Report from the Community Needs Assessment

Burnaby Public Library

Executive Summary

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This report presents the results of the Community Needs Assessment conducted for the Burnaby Public Library (BPL) by Marleen Morris & Associates. The comprehensive study was initiated by the library to gather information to better understand community needs and guide the future direction of the library.

Research Methodology

The research plan for the Community Needs Assessment involved both quantitative and qualitative methods and was designed to gain insight regarding:
- Community satisfaction levels with library services;
- User and non-user opinions about the future direction of library services in Burnaby;
- Behavioural patterns and beliefs related to Burnaby Public Library and its services;
- Current information and knowledge requirements of Burnaby residents; and,
- Societal and technological trends in information and the knowledge economy.

Research methodologies employed for the study included the following:
- Literature review of library trends
- Analysis of BPL administrative data
- Analysis of demographic / community data
- Library user survey
- Telephone survey of randomly-selected Burnaby residents
- Focus groups with users and non-users of BPL
- Interviews with the Mayor and City Council

Key Findings

The key findings from the research for the Needs Assessment are presented below in relation to the library's strategic directions that have service and operational implications.[1] Issues related to awareness of the library and the physical space at the library are also reported as these emerged as important themes through the analysis of the study results.

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[1] At a planning retreat held in October 2004, the BPL Board identified five strategic directions for 2005-2007: Children and Young Families, Teens and Young Adults, Diverse Communities of Interest, Technology, and Burnaby First. The first four strategic directions have service and operational implications for BPL; 'Burnaby First' is primarily a governance issue so was not considered in relation to the results of the Needs Assessment.

Children and Young Families
The Needs Assessment revealed that children and young families are seen as an important target group for BPL and that the library is particularly well known for its service to children. While areas for improvement were evident, the study showed that levels of satisfaction among this group are quite high.

Resources
- The collection of children's books represents 15% of BPL's total collection and comprises 16% of total materials circulated, suggesting the collection is balanced with demand for these resources.
- Cataloguing children's titles and expanding the collection of children's resources available in languages other than English would result in improvements in the area of library resources for this target group.

Services
- Children and their families would benefit from longer weekend hours, particularly on Sunday, which was identified as the ideal day for families to visit the library.
- A family account, which consolidates the entire family's account on to one card would make it easier for families to manage and keep track of their library activity.

Programs
- Families would like to have access to 'simultaneous programming' to provide programs of interest to different members of the family, all scheduled at the same time.
- Offering library programs for families and children outside of regular day-time hours would help facilitate the participation of working families.

Library space
- Having access to a designated child-friendly area, where children are free to make noise without the concern that they will disturb others, would make the library a more comfortable and enjoyable place for children and families and for all library users.

Teens and Young Adults
According to the results of the Needs Assessment, the teen and young adult population does not appear to be particularly well served by the library. The study indicated that in relation to library resources, services, programs and space, teen priorities are different than those of the general population; for example, the 'virtual' world is of greater importance to the teen population than to any other single group. Overall, the results of the study suggest that there is work to be done in the area of teens and young adults if the library is to engage this group. Improving resources, services and programs for teens will also be important in keeping families with children as active users as children get older.

Resources
- The library's collection and circulation of teen resources is low, and the teen materials that *are* available might not be the ones of greatest interest to teens – survey respondents indicated dissatisfaction with teen materials and focus group participants said the teen resources currently available at the library are not the ones they are most interested in.
- Teens would like to have access to materials electronically and appear to be unaware that the library's website currently provides this access.
- Teen collections ranked second, after print fiction, in response to a question about "most important" resources among under-19 respondents to the survey.
- Under-19 survey respondents also indicated a strong interest in videos and DVDs; levels of dissatisfaction expressed by survey respondents generally regarding the library's collection of videos and DVDs were quite high.
- That said, the collection and circulation of teen collections expanded significantly between 2002-2005 – 58% and 60% respectively.

Services
- Teens expressed a stronger interest than the average respondent in services related to the 'virtual' world, including self-checkout, computers with Internet access, the library's website and wireless Internet access.

Programs
- Teen programs were identified as the top priority among under-19 survey respondents.
- Dissatisfaction with teen programs was also high, which suggests there is an interest in teen programming, but that the teen programs currently offered by the library may not be of interest to this target group.

