

THE NEWS

Libraries feel pinch of zero funding increases

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As chief librarian for the Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library, Eric Stackhouse is always encouraged to see how busy the libraries in this region are.



Troy MacCulloch, New Glasgow town councillor and board member for the Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library, left, and Eric Stackhouse, chief librarian for the library, are frustrated that the provincial government is not planning any increases in library funding for the seventh straight budget.

There is always a steady stream of people making use of the computers, taking part in programming and checking out books. Stats show that more than 35 per cent of people in Pictou County make regular use of the libraries.

What's discouraging to him is that provincial financial support for the work they do doesn't appear to be there.

For the last six years, the Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library has had no increase in the money they receive from the province, he said, and as the 2016/17 budget release is approaching, Stackhouse said they are bracing for more of the same.

"We're very concerned," Stackhouse said. "We know what's coming in the provincial budget. We've already been informed."

What they've been told is there will be no increases this year and likely won't be for the next three years.

Liberal Finance Minister Randy Delorey has said they want to take a firm stand [to end deficit spending](#) which has been commonplace in Nova Scotia. Twenty of the last 30 budgets have had deficits.

But Stackhouse says to expect the libraries to continue year after year without even so much as a cost of living adjustment isn't reasonable.

He said the board has done everything in its power to control and reduce expenses including eliminating the equivalent of three full-time positions through attrition in recent years. They've put their services out to tender and have operated as efficiently as possible. But to continue to operate the same number of hours and offer the same level of programming won't be possible if something doesn't change, he says.

The Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library has in the past relied on the province for about 68 per cent of its income, but that has gone down to about 64 per cent, he said. The majority of the other funding comes from the municipalities, which also provide the building space.

"The board sees it as downloading of the cost to the municipalities," Stackhouse said.

Still the Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library has been forced to ask the municipalities to chip in another \$45,000 this year to make their ends meet. If the municipalities decide they can't or won't make up the difference, he said they will have to look at tough choices such as closing all the libraries in the community for another day a week or reducing hours some way.

New Glasgow town councillor Troy MacCulloch, who sits on the board for the library, is frustrated at the situation.

He said when they are doing municipal budgets they assume each year that they need to adjust a little bit to compensate for increased costs and believes it's only practical that the province do the same when they are budgeting how much money to give to libraries.

"To have flat funding for seven years is unrealistic and unsustainable," MacCulloch said. "The only recourse we have at this point is reduced hours, reduced services and reduced staff and or locations. We have no other choice."

He said in the eight years he's been on the library board, they've tried to get a structured funding formula set up for libraries in the province. But all three political parties have failed to do that in their time in power. Library boards are once again trying to work towards this.

"Every municipality is feeling this. Numerous regional library boards have tried different attempts to work with their local MLAs and the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage."

A request by The News for an interview with Tony Ince, minister of Communities, Culture and Heritage, was declined.

“Public libraries are vital parts of the communities they serve and are highly valued by Nova Scotians of all ages,” Krista Higdon, media relations adviser for Ince, said. “We worked with library board chairs and CEOs to review the current funding model and to determine the best approach to maintaining core library services. Libraries are now providing feedback on a possible new model for library funding to ensure Nova Scotians continue to have equitable access to library services in their communities.”

She said while it’s hard to compare library funding jurisdiction to jurisdiction, Nova Scotia provincial funding is on a par with other provinces in the jurisdictions they were able to compare.

She stated that funding commitments will be released in April as part of the budget.

Stackhouse is hoping that something can be done to change the provincial government’s mind before April.

“Compared to many other things that the province spends money on, this is nothing,” he said. “It is so little, but it does so much.”