

To the Mayor and Thunder Bay City Council members

On behalf of the Public Library Board, I am writing today to ask you to reconsider Council's decision to continue the practice of reserving two seats to represent the English public and Catholic schools on the Thunder Bay Public Library Board. We fully respect Council's full autonomy to determine the process of appointing whomever they wish to the public library board. However, you may have been missing background information critical to this decision that we would like to respectfully provide for your consideration.

- 1) Perhaps the most important reason to make the change is that a failure to do so would continue a system of structural racism that systemically disadvantages the Indigenous community. At the library, we have the provincially mandated task of meeting the needs of all community members and that "reflects the community's unique needs" (Ontario Public Libraries Act, 20-a).

The practice of appointing two school board representatives solely from the English public and Catholic boards was a long term practice required by the province until changes in legislation in 2002. In 2002 this requirement was abolished. Maintaining this practice fails to take into account the other school systems operating in our community (many of which did not exist historically) - notably the school systems that are built by and run for the Indigenous communities such as Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School. These school systems are just as important to our city and the library as the English public and Catholic schools; and a system that systematically privileges one school system over another is one tainted by structural racism.

A similar argument could be made in regards to the French school systems that thrive in Thunder Bay. We are sure that this is an inadvertent and unintentional move by Council. However such actions are, by their nature, the definition of structural racism and hidden bias..

- 2) The shift in board composition will also empower Council to choose from a wider and more diverse group of applicants that serve the needs of the library board.

The library board went through a process of outlining the skills that we would like to have represented to better enable the board to govern and contribute to the success of the library system. As an institution with a multi-million dollar budget, multiple properties and an ongoing Master Facilities Plan, having board members with backgrounds in law, architecture/ engineering, business, accounting, etc would greatly aid in complex decision making regarding our financial and physical infrastructure. This is standard practice for boards of large organizations and we are following industry best practices in this regard. We would greatly appreciate Council taking these in-demand skills into consideration when choosing board members.

- 3) The original reason for having school board representatives was that it was legislatively required by the province. This legislation was amended in 2002 to eliminate the requirement for school board representatives for all public library boards. At that time, nearly all library boards and municipalities revised their by-laws and ceased having reserved seats for school boards. The

Ontario Library Service ceased systemically tracking the number of school board representatives on library boards in 2002. However a brief poll recently conducted showed that of the 30+ Ontario library systems polled, none had continued the practice of reserving seats for school representatives. These library systems/municipalities include: Clearview Public Library, Blind River Public Library, Georgina Public Library, Owen Sound Public Library, Port Hope Public Library, Ramara Township Public Library, French River Public Library, London Public Library, Woodstock Public Library, Collingwood Public Library, Grand Valley Public Library, Caledon Public Library, Champlain Public Library, Kawartha Lakes Public Library, Kingston Public Library, Springwater Public Library, King Township Public Library, Oshawa Public Library, Whitby Public Library, Huron County Public Library, Brant Public Library, Brampton Public Library, Innisfil Public Library, Clarence-Rockland Public Library, Carleton Place Public Library, Orangeville Public Library, Deseronto Public Library, Blue Mountains Public Library, Nipigon Public Library, Augusta Township Public Library, South Algonquin Public Library, Brock Public Library and Richmond Hill Public Library.

- 4) The relationship and service level between the Thunder Bay Public Library and the English public and Catholic schools will not be affected in any way by the elimination of reserved board seats. All of our programming that we conduct with the schools and students will continue as normal. The professional relationships between teachers and library staff will continue as will class visits to the library and library visits to the schools as well as other activities arranged by their teachers. The composition of the board is unrelated to our programming strategy or schedule of activities. As a governing board, the role of the board is not to direct programming or supervise daily operations but to set general policy and supervise the CEO. The library's relationship with the various schools (all of the schools, not just the English public and Catholic schools who have board seats) is very strong and we will continue to invest and nurture those relationships to ensure an active and vital connection between our mutually supportive institutions.
- 5) Consultation was done through the proper channels - through that of the school board representatives who sit on the library board. This decision was not done lightly or hastily. It was debated over a series of meetings wherein the school board representatives had direct input and were able to seek the opinions of their full school boards to bring back to the library board. After a series of discussions and meetings over a number of months, the school board representatives, along with every other member of the library board, voted in favour of abolishing the reserved seats and to have those seats filled by community members. This included Council's representative on the library board.

In conclusion, we would ask you to take this information into consideration during the ratification process. If you do choose to open the reserved seats up to community members this move would:

- modernize the library board
- bring it in line with nearly every other library board in the province
- infuse it with new skills and diverse representation

- aid in the quest to decolonize the library and our public institutions and root out systemic racism from our community
- in no way affect the library's relationship with the students or schools of our city
- hopefully allow us to gain representation from currently under-represented community voices.

It is worth noting that the library board welcomes additional representation from City Councillors so they can be more involved in our public library system, develop a deeper understanding of library needs and contribute their unique perspectives to the governance of our system.

A board with even numbers is typically contra-indicative of good governance principles. Our library board has operated efficiently with 9 members for many decades. We would recommend keeping that number at 9 (the indication of 10 members on March 27 may have been a typo). This would mean 2 city councillors and 7 community members.

We thank you for your consideration and we look forward to building a fruitful relationship to deliver the library services that Thunder Bay residents deserve. We extend to you an open invitation to discuss this matter in more depth or to discuss any topic related to the library you wish to engage in at the contact below.

Sincerely,

Carol Grieve,  
Thunder Bay Public Library Board Chairperson  
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