Library space
- The library is not seen as a 'cool' or fun place for teens primarily because there is too much emphasis on having to be quiet at the library; it is not a place where teens feel comfortable.
- To address this issue, it would be helpful to provide designated spaces for teens where they can talk without being worried about being told to be quiet.
- Areas for group study were rated as a top priority by teens in the focus groups and survey; these areas were also among the highest areas of dissatisfaction in the survey.
- Areas for socializing were of particular interest to teens in the focus groups; levels of dissatisfaction in relation to these areas were also among the highest observed in the survey.
- Teens also recognized the importance of quiet study areas in the survey and focus groups.

Diverse Communities of Interest

The library's strategic area of 'diverse communities of interest' refers primarily to Burnaby's multicultural community. The results of the Needs Assessment strongly suggest that the library could make improvements in its service to this group. The public library is often the first access point for community and social services for newcomers to Canada, which underscores the need for the library to be as welcoming and inclusive as possible.[2]

The study revealed there is dissatisfaction with the resources, services and programs to serve the multicultural community. Rates of dissatisfaction expressed by study participants in relation to ESL materials and library resources, services and programs in languages other than English were among the highest recorded.

Those who completed the survey in Mandarin indicated ESL resources and programs were their top priorities in these categories, while focus group participants expressed a preference for equal emphasis on ESL and first language in the provision of library resources and programs, as well as services, for the multicultural community.

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[2] The demographic analysis conducted as part of the Needs Assessment, clearly demonstrates the significance of the need to serve the multicultural community. In Burnaby, 47% of the community are immigrants (as compared to 26% in BC overall) and many of these immigrants have recently come to Canada: 24% arrived between 1991 and 2001. Furthermore, 52% of Burnaby residents speak a language other than English as their mother tongue.

Resources
- Resources of interest to the multicultural community include ESL materials for adults and children that are age and level appropriate; bilingual ESL resources; materials to help facilitate literacy development among those who may not have strong literacy skills in their own language; first-language resources, both original works and translated popular English titles; and materials to help newcomers learn about and adjust to living in Canada.
- The library's collection of ESL materials and resources in languages other than English is considered limited in scope and number, read through, and out of date.
- Caution was expressed by stakeholders with regard to attempting to provide extensive collections in languages other than English. Because Burnaby is so linguistically diverse, there was concern that the library could never equitably serve all language groups in the municipality and agreement that it must be very careful in defining what it can provide.

Services
- Services of interest include having access to librarians who can offer reference and information services and basic library orientation information, such as how to get a library card, in languages other than English.
- Members of the multicultural community would also benefit from library brochures and promotional materials in languages other than English.
- A stong interest in having the library open longer hours on Sundays was expressed among members of the multicultural community.

Programs
- Programs in languages other than English, such as children's story times and workshops on how to use the library would be of interest to the multicultural community.
- Strong interest in ESL programs was also expressed.

Library Space
- Library signage that uses universally understood icons, rather than the English language, would make the library more accessible to non-English speakers.

Technology

The Community Needs Assessment revealed that while in-person visits to BPL have been steadily decreasing since 2002, BPL has seen considerable growth in virtual or Internet visits.[3] Such an increase is in keeping with trends showing a growing prevalence of online information and services, and with trends related to how younger people access information.

Comparing the library's collection of electronic resources to the collections of other public libraries in BC suggests that, on a per capita basis, BPL's collection is about average for a library of this size. There is, however, an issue related to awareness, which highlights the need for BPL to promote and market the scope of electronic resources and services available through its website. It also signals an opportunity for new programs that teach people how to access and use electronic resources.

It was clear from the Needs Assessment that there is a lack of awareness about the scope of the services and resources available electronically through the library's website.
- More than 40% of survey respondents indicated they were not familiar enough with BPL's electronic resources or links from the library's website to rate their satisfaction with them; more than half of survey respondents could not offer an opinion in response to questions about their satisfaction with the website's community information and resources and online help; and more than three quarters of survey respondents appeared to be unaware that the website offers online tutorials.
- Non-users of the library suggested through the focus groups they were unaware of the library's e-resources.
- Even frequent library users indicated in the focus group discussions they did not know they could access electronic resources through the library's website.
- Other focus group participants said they do not use the library remotely because they do not know how to find or search for what they need on the library's website.

Study participants expressed an interest in electronic resources and services.
- Focus group participants indicated that accessing resources in electronic format would be useful when having the most up-to-date information (as opposed to resources for pleasure reading) is important, such as with health or business information.
- Providing access to more electronic resources was one of the most commonly suggested ways for BPL to improve its services in the telephone survey.
- Survey results indicate that infrequent users of the library are more likely to be virtual visitors.

