

Useless As Tits on a Bull: Library User Fees in Alberta

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Grabbing The Bull By the Horns

The biggest information policy issue facing librarians is not one that people typically think of when they consider information policy issues (censorship, privacy, copyright and so on.) Instead, it is the insidious underlying element that quietly influences so many of these issues – the increasing corporatization of the public library system that sees private models and theories overrunning public spaces and organizations.

Examples of the increasing corporatization of public libraries in Canada abound – in the sponsorship of seemingly every room, section and public area of the London Public Library; in the plan to move to a “hub” model of service with a central branch and four large branches in each quadrant of the city (preferably in malls) at Regina Public Library (that was just as quickly abandoned due to citizen outrage); and in the user fees that have been charged for library cards by all but a few library systems in Alberta for the past twenty-five years.

A full examination of the influence of corporatization of public libraries is beyond the scope of this paper but it is revealing to do a study of one of these elements in detail – the issue of library fees in Alberta, a situation that is unique in North America.

Heads or Tails

Alberta’s historical roots are agrarian, populist and isolationist. When the provincehood of this region of Western Canada was envisioned in the late 1800’s, Fredrick Haultain, premier of what was then called the North-West Territories, conceived of the establishment of a single province, a province that, had it come to

pass, would have been called Buffalo (Van Herk, 2001.) But there was a great fear in central Canada of the power that would be held by such a large entity and instead, two separate provinces, Alberta and Saskatchewan, were incorporated within months of each other in 1905. Resentment of this decision still lingers in Western Canada today. (Van Herk, 2005)

Bull Market

A massive oil strike in Leduc Alberta in 1947 forever changed the destiny of the province (CBC, no date). Alberta was set on its currently course as the country's richest and most conservative province, home to the second-most corporate home offices of any major city in Canada (including the much larger cities of Montreal and Vancouver.) (Calgary Economic Development Board, 2006) Unlike its sister province, Saskatchewan, which began a pattern of stagnation that in many ways resembled the flatness of its landscape, Alberta has grown from a population of 731 605 in 1931 to over three million today (Wikipedia – Alberta) with thousands of people – mostly young and University educated – streaming into the province each year from all other parts of Canada. (Government of Alberta – Labour Force Report, 2006.)

The culture of the province was summarized by Preston Manning, former leader of the Reform Party and son of the longest-serving Alberta premier Ernest Manning, in an essay he wrote for MacLean's magazine for an issue celebrating the centennials of each province in 2005.

In the 1920's and 30's [as the Social Gospel movement moved across Saskatchewan influencing many including Tommy Douglas], another spiritual stream, later labelled the Evangelical Movement, rolled across the Prairies. One of its key proponents was William "Bible Bill" Aberhart. Born and educated in Ontario, he became a prominent high school principal in

Calgary and a pioneering radio broadcaster whose weekly religious appeals helped knit together isolated Prairie homes across southern Alberta. For evangelicals, the primary dimension of faith is the relationship between individuals and God -- the so-called vertical relationship of personal salvation -- a prerequisite to being able to effectively do God's work on Earth [as opposed to the social gospel's belief that the most important dimension of the Christian faith is social justice -- the horizontal dimension of faith, as it's been called -- meeting the needs of the young, the sick, the poor and the old.].

Oh Give Me A Home...

This brings us to today and our specific topic of inquiry, the subject of user fees in Alberta public libraries. Saskatchewan (along with British Columbia) are the only provinces that have “specifically and unambiguously” enacted their citizens’ rights to free universal public library access in their provincial legislation. (Saskatchewan Public Libraries Act 1996; Mardiros, 2001.)

Alberta too would seem to have legislation guaranteeing free and equal access to public libraries. Alberta’s very first Public Libraries Act was passed in 1907. That act stated clearly: ‘All libraries and reading rooms established under this Act shall be open to the public free of all charges.’” (Government of Alberta Hansard, 2005.) The current version of Alberta’s library legislation appears to continue defending the public’s right to borrow materials for free. In fact, where the 1907 Act only specified that libraries be open to the public but didn’t mention borrowing materials for free, the current version appears to do so, stating that: “libraries are required to provide access at no charge to...library resources in any format.” But the Alberta government uses disingenuous language to get around this commitment to free access, stating that: “libraries may charge for the

issuance of a library card.” (Government of Alberta, Public Library Service Policy, 2006)

Pat MacNamee, library consultant at Alberta Community Development [the government department in charge of libraries], chooses her words carefully when describing the government position on fees. "Libraries are not permitted to charge a membership fee. All members of the public are library members, with free access to the five or six basic services that the Act mandates. But library boards are permitted, at their option, to charge for the issuance of a library card, for use in tracking borrowed materials. (Mardiros, 2001)

