

Local libraries offer more than you think

By Mike Riley

When most folks think of libraries, they think of books, magazines, DVDs, and a place where you need to be really, really quiet. Indeed, they're all those things, but so much more, especially those libraries in rural areas like here in North Hastings and across Ontario. Sometimes, these libraries can be a lifeline, literally and figuratively, for people living in these remote communities.

Ontario libraries reach 98 per cent of Ontario residents in local communities of all sizes, and according to the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries, Ontarians of all ages make 200 million visits to their local public library each year. People vote their public local library consistently as one of the province's most trusted institutions.

In addition to books, magazines and DVDs, libraries provide a place for people to be able to access free Wi-Fi; for job searches, medical appointments, children's activities and education, and so much more.

Local libraries kept people connected during COVID-19 when people were forced to stay at home providing much needed access to the outside world when people's worlds atrophied to the four walls of their house or apartment. They offered curbside pickup of library materials, made Wi-Fi available to their community and lent out devices like tablets, laptops and hotspots. During the first year of the pandemic, 313,000 cardholders accessed over 1.4 million e-learning courses through their local library.

Local libraries also provide a place to go to socialize with others, as many of these libraries offer programs and workshops for their local residents. When I was a youngster, more years ago than I care to admit, my local library in Markham was a haven for me to go do my homework and class projects, access computer terminals as I didn't have a PC at home, borrow and read a plethora of books, make new friends and just hang out on a rainy weekend afternoon, browsing the shelves for the next amazing world I would visit with the book I eventually found.

Sometimes, libraries literally provide a lifeline to people. A resident in a community here in North Hastings was considering suicide and a local librarian, who requested anonymity, convinced this person that life was worth living and not to end their life. Today, that resident is doing much better and it's all because of this librarian's counsel, courtesy of their local library. I have heard similar stories in local libraries across our region and the province.

Unfortunately, local public libraries are facing a tipping point in their ability to function due to lack of investment from the province and the municipalities they're located. Libraries in Ontario have experienced a 73 per cent decline in provincial funding over the last decade. Ontario's share of library funding is the lowest at four per cent of total revenue of all provinces, according to the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries, and is 100 per cent less than the closest comparator.

Municipalities, who to be fair, are faced with a disproportionate share of the funding for local libraries at 85 to 90 per cent, are being forced to scale back funding to their local libraries due to rising costs and attempting to spread what money they have to all the services they provide, including libraries. However, while it may seem like good economic sense to scale back or cut off library funding to fund other services, it's a short-term savings, does not look at the big picture and will end up being a huge economic loss when that library is operationally restricted or gone. Every dollar put into a local public library generally sees a return of direct economic investments in a community several times more than the original investment. According to the Ontario Library Association, a \$4 return on investment was realized in Ottawa, while that figure skyrockets to nearly \$12 in Temiskaming Shores. Sounds like quite a bargain to for the provincial and municipal governments to fund these libraries to the best of their abilities to ensure their continued operation.

These local libraries are indeed invaluable and provide many times more benefits than can be quantified with dollars and nickels. So next time you feel like going out to Indigo or a local bookstore to buy a book or a DVD, or patronizing a local coffee shop to do a job search, make a beeline for your local library and give them your much needed support and they'll return that support many times

over, in many different ways. It's well worth it!