

THE BARBARIANS AT THE GATES

HOW CITIZENS ARE FIGHTING BACK AGAINST ATTACKS ON THE OTTAWA PUBLIC LIBRARY

Stepping Back from the Brink

As 2007 drew to a close, Ottawa Public Library (OPL) patrons breathed a collective sigh of relief, having just received two bits of good news that seemed to augur well for the continued survival of this beloved institution. One was Council's decision not to close the 10 branches that previously had been targeted as a way to cut \$3.2 million from the City's Budget. The other was passage of a 4.9% tax increase for 2008 rather than implement the massive cuts required to fulfill the Mayor's zero percent election promise.

Those rejoicing at the news would be well advised not to break open the champagne just yet. For the Library will still have to make a number of painful cuts – like putting plans for a new west-end facility on hold for at least a few years, cutting another \$830,000 out of its budget over the next three years through greater efficiency, absorbing cuts to its collections budget and putting off or cancelling important new programs.

Worse yet, Council is slated to revisit the City's budget in April 2008 with an eye to finding an additional \$100 million in "efficiencies" (a euphemism for cuts to jobs and services) – which means that a new – and more draconian – round of cuts may be just around the corner.

That the OPL should have to tighten its belt so much and so often appears to flow from a perception held by some City Councilors that the Library is a "soft target". This mindset was evident during the most recent Budget battle when the Library Board was ordered to come up with deep cuts in support of a zero percentage tax increase. The result was a proposal to close 10 library branches – an idea that aroused so much public anger that the Mayor and Council felt obliged to publicly disavow such a possibility.

But while the OPL may have dodged that particular bullet, it is not out of the woods yet – not by a long shot. For, unlike Police Services – which has its own stand-alone budget that cannot be tampered with – the Library's budget is subject to change at any time. So, further cuts in April may well be in the offing.

Protecting a Vital Community Service – Our Libraries

Still, not everyone is taking this situation lying down – with a number of Ottawa residents fighting back against threats to this key educational and cultural institution. One group determined to make a difference is the *Friends of the Public Library Association*, which mounted a highly effective campaign in 2007 aimed at preserving the Library's ability to maintain high-quality services in the region. It launched a *Save our Services (SOS)* postcard campaign that demonstrated strong public opposition to any and all branch

closings. Building on its this initial success, members made their presence felt at City Hall during Committee of the Whole deliberations, making strong presentations that gave Councilors considerable food for thought.

Questioned about the growing militancy of this group, which supplies the Library with some 500 volunteers each year, spokesperson Lori Nash defended her group's advocacy role, arguing that, "It's our job to advocate for public libraries to City Hall and the Province during budget time. If libraries were to close, it would have a phenomenal impact on the local economy and small business". And she emphasized the special importance of library services to children and youth – which would suffer if penny-pinching Councilors were to get their way.

Speaking of recent budget deliberations and the on-going threat to library services, CUPE 503 President, Brian Madden observed, "What was never discussed during budget discussions was the fact that Ottawa is the nation's capital. We keep talking about Ottawa as if it were just another city - but it's not. Ottawa should be a beacon to the rest of Canada." Madden also emphasized that funding for the library system should take into account the needs of a growing community – including the need for better services and improved access to library services in those areas undergoing rapid growth. "For example, Barrhaven's population is exploding and there are no new libraries being built in that area to accommodate those people. We have to make sure all of our citizens can access the services they require."

The Real Problem – Chronic Under-funding

Part of the problem is that libraries often take a back seat to other city services – in spite of a recent Decima survey that found an impressive 80% approval rating for local libraries. Such high praise is all the more remarkable, given how poorly funded Ottawa's libraries are, lagging that of other cities. For example, while per capital rates for Toronto and Hamilton are \$65.83 and \$51.70 respectively, Ottawa's trails by a wide margin with a mere \$42.91. This half-hearted support for library services in Ottawa was echoed in a recent study of Canadian libraries which found OPL's per capita floor space to be second to last – half that of London, a much smaller city.

Why the City of Ottawa has chosen to starve its library system is hard to understand, given the cultural sophistication of the city and its role as the nation's capital. Explanations range from speculation that other municipalities may have a larger tax base to the more worrisome possibility that other communities may simply place greater value on reading and literacy. Whatever the reason, under-funding is taking its toll – with the heaviest impacts falling on Ottawa's most vulnerable citizens. These include newcomers to our country who rely heavily on the library's literacy programs and foreign language materials to help them integrate into mainstream Canadian life – and children and young people, who benefit enormously from library programs and services aimed at helping them get a good start in life by improving their literacy skills.