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[3] This was demonstrated by the significant increase in website visits, which grew by 64% between 2002 and 2005.

- In response to a survey question about most important services, the library website ranked third.
- When asked about the three most important resources and the most important resource for BPL to offer, the rankings of print reference materials and electronic reference materials were almost equal.
- Focus group participants also indicated they think it is important and convenient to have access to services remotely via the library's website.

The increase in website visits, juxtaposed with the lack of awareness about the scope of the services and resources available electronically and the interest in electronic resources and services, suggests that BPL has an exciting opportunity to increase virtual use of the library.

Awareness
The Needs Assessment strongly indicated that there is a considerable lack of awareness of what the library offers, among library users and non-users alike. This was true on all fronts – in relation to library resources, services and programs – and with almost all populations, although less so with regard to what is available for young children. The issue of awareness is significant since, logically, a lack of awareness equates to a lack of use.

Demographic information collected for the study revealed that close to half of Burnaby's population (48%) was new to the community within the past five years. This trend is expected to continue and accelerate and is hugely significant in relation to the need to create awareness of what the library offers. The library must be constantly in awareness-building mode in order to attract newcomers moving to Burnaby – both from other parts of Canada and from abroad.

The lack of awareness about the scope of what the library offers was evident through:
- Comments made during the focus groups by both users and non-users indicating there is generally low awareness in the community about the library and what it provides.
- The high number of survey respondents who were not familiar enough with the electronic resources or links from the library's website in order to rate their satisfaction with them; and who selected 'I don't know' in response to questions about their satisfaction with aspects of the website.
- The fact that focus group participants suggested the library should provide resources, services and programs they already offer, including computer instruction and job-finding programs, and electronic resources.

The study indicated there is a desire for the library to offer more information about what it provides and how its resources, services and programs can be accessed.

- Providing more advertising and communications about what the library offers was suggested as a way for the library to improve its services in the community.
- The library should pursue multiple channels and methods for distributing information and ensure information is available in multiple languages reflective of the demographics of the community.

Physical Space and Library Atmosphere

The physical space at the library emerged as a major issue through the Needs Assessment. One of the highest areas of dissatisfaction observed in the survey was in relation to physical characteristics of the library, and issues related to physical space were raised in all of the focus groups and in the stakeholder interviews.

One of the main concerns related to physical space was connected to noise levels. Some focus group participants expressed frustration that the library is noisy, while others indicated they do not feel comfortable in the library because of the need to be quiet all the time. To address this issue, it was felt that the library should consider providing designated and separated spaces for specific library uses/users.

There was clear agreement in the study about the importance of quiet areas at the library.

- Eighty percent of survey respondents identified quiet areas among their top three priorities for physical space and half indicated these as "most important".
- Focus group participants highlighted the importance of having access to quiet areas to read, study or use computers and expressed frustration that they find current noise levels in the library make it difficult to concentrate.

At the same time, the need for areas where noise is permitted was also revealed.

- Areas for children ranked second in response to a survey question about most important physical characteristics at the library.
- Focus group participants emphasized the need for an area for children where they are not expected to be quiet and where parents do not have to worry about them disturbing others in the library.
- Audiovisual and group study areas emerged among the most important library space priorities in the survey.
- Levels of dissatisfaction in relation to areas for group study and socializing were among the highest observed in the survey.

- Focus group participants stressed the need for group study areas, particularly for high school students. They also suggested the library should provide audiovisual space, an area where cell phones can be used, and computer areas where groups can work together.

Issues related to overcrowding and library atmosphere were raised in the focus groups.
- A lack of available seating was cited by some focus group participants as the reason why they do not visit the library more often.
- The library is seen by many as institutional and unwelcoming. This was mentioned primarily in relation to the Metrotown Branch. Contributing factors in this regard that were identified include the dull paint colours, tinted windows, physical barriers created by the entry and exit gates, the large desks at the library entrance, and the Commissionaires who may appear to some library users like 'guards'. It was noted that in this context, entering the library is intimidating for some. Similar comments were heard regarding the Kingsway Branch.
- Focus group participants indicated they feel that space is used inefficiently at the Metrotown Branch, particularly in relation to the wide foyer. It was noted that the library processing functions located at the Metrotown Branch also take up a lot of space that could be used more effectively for public service.

The desire for the library to function as a welcoming community gathering/meeting space was highlighted in the focus groups and stakeholder interviews.

Looking Forward
The results presented in this report provide information to serve as a reference to guide the future development of the library. This information will help the library better understand and continue to meet community needs.