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Sean Quinlan
Chair, Regina Public Library Board
Regina Public Library
2311 12th Avenue
Regina SK S4P 0N3

**Submission for a presentation to the Regina Public Library Board's
September 27, 2022 meeting, and inclusion in the RPL public record**

Good afternoon, my name is Jim Elliott. I was a member of the Alternative Task Force assembled to gather public input into the decisions of the Regina Public Library (RPL) Board in 2003.

The Friends' Library Alternative Task Force was appointed on February 1, 2004 and given a four-fold mandate:

1. To listen to the concerns of Regina citizens regarding the library closures (this includes the Prince of Wales branch, Glen Elm branch, Connaught branch, the Prairie History Room and the Dunlop Art Gallery) and the future of the RPL.
2. To encourage dialogue, discussion and debate on the issue.
3. To assess the process leading to the library closures and the reason for the decision.
4. To recommend, to the best of our ability, sustainable and innovative methods of maintaining library services at their present levels and enhancing them for the benefit of all Regina residents.

This September 27th, in my mind, brings me back to the days in late 2003 when the then Library Board and their Director made the decision, without any public awareness, that they were going to close three branches and shutter a number of institutions within the Regina Public Library. It was clear at that time that the basis for the decision was not available to the public.

At the beginning, the public said rightfully that they wanted to be involved in that decision-making and they were able to develop a consensus of citizens and taxpayers, totaling 26,048 people, saying that they wished to have a public referendum and vote on the Library Board decision.

And again today, the public, when asked about their beloved library and its services, was not adequately consulted or engaged in the dialogue prior to the announcements made only twenty days ago, on September 7th. Only a few days after having some 12 reports publicly posted on September 16, the public was expected to muster a response to what was being proposed. The public was given an extremely short time of a mere 3-4 days to put together a response to a still very vague answer to a question that has been plaguing this city for a few decades.

In my response, we are simply wishing to have a more robust, more thoughtful and valued engagement in the decision about the future of our beloved downtown branch of the Regina Public Library. It only took about 4 months of weekly meetings and outreach for the community in 2004 to educate, inform and execute their plans and their wishes. And very quickly it was found that a decision to maintain the branches and services was the correct one and the appropriate one for this community going forward.

It has been seen consistently that the community does not simply want a tall glass and steel tower at the corner of Lorne Street and 12th Avenue. In the current building, we already have the features of an appropriate, effective and valued position in the community. And the future for this city needs to be fulfilled. In 2004, the community rejected the hub and spoke model of library services, with one big branch downtown and only 4 branches at the corners of the city. And we have seen that it is not necessary to have a large glass monolith in central Regina for us to be in a position of maintaining and expanding the services for the residents of inner-city Regina or the rest of Regina.

The administrative functions and physical handling of library products could be moved to another part of the downtown, freeing up more space for more services. Or, if the downtown location is essential, administration and physical handling of library products could be moved to the west side of the property in a new four or five story tower. That could open 18,000 square feet of the current building for expanded programming and services, for current and future programs and a needed second elevator. A synergy of time and money could allow all this work to be done at the same time, saving time, money and the embedded energy and resources in our current building.

But prior to any decision, there needs to be adequate time for the public to be engaged fully to consider this and other options and maybe others from the public not thought of at this time. And prior to any decision, the public needs to better understand the financial implications of their decisions. And in conclusion, it is my belief that this decision should be first made by the citizens of this city and then ratified by the library board, after all it is the citizens' money and they should have a choice as to what they wish to spend it on today.

All of this would dictate that the decision being considered today should be put off until such time as a more participatory engagement with the taxpayers is done.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Elliott

Regina

2021 Survey & Stakeholder Engagement Summary

This survey and consultation procedure is limited in the following way:

1. There is no direct question around the options around what to do with the current building, i.e., renovate, expand or demolish and replace. At best it says that there is interest in renewal and the provision of services. It doesn't explicitly support demolition.
2. The questions have assumed that when a building is said to be "old", that it appears to be not fulfilling the needs. And yet, when one looks at the eleven services questioned, the current branch does nine of them. This presumption of not fulfilling the needs biases the question's answers towards a feeling that the building should be renewed but does that mean demolition.
3. The facilitated discussion with stakeholder groups is biased towards those that have a commercial or development bias. One third of them are business organizations or those interested in economic development. The Separate School District is included but the Public School District is not. There are very few if not any groups that work directly with those individuals that would frequent the central branch. There is not necessarily anyone who would represent strictly the patrons of the library.
4. The survey questions could almost be seen as motherhood questions. With the actions over the two previous decades when branches were to be closed or when the province reduced funding to libraries across the province, it is well known that the public love their libraries and are very willing to invest their tax dollars into these institutions.
5. The four themes for engagement are very open-ended and not appearing to be singularly that of what a library is supposed to be. For example, why are libraries seen to be defined as a destination downtown or a place that tourists should be marketed to? And what is the definition of a "destination"? And why is it left to the library to attract events and conferences to the downtown? What is a place for innovation and what is the definition of innovation? And with the lack of capacity in other organizations, why is there such a significant push to be that "facilitator of local connections" and why should the RPL be asked to have that role?
6. Much throughout the report, there is a coloration of the report because it happened during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Is that an appropriate response or should it be assessed as being in "normal times"? This also uses the approach of disaster capitalism put forward by Naomi Klein to justify making substantive changes to the branch following the pandemic or

disaster. Is this appropriate and is it being seen as an inappropriate change in direction after many years of inactivity from the library to respond to the growing needs of this branch?

7. It is noted that there is an increased demand for flexible and collaborative space hence the feeling that this branch as compared to adding more branches or changing the utilization of the central branch to simply be just another branch was justified. With the decline in rentable space in the downtown area for the past few years, is this something that is new and secondly, is it appropriate for the library to be the fixer to this problem or is this a result of the growing number of parking lots downtown?
8. There is need to have a much more robust, collaborative participatory process between the public and the library board and staff. These types of engagement do require a certain amount of power being given back to the public as it is the citizens that give more direction to the future plans.

Public Collaboration and Engagement

The use of a very general survey and engagement of perhaps twenty individuals in facilitated discussions over a very short period of time does not match up with the scale of the financial investment nor the need for a more robust discussion about the future plans of the library system.

The actions related to the central branch seems to be done prior to any ostensibly robust discussion of the library master plan. The needs for the entire system should be assessed and known prior to making any substantial investment. The idea that the central branch might be better served when it is simply a central branch and not coupled with the other functions that are within the current library has not been discussed. Is it possible that there might be a different model of service delivery to the branches that would allow for limiting the costs of renovating the current central branch while supporting the other branches? The current approach seems to be having the cart before the horse.

If one had done a more robust engagement with the public in library services for the future at the time when the official community plan was being debated and discussed, this city could have had the horse before the cart and then gone with the public behind them on their future plans. The process used by the city in the official community plan development was much more participatory, has given direction to the city administration and council and they are moving forward with the plan.