state of affairs in public libraries.

Currently, autonomous public library boards have the authority to manage public libraries. Though the membership in these boards is made up of municipal appointees, the boards are charged with directly overseeing the provision of library services in their geographically defined service areas. The locally appointed board member provides a communications conduit for the local municipality and the library system. There is extensive cooperation between municipalities and the respective library board, particularly in the area of facilities. For PNLs, the public and education library systems are so entwined that both systems would have to be redesigned from scratch if public libraries were defined as purely a municipal function.

Autonomous public library boards are the standard mechanism for managing and overseeing public libraries throughout North America. This arrangement works well and deserves to be maintained. The regional library board structure provides a mechanism for municipalities to come together and ensure that quality public library services are maintained across this province. All provincial residents are ensured that they will receive quality, cost-effective public library services regardless of their social or cultural background, their economic situation or where they may live.

Further, the substantial provincial public interest is confirmed by the fact that the province provides most of the operating funds for PNLs, and about half of the operating funds for regional library systems, and, albeit minimally, the province contributes to the operations of the two city municipal public libraries. This funding is related to cooperative efforts and resource sharing, which is itself a provincial public policy issue. Interestingly, with increased reliance on electronic information delivery requirements, public libraries have become a substantial federal public policy interest as well.

Given the wide public interest and social policy mandate of public libraries in this province and given the existence of an effective and efficient public library system in Saskatchewan:

**The Saskatchewan Library Trustees' Association recommends that the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal include public libraries in their list of non-municipal functions.**

### **Responsibility for Library Services**

The library community was very surprised by the magnitude of the impact that the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal's recommendations will have on Saskatchewan's public Libraries. With only four references to public libraries in their report, the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal has effectively recommended the destruction of over half a century's efforts in developing a cooperative province-wide public library system. This is especially shocking since there was no consultation or communication with the public library community in developing these recommendations.

Public libraries are very conscious of the need to examine their mission and goals on an on-going basis but the library community was never informed that their place in society was being examined from without nor were the library stakeholders given a specific opportunity to participate in the process prior to the issuance of the interim report. Further, having just completed a legislative and service renewal, public libraries are expecting that they will be given some time to implement all the changes that have ensued.

The Interim Report seems to indicate that the Taskforce sees public libraries as solely a municipal responsibility. It would seem that the Taskforce is saying that each municipality could operate its own public library system or it could cooperatively join with other municipalities to form a regional library system. The province-wide public library system would have to be reinvented from scratch when the system already exists, works well, and is cost effective. With a highly regionalized structure already in place why would the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal destroy it? Would not the current regional library system, along with minor changes to service boundaries to accommodate new municipal boundaries be a more effective model?

Further, the municipalization of public libraries could deny public libraries of significant provincial funding and opens up the spectre of massive de-regionalization of the public library system. It seems ironic that a report that supports some kind of regionalization of municipal government would open the door to the destruction of a very successful, highly regionalized public library system. It would make more sense to keep the current regionalized public library

system and overlay any new municipal structure on the existing public library system.

Since a very successful regional public library system already exists in Saskatchewan:

**The Saskatchewan Library Trustees' Association recommends that the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal overlay any redesigned municipal structure on the existing public library structure in Saskatchewan.**

Further, since municipal boundaries may be changing as municipalities are restructured:

**The Saskatchewan Library Trustees' Association recommends that the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal give the library community an opportunity to adjust its own service boundaries to coordinate with any changes that occur in Saskatchewan's municipal boundaries.**

### **The Need for Local Involvement**

One of the unique features of the public library system in Saskatchewan is that there is a place and role for local communities in the provision of public library services. Each community with a public library branch has a local library board. It has been the experience of regional library systems that local public library boards need to be responsible for some service functions in addition to serving as an advisory body for both the municipality and the library system. In regional libraries, local library boards are directly responsible for the provision of local programming services.

The recent Review of Regional Libraries Committee Report has been premised on the assumption that local municipal councils could have a stronger role in choosing the level of local library service for the local community and then contributing the funding that is required to sustain that level of service. Regional libraries are working on implementing this principle with some success, particularly with larger municipalities. But more importantly, the principle is that local communities need to have more than an advisory role. Their actions and decisions need to be reflected in a real and meaningful way.

The balance that public libraries have been able to attain between local and regional library boards, municipalities and the interests of the residents of local communities needs to be maintained and applied to all aspects of a restructured municipal system. Based on our experiences in balancing local input and regional interests:

**The Saskatchewan Library Trustees' Association recommends that the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal ensure that a significant local community role, in addition to any advisory role, is maintained in whatever municipal structure is proposed.**

### **Maintain the Current Public Library System**

The province's one-province public library system has been very successful in providing meaningful and effective public library service for the residents of Saskatchewan at a very reasonable cost. While we freely acknowledge that we can always do better, we want to ensure that we are not put in a position where we will do worse because of municipal restructuring. The province-wide regionalized public library service has allowed for an equitable level of public library services in both urban, rural and remote areas of the Province of Saskatchewan. The experience of regionalization has been extremely good for the public library system and the residents of Saskatchewan.

Our primary concern is that by including public libraries in the list of exclusive municipal responsibilities, the Taskforce on Municipal Legislative Renewal is restricting public libraries to the services provided at the local public library branch level and forcing public libraries to reduce their primary funding support to that of the local municipality. It is as if the Taskforce is cutting off one of our two support legs, thereby crippling our ability to respond to the ever-widening demands for library information services. De-regionalization of public libraries will constrain the ability of public libraries to deliver appropriate services and, at the same time, drive up the costs of operating the library system.

**The one-province public library system in Saskatchewan is probably the best in existence. Let's maintain it!**