

The Casket

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Celebrating libraries

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The Pictou Antigonish Regional Library (PARL) hosted an appreciation gathering April 16 at People's Place Library.

"The purpose of it was, really, to ask a simple question; 'do people care about their public library?'" Eric Stackhouse, PARL chief librarian, told the *Casket*.

The answer would seem to be an emphatic 'yes,' considering 1,153 people visited the location over a three-hour period, a turnout that he described as "fantastic."

The PARL initiative included participation from the neighbouring Eastern Counties Regional Library, which is comprised of branches in Inverness, Richmond and Guysborough counties.

"We wanted to showcase what we have to offer," Stackhouse said.

Information booths outlining those offerings dotted the location.

Along with displaying what people can access and enjoy at their public library branch in the region, the celebration focussed on their ongoing financial challenges.

"As people are aware, we have been facing some significant budget challenges because of years of underfunding and then six years of frozen funding by the province," Stackhouse said.

He noted several speakers, including Chamber of Commerce and municipal government representatives, remarked about the importance of libraries.

"The comments made by speakers were very pertinent and very clear that libraries are very much appreciated; they are very much valued and very much needed, and also that they are struggling," Municipality of the County of Antigonish Councillor and LBANS board member Mary MacLellan said.

Noting the "great turnout" for the appreciation celebration, she added people came "from far and wide."

"It certainly showed that people care," MacLellan said.

Stackhouse offered "a big thank you" to those who offered their support.

“We were really pleased with the turnout – people had great things to say about the library,” he said.

Stackhouse noted PARL is putting together a package about the day that will be turned over to provincial government officials.

Running out of options

Heading into the seventh year of frozen funding, which Stackhouse said could very well increase to 10, he noted the PARL board has been making service cutbacks, “but more behind the scenes.”

Stackhouse added three positions have been lost due to attrition; when someone left, they were not replaced.

“We have been making cuts to services – here and there – and materials. We have been forced to fundraise more money – well beyond what we are mandated to do. And, as well, our municipalities, on occasion, have had to put in more money,” he said.

Stackhouse added support has been strong at the community level, including from local businesses and municipalities, “but the province hasn’t been doing its fair share.”

“They have agreed with us to – there are a set of core services that libraries should be delivering – and we have been delivering those, but the province, even though it has agreed to that, has not put its amount of money in to ensure that,” he said.

As for further cuts, Stackhouse said “the only thing left” is the reduction of hours.

“When we do that, it not only cuts access to rooms for use, it cuts access to the library, overall. We could be talking a day a week, in order to bring our budget back into balance, and that goes right across the entire region, including Antigonish,” he said.

“It would mean less staff, fewer hours for staff and it could also mean – because many of our staff are part-time – they could fall under the threshold for benefits, so they could lose benefits as well.

“So, it is a huge impact on not only library users, but employment as well, and the conditions of employment,” Stackhouse added.

He said the PARL board “doesn’t want to do that.”

“It is asking for help from the municipalities, but it also wanted to let people know – who care about libraries – that this is happening, and it is due to the provincial government’s failure to really fund libraries adequately and sustainably,” Stackhouse added, reiterating one of the focuses for the library appreciation gathering.

He noted the province agreed to look at the issues more than two years ago.

“We said ‘great, well let’s look at a new way of funding libraries sustainably,’” he said.

“We did that and as soon as we started the meetings the province said ‘yeah, but we have got to do it with no money.’

“It is really just moving money around from one region to another, so somebody’s going to get hurt; there’s going to be winners and losers,” Stackhouse added.

Message delivered

Hosting the library appreciation day was part of delivering the message libraries across the province need more funding.

“Where we could have people come out and show their support – show they care, in a fun and a celebratory way,” Stackhouse said.

“We don’t want to be in conflict with the government over this; we want to be serving people and putting forward our core services.”

“What we were doing really was alerting people, informing them of the kinds of services they get for the money that is put in, and we are asking the province to do its fair share,” he added.

Big boost

During the library appreciation celebration, the Friends of the Antigonish Library (FOAL) raised more than \$1,700 as part of its annual fundraiser.

“Again, we are willing to do our part – the community is willing to do its part,” Stackhouse said.