Unfortunately, this situation will only get worse in the future as each passing year sees more and more cuts to the Library's budget – a trend that causes some to charge that cuts are being applied unfairly, with the OPL being forced to tighten its belt more than other municipal functions. While some might dispute this claim, it is true that the Library has had to make a number of far-reaching cuts over the last few years which have left it with very little fat to trim. So any future cuts will have to be applied to bone and muscle. For example, staffing levels have already been cut dramatically – with a hiring freeze in place on and off since February 2007. And for some time now the OPL has been actively pursuing greater productivity through the use of new technology – such as automated check out machines and “smart cards” for photocopying – which means pursuing new efficiencies in this manner is unlikely to result in large cost savings in the future.

The Ottawa Public Library – Serving Our Community

Sadly, a great deal of harm has already been done – with a number of branches having to carry on with no full-time staff and others forced to stay closed a few days per week. Should such a situation persist – with even more cuts coming from Council – the damage to the system could be irreparable.

That being the case, Council – like it or not – is going to have to bite the bullet and restore adequate levels of funding to the Ottawa Public Library. For libraries are not frills; they are an absolute necessity in our increasingly knowledge-based economy. This was underlined by Councilor Jan Harder, Chair of the Library's Board of Trustees, who noted, “Libraries are the heart of the community – they connect people and places. They are the first civic building newcomers visit, and they encourage life-long learning and literacy. They work with settlement workers and businesses and provide internet access to those who have none. They are a comfort and a friendly spot for many.” Harder's comments are supported by statistics showing the OPL's effectiveness in building community capacity and providing literacy programs and other important services to many of Ottawa's most vulnerable citizens of Ottawa. These programs, in which over 188,000 people currently participate, include ones targeted at newcomers, teens, infants, families, the blind, the homebound and the disabled.

Such programs and services are particularly important in rural areas – where the large distances between communities and limited services available to residents make library branches key community resources. That is why many rural residents are concerned about the possibility of branch closings – a reasonable fear in light of the fact that almost all of the proposed branch closings would have taken place in outlying areas. Had this occurred, the impact on rural communities would have been devastating – given their role in strengthening the social ties that bind rural communities together and their potential for leveling the playing field in terms of literacy, information and learning.

Protecting a Vital Community Service – Our Libraries

Mayor O'Brien's recent unsuccessful drive to ram through a zero per cent tax increase has done at least one good thing. It has provided citizens with a wake up call to the fact

that Ottawa's municipal services – services we all count on and which make our community such a great place to live - are under attack. And many risk being reduced or eliminated – all in the name of fiscal restraint. Were this to occur, it would damage the quality of life in our community for years to come.

A good example involves cuts to our library system, which has served Ottawa well and faithfully for as long as anyone can remember – promoting literacy, helping children get a good start in life, helping newcomers get established, assisting those with disabilities and providing a thousand other important services. Given this record of accomplishment, how do the Mayor and some Councilors propose to reward such exemplary service to the community? By cutting branches, laying off staff and starving the Library of the resources it needs to do its job. That's how!

But the citizens of Ottawa are wise to their tricks. And they're fighting back – demanding that municipal politicians recognize the valuable contribution made by the OPL and its staff to our city. That means valuing their work. It means ending cuts to services. And, most importantly of all, it means increasing funding to the Library so it can continue to serve the citizens of Ottawa as well in the future as it does today.

For, contrary to what the Mayor and some Councilors might think, Ottawa is not just about money. It is also a community – a sophisticated community with a rich cultural life. And the Ottawa Public Library is a key element in that cultural mosaic.

Generations of proud citizens have built up the Library into the important cultural and educational institution we see today – a remarkable accomplishment by anyone's standards. As such, it deserves to be supported and encouraged. However, doing that will take more than mere words. It will also require providing the adequate financial resources the Library will need to survive and thrive in the years ahead. So it can continue to do what it does so well – what it has always done – serve the citizens of Ottawa and improve the quality of live in our community.

Over the years, the Ottawa Public Library and the people who work for it have given their all for the community they love. Now it's time for the community to return the favor - by once again providing them with the funding they need to continue their important work on behalf of the citizens of Ottawa.

It's that simple.