Dear Executive Policy Committee,

My name is Ashley Huot, I was originally scheduled to speak via zoom last week, however, the internet connection issues prevented me from doing so; rather I have gathered my thoughts as comments. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the Winnipeg public library budget. I am an academic librarian and I also have a background in managing community service programs with nonprofit organizations that work toward poverty reduction. I am a patron of wpl and in particular, frequently take advantage of their early literacy programming for my baby. I previously lived in Edmonton, a city that from my experience proudly invests in its library system and has a relatively comparable population. My opinions on the city of Winnipeg's library budget are drawn from both this professional and personal perspective.

Libraries are not just places that house books and access to various media. They are community hubs that support and engage their patrons in lifelong learning while responding to the distinct needs of their communities. They welcome and offer intersections for learning, inquiry, and relationships. Wpl has many branches and the addition of some beautiful new libraries through capital funding, but without adequate staffing they are severely limited in what they can offer to their communities. When I moved to this city I was truly surprised by the limited capacity the library system has in serving its community. Despite budgetary limitations, the staff of wpl does innovative work, but the staff and patrons deserve more.

Understaffing

First I would like to speak to staffing. Staffing levels impact the hours the libraries are open to the public, the availability and quality of programs, and services, and how healthy, supported, and safe a working environment is for staff. Wpl Is understaffed. We have about 36 full-time staff members per 100,000 residents. Other Canadian cities of comparable size have anywhere between 46-78 full-time staff members per 100,000 as well as larger leadership teams available to do important strategy and coordination work.

A significant number of wpl positions are part-time or even listed as temporary although some staff have worked in the system for decades. Staffing levels are frequently inadequate and sometimes barely allow branches to be open. Sometimes one staff absence means a branch must close. Personally, on numerous occasions, I have walked with my baby to my local branch during its regular open hours to find it closed.

I have also been enjoying attending rhyme time with my baby, but when I return to work, there will be no options available for weekend programs for us. The limited hours and lack of weekend hours mean that the library's early literacy programs cater to caregivers who can afford to stay at home. I believe wpl needs to bring staffing levels closer to that of cities similar in size. The libraries are dangerously understaffed and adequate or impressive levels of staffing would allow for far for programs and services, as well as a healthier and safer work environment.

Many other library systems also invest in numerous positions dedicated to outreach which is essential for providing programs and services to community members who face multiple barriers

that prevent them from making it to the library. For example, epl has several community librarians who primarily work outside the library walls. I had the pleasure for many years of working collaboratively with some of these librarians. They sat on committees dedicated to supporting specific neighborhoods alongside community organizations and brought the library in several ways to the people, through their literacy van program and running innovative programs in schools, community centres and non profits. Beyond books, they supported technology literacy through innovative programs involving green screens, robots and iPads.

Need for Adequate or Competitive Wages

Another factor impacting staffing is Wages. All library workers conduct skilled roles that require expertise. Many positions also require significant post-secondary studies. Library assistants have library technicians diplomas or degrees and librarians have Master's degrees. The wages of wpl staff, considering their credentials, are not comparable to other city employees and if we look to other prairie cities, wpl wages are significantly, if not shockingly lower. Staff also deserve to be supported in their ongoing professional development, such as attending training and conferences on paid time as it is an ever-evolving Feild with new technologies. Wages are important to attracting and retaining dedicated staff. Similarly sized cities, such as Edmonton pay significantly higher wages at every level of staffing. For example, wpl pays it's shelvers or pages minimum wage while Epl pays over a living wage. Epl's library assistants make even more than wpl branch heads and some library systems entry-level librarian positions start at more than some of wpl's most senior positions. Wpl would greatly benefit from having more staff with better wages. Another factor to consider is the need to offer wages that attract librarians to relocate to Winnipeg. Manitoba does not offer a Master in Library and Information Studies program, so either Winnipegers move elsewhere for their studies and need to be enticed to return, or wpl must attract librarians from other provinces via competitive salaries.

Need for Program Funds

In addition to staff, Funds for programs are limited. Other prairie library systems offer significantly more programs such as robust Indigenous programming, programming for newcomers to help support settlement, programming for seniors, programs that support financial literacy and information literacy, support in searching for and applying for jobs, kitchens with cooking programs, and Various residencies such as Elders in residence, artists, musicians, storytellers and historians. Additionally, other systems offer more options for early literacy, children, and youth and with more funding to support them.

Investing in evidence-based safety measures

I would also like to speak to the complexity of accessibility, approachability, and safety in public spaces such as libraries. The ever-increasing challenges that our communities face can manifest into situations where safety is a concern, and this is not specific to public libraries. However, they are one of few public spaces in which all are welcome and hopefully, supported in their engagement in their lifelong learning. Adequate staffing, but also specifically staffing dedicated to supporting more vulnerable community members is important for community safety.

The city supported the implementation of two important and much-needed initiatives related to this. One is the Millenium community Connections space. Unfortunately, the city has not provided operating funds for this space. To function at its best it needs to be fully funded with dedicated staff, food, and program budgets, and needs to be accessible during all library hours. In addition to a librarian and library assistant that are dedicated to this space, it needs crisis workers with the expertise to be available to its visitors.

Secondly, There has been much attention brought to safety concerns at millennium library. I was very encouraged to see that careful consultation was done to develop and pilot the Community Saftey Host positions. There has been attention applauding the success of this program, but the city is not currently fully investing in implementing it. Instead, currently, incredibly costly private security and police are being utilized. The funds being spent on these positions is significant and could easily rather fund evidence based safety measures such as the community connections space with resources, library staff and crisis workers, and in-house community safety host security positions, all at a cost equivalent to paying police to conduct security.

Librarians and Libraries are guided by several core values one of which has to do with providing access to information and lifelong learning to all. The Escelatory presence of police as security is an exclusionary and huge barrier and prevents many community members from feeling safe and welcomed. I won't go into the nuances of this as others before me have addressed this in detail.

I fully support the calls to action that the Millenium for All group has brought forward. I would like to see the city commit to hiring a team of full-time community safety hosts available during all library hours and invest in in house security that is part of the library community to best enable long term relationship building and outreach and for this security to be trained in de-escalation, anti-racism, Indigenous approaches to kinship and welcome, harm reduction, youth outreach, and other approaches to community safety. Research shows that this is the most welcoming and effective approach to community safety and it aligns with the values of librarianship.

Summary

In closing, Winnipeg's libraries have been historically and are currently underfunded compared to other cities. I recognize that at this stage only minor adjustments are likely to be made. But I hope you take these issues into consideration, especially as you move towards working on the next budget cycle. The social and economic impact of well-funded public libraries is extensively studied and documented in the literature.

Reports of public library return on investment in Canadian cities range anywhere between $3.11 to $7.05 for every dollar spent, that's around $200-over $500 per patron. Or an output of between 200-over 600% of what is invested. I implore you to get to know your local library and perhaps consider looking to the programs, services, and capacity offered by other major prairies cities for inspiration.

I believe the staff of wpl do incredible work with the limited resources they are afforded and would love to see what our libraries could do for our communities with adequate staffing, appropriate wages, and programming funds, and by implementing evidence-based safety measures. Our libraries could be and do so much more with your support. Winnipegers deserve to have equitable access to information and opportunities to engage in lifelong learning and Library staff could be better supported to do this important work. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Ashley Huot