The Library Association of Alberta also avoids taking a position on this controversial subject, instead choosing to defer to local library boards, similar to how the Alberta government frames this policy in terms of the “increased flexibility” it gives to municipal governments. LAA Executive Director, Christine Sheppard, explained her organization’s position in response to an e-mail inquiry in March 2006:

LAA does not have an official position on this issue. Although no one would argue that library card fees are a great thing, public libraries and regional libraries are not at all unanimous that this initiative [removing user fees] is the way to go, and would rather support an increase in per capita funding. While it’s in LAA’s mandate to support in general increased funding to public libraries, this kind of thing fits more within the mandate of public library trustees who are also not unanimous in wanting to pursue this issue. (Sheppard, 2006)

Indeed, although “no one would argue that library card fees are a good thing”, Alberta’s library trustees were often left with little choice but to charge user fees due to government cutbacks in the 1980’s and in fact, this is exactly what happened with every public library system in Alberta choosing to institute library

fees at that time. These fees were (and continue to be) on top of any property taxes that the citizens may already pay.

Obviously, the hegemonic mentality that has created the conservative climate in Alberta – the maverick spirit of entrepreneurship (and its related concept of “Every man for himself”), the strongly pro-business attitude and the vertical relationship with God that underpins the belief system of Alberta – has led to a culture where user fees are an accepted norm by the majority of the population, whether the subject is healthcare (Taft & Stewart, 2000), car insurance (Alberta NDP, undated) or building new schools and roadways using so-called P3’s - public-private partnerships (Ferguson, 2003).

As part of my preparation for writing this paper, I sent e-mails requesting comments on this subject to librarian and writer listservs in Alberta. I have to admit that I was shocked by how many librarians and others responded along the lines of “we’ve accepted the user fees now” or “it’s not much more than the cost of a paperback book.”

Libraries are no exception to “You use it, you pay for it” user fee mentality in Alberta. As stated earlier, user fees for Alberta library cards were implemented in the late 1980’s to replace funding lost due to government cutbacks (Alberta Government Hansard, 2005). They now make up 10-15% of the average library’s budget.

In Alberta libraries are largely funded through tax dollars, with more than 85 per cent of library board revenue coming from local and provincial

governments. But Albertans aren't automatically entitled to borrow materials from the libraries that their tax dollars fund. Libraries in Alberta charge local ratepayers an annual fee of up to \$20 for the privilege of a library card, a form of double taxation that disproportionately burdens lower-income families -- and which may exclude them altogether. (Mardiros, 2001)

The fee charged is determined at the municipal level and ranges from \$5/year in Medicine Hat to \$20/year in Airdrie for a single adult card. Most library systems are explicit that this card is for a single user and *can not* be shared (for example, between spouses.) Cards for children are usually provided for free but the definition of children varies from system to system – some define it as “under 12”, some as “under 18”. Some charge teenagers, some do not.) Most systems also clearly state that no one will be denied a library card due to an inability to pay but some libraries, such as Calgary’s make this less than obvious:

*If you are receiving Supports for Independence, Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped, Guaranteed Income Supplement, or if you have a Medical Services Card, the yearly registration fee for a Library Card **may** [emphasis added] be waived. Please talk to staff at your branch.*

The potential access problems caused by these policies should be obvious. People with low incomes are unfairly burdened by this policy, forced to choose between a library card and other necessities. In a public space supposedly dedicated to fair and equitable access, others are forced the indignity of differentiating themselves by providing documentation to show their “lower” status which *may* allow the user fee to be waived.

An Alberta librarian responded to a general e-mail I posted on the Alberta Library Listserv (Jerome-L) by pointed out the dark truth of a policy like this:

I suspect that many thought that the addition of front-end payment instils value in library services [but] some may have thought that such fees keeps out the "riff-raff".

A Cock and Bull Story

Mainly due to another oil boom over the last decade, the Alberta economy recovered from its 1980's depression and went on to become the first debt-free province in Canada in 2004. But the library user fees were never removed and instead, remain to this day in the vast majority of Alberta libraries, even as the government continues to post enormous multi-billion dollar surpluses (Reuters, 2006), even as they send out \$400 prosperity cheques to every citizen, and even as they were presented with the perfect opportunity to replace this funding as part of the province's Centennial celebrations in 2005.

User fees have been proven over and over again to be ineffective (and even harmful) when applied to services that have been traditionally delivered using the public model. Some examples include healthcare (Taft & Stewart, 2000), education (Nikiforuk, 1993) and even charity (Rose-Ackerman, 1987.)

