

Save your city: support the public library

TORONTO STAR

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All right Torontonians, do you feel like you live in a world class city now? If you, like me, have developed a sense of disgusted exhaustion at the mention of crack, impaired driving and the mayor's libidinous habits, please step away from the radio. Close the browser. Smash the television.

Save yourself, your soul, and the city. Put aside our rumoured fall from greatness. Walk down the street to a branch of the Toronto Public Library. Immerse yourself in a novel. Voyage through pages. Wander in a house of shared, public knowledge. Remember that we are not defined by a moment of scandal. Far more important are our values, and the public institutions which express those values — such as the busiest public library system in North America, the Toronto

Public Library. The library was there before this council and this mayor. Crucially, it must remain there after this council and this mayor.

Unlike the current sound and fury from city hall, the library is something that actually matters. One could be forgiven (given the current state of municipal news) for having forgotten that we are headed into a season of municipal budgeting, the effects of which will linger more profoundly than the hangover of any illicit substance used by the mayor.

Ward 2 Councillor Doug Ford ("I'd close a library in a heartbeat") might not, as he once declared, be able to recognize Margaret Atwood on the street, but councillors should listen to their constituents. A 2011 survey by Forum Research and similar research in 2012 by The Strategic Counsel and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives came to essentially the same conclusion: Torontonians really love their library.

Three out of four households have a Toronto Public Library (TPL) card. Seventy-two per cent of adults use library services. There were 19 million TPL visits last year, nearly two million more than the combined attendance at the city's top

10 cultural, arts, and entertainment venues, from professional sports to the ROM, AGO, CNE, TIFF, Science Centre, Zoo and Canada's Wonderland.

My kids love some of those attractions, which entertain them once or twice a year. They adore the library. There, they borrow bags of books at a time, which allow them to discover the richness of the world. They also learn that books, and knowledge, are a shared resource.

Crucially, the library is a great social equalizer. A new immigrant family to this city can access the same vast collection of intellectual resources as the wealthiest resident of Toronto. A high-quality public library is an integral part of our commitment to a democratic civil society.

Meanwhile, in an age of constrained public budgets and the necessity of deriving value for money, there is hardly a better value proposition. We're talking 17 cents per day per resident for open access to 11 million items, thousands of programs, such as children's literacy, job search assistance, pre-retirement seminars, and adult literacy. At two pennies of each municipal budget dollar, it's not as if the TPL is an onerous tax burden.

Yet, what I find this more shocking than

anything to come out of the mayor's office is that in the face of delivering such a great gift to the city, the TPL budget has declined by about \$30 million over the last 20 years, and staff positions have been cut by 24 per cent even as population increased by 15 per cent and the number of items checked out rose a remarkable 47 per cent. These cuts to library budgets simply cannot continue. Rather, they need to be reversed if the library is to offer the rich services that Torontonians expect and value from it.

One of the foibles of the Canadian character may be that we struggle to properly appreciate our own greatness. We look for it in the wrong places. We have a blind spot for our solid, true assets while we chase ephemera. We have great hope for the Leafs. And the Jays. I will say no more about sports. We are in equal parts horrified and transfixed by a clown-like figure in public office.

Meanwhile, in this instance the real tragedy would be if we lose sight of the great institutions, like the Toronto Public Library, which such offices are meant to uphold. If we lose sight of them, we will lose them bit by bit, and this is how Toronto may truly cease to be great.



A public forum, The Future of Our Public Library, will take place Nov. 24 at 2 p.m. in the Council Chamber at city hall. Vincent Lam is an emergency room physician in Toronto and winner of the 2006 Giller Prize for fiction. His most recent novel is *The Headmaster's Wager*.