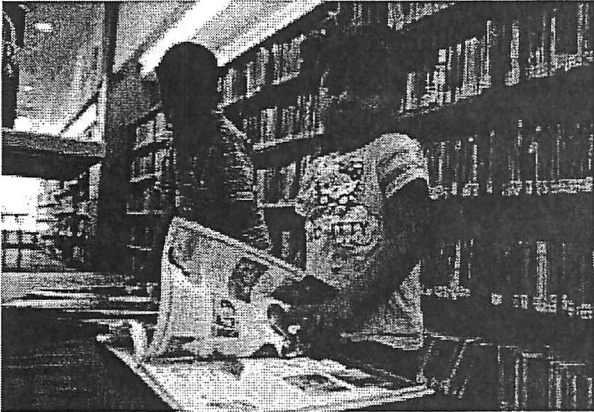


Why Toronto City Council neglects our great library system is a mystery

Torontonians are almost unanimous in being satisfied with the overall quality of Toronto Public Library service



KATE ALLEN / TORONTO STAR

Children choose books at the Northern Elms Toronto Public Library branch on the day Councillor Doug Ford said that no one knows the library is there. (July 26, 2011)

By: Maureen O'Reilly Published on Fri Mar 29 2013

Mysteries are among the most popular of all book and video genres in Toronto's many neighbourhood libraries, and no doubt elsewhere as well. The biggest mystery, however, is at Toronto's City Hall. Why would politicians who ceaselessly pat themselves on the back for their sensitivity to their constituents' needs want to downsize, or simply just neglect, one of the most popular and economically efficient public services in the city?

Ward 2 Councillor Doug Ford can be excused for not being able to recognize Margaret Atwood on the street but does Councillor "I'd Close A Library In A Heartbeat" not listen to the people who elected him and his brother? 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, especially their neighbourhood branches, and do not support Ford and his council allies on this subject.

Just a few numbers from all this research make this point. 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 2 million more than the combined attendance at the city's top-10 cultural, arts, sports and entertainment venues, from the Rogers and Air Canada Centres to the ROM, AGO, CNE, TIFF, Science Centre, Zoo and Canada's Wonderland.

A near-unanimous 97 per cent of those surveyed last November were satisfied with the overall quality of TPL service. What other public service comes even close to this? Over 90 per cent are satisfied with the helpfulness of the library staff. Seventy-one per cent said it would affect their vote in the next municipal election if they knew their councillor supported library branch closures. Over 50 per cent said it would affect their vote “a great deal.”

So what’s going on in the minds of those politicians who voted to cut millions from the TPL budget in 2012 and grudgingly gave back a tiny fraction of those cuts in 2013? In classic murder mysteries, the detective looks for motive, method and opportunity. Councillors have the opportunity and the method to cut back on the library but what could possibly be their motive? At 17 cents per day per resident for free access to 11 million items, thousands of programs, such as children’s literacy, job-search assistance, pre-retirement seminars, adult literacy, and visits by internationally famous authors, it’s not like the TPL is a tax burden. In fact, in constant dollars, the TPL budget has declined by about \$30 million over the last 20 years; staff positions have been cut by 24 per cent even as the population increased by 15 per cent and number of items checked out rose a remarkable 47 per cent. Talk about employee productivity gains! And wasn’t the Internet supposed to make libraries less used? The very reverse has happened.

Tax fighting is therefore a pretty lame, not to mention anti-public opinion motive for cutting back the TPL. Is there some other explanation that makes political sense?

Toronto’s boast of being “world class” in many civic areas now has a whiff of nostalgia about it. But in the case of our library system, it is an undisputed fact — for the present. We have the world’s busiest system and circulate more books than those of New York City and Los Angeles combined. Like our once world-class transit system, however, our enviable library, our most valuable public resource, accessible to all, can rapidly deteriorate without the badly needed investments in books and other materials, technologies and, yes, the people who go into library work, obviously not to get rich but to be another link in the (hopefully) endless chain of human knowledge and imagination. So why are all those politicians who say their only concern is the public good not clamouring for these investments? That remains a mystery.

Maureen O’Reilly is president of Toronto Public Library Workers Union Local 4948 (CUPE).