Libraries are no exception. When Edmonton introduced a \$10 library user fee in 1994, enrolment immediately dropped significantly and a decade later, had not recovered. (Alberta Government Hansard, 2005.)

An Edmonton librarian summed up his observations along with an explanation for why the membership rates may not have recovered:

Edmonton Public doesn't charge anyone under 18 and will waive the fee for anyone who says they can't afford it, or even won't afford it on principle. I know they work really hard to have front line staff be very sensitive to this issue and to find tactful ways to make sure no-one is turned away. Also, they have various collaborations with community service organisations to encourage public library use among young mums, recent immigrants, people struggling with literacy issues, etc. We know many households get by on their kid's free library card, or certainly have one designated library cardholder for the family, rather than all taking out individual memberships. That means our circulation continues to rise, even though our membership may not reflect heavier usage.

Conversely, four Alberta cities have chosen to go against the tide and remove library user fees in recent years – Banff which was the first municipality to remove their library fees in January 2000 with the full support of their town council.

On January 1st, 2000, Banff Public Library became the first library in Alberta to remove the membership fee for local residents -- thus reversing a trend toward a curious form of "privatizing" libraries that has swept Alberta in recent years. In Banff, the effect of eliminating the fee was immediate and dramatic. In January 2000, three times as many new members joined the library as had joined the previous January. (Mardiros, 2001)

The Banff Town Council voted a significant increase to the library grant, covering the loss of membership fee revenue. The upswing in new memberships continued for the rest of the year with the Banff library seeing a 40 per cent membership increase in 2000. (Mardrios, 2001)

The next three to drop the fees were Whitecourt, a bedroom community outside Edmonton, Drayton Valley in the heart of conservative rural Alberta and ironically, Leduc which is the source of so much of Alberta's original economic wealth. All removed their user fees in September 2005 as a way to celebrate the

province's Centennial and in memory of a popular recently-deceased Lieutenant Governor and author, Lois Hole, who was a passionate advocate on behalf of libraries. (Another Alberta city, Lloydminster, sits on the Alberta-Saskatchewan border but because it receives library services from Saskatchewan, has never had user fees.)

Till The Cows Come Home

Although there appears to be no threat that the user-fee model that exists in most public libraries in Alberta will spread to other provinces, the possibility is always there. Just as the grandparents and great grandparents of people in Alberta never would have predicted back in the early years of the province that their ancestors would pay for bottled water and satellite radio when well water and terrestrial radio were available for free, we cannot predict the future and where the issue of user fees in public libraries may go.

Still, the signs are positive that the tide is turning back against library user fees in Alberta, if ever so slowly. Another librarian responded to my listserv posting with some good news – a fifth Alberta city was soon going to drop their user fees as well:

Effective April 1st, 2006 Wetaskiwin Public will not be charging residents of the City and County of Wetaskiwin membership fees! We are very excited about this.

Despite it's "redneck" reputation, Alberta is home to some extremely progressive organizations and ideas. For example, the Alberta Library card is unique in Canada allowing anyone to borrow books at nearly any public, academic or special library in the province. This card is free although ironically, the patron still has to pay for a local card before they can receive a TAL card.

Because of programs like this, there is always the possibility that the Alberta Government can be convinced to re-institute full funding for public libraries. 92% of heads of libraries in Alberta are opposed to the fee-model for library service and although they are not actively lobbying for removal, that fact is still a positive in the battle against user fees. On average, 80% of library budgets in Alberta come from municipal taxes, 10% comes from provincial governments and the remaining 10% is made up of self-generated funds (mainly membership fees.) It would take less than \$4 million per year, or 0.1% of their annual budget surplus for the Alberta government to cover that self-generated 10% on behalf on public libraries. (Mardrios, 2001)

Alberta touts the “Alberta Advantage” far and wide in promoting the province, its natural beauty and its pro-business climate. But they don’t mention the negatives that go along with these beliefs. Chief among their failings is that they are the only jurisdiction in North America to charge user fees for public library cards. Not one state in the most conservative parts of the United States has such a regressive policy, not even Texas, the American state that Alberta most resembles in terms of economy and attitude.

Alberta’s policy on library user fees is an embarrassment to the librarians of that province, to the government of that province and to the people of that province.

This sentiment was perhaps best summed up by the response received by Shelley Mardiros, Treasurer at the Banff Public Library when she was researching the issue of library fees around North America. She sent an e-mail to the PubLib listserv asking if anyone knew of any public libraries charging user fees anywhere on the continent. One librarian in an undeclared location replied: “yes, we call them taxes.”

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