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Provincial News

Libraries need more than just books to fight illiteracy

Repairs, new public programs and equipment are all pressing needs, says board member

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Appointed earlier this month as the only Monctonian on the N.B. Public Libraries Foundation board of directors, Franscine Anderson says she'll be working hard to raise money and books for the 14 libraries of Albert, Westmorland and Kent counties, but reminds that she's got 62 libraries across the province to look after in her new voluntary position.

"I'll be doing my part for the AWK system but I have to work with the whole board in Fredericton too," the former assistant librarian at the Moncton Public Library on Main Street said in an interview yesterday.

Anderson says the province's libraries and its rural bookmobile services need more than books repairs, new public programs and equipment are all pressing needs - "and we can't expect the province to pay it all; Citizens need to do their part too."

Anderson - wife of former Moncton City Councillor and Town Planning Commissioner S. Boyd Anderson - reminded that the Foundation's annual mail-out campaign begins on Oct. 17 at the launch of National Library Week and letters asking for help will go out to every library card holder in New Brunswick - all 270,000 of them.

That's an astounding figure considering there are only 370,000 households in all of New Brunswick, says Anthony Knight, the Foundation's executive director.

Some people think the continuing rise in the popularity of the Internet spells doom for public libraries, but it's actually the best thing that ever happened to the system, says Knight.

Recent Statistics Canada reports that say the province has relatively few home computers per capita when compared with other provinces can be misinterpreted to mean New Brunswickers don't use the Internet as much as their counterparts elsewhere in Canada.

Quite the opposite is true according to the New Brunswick public library system's records, says Knight.

"New Brunswick led the country last year in terms of people accessing the Internet from their public library. People use our terminals - we have 300 of them across the province - for free access to the Internet. Our website has also registered 1.5 million hits already this year."

New Brunswickers have always had a love affair with their libraries and Internet access has only helped to heighten that sentiment and remind people of all the other good things a library means - not just stacks of books but a public meeting place and an interactive learning centre for the kids, reminds Knight.

In fact, computers have indirectly meant a new lease on life for the provincial system due to a donation of software, computers and cash with a total value of \$1 million from the Bill Gates Foundation in 1997.

That grant also helped create the Foundation that same year with a mandate to raise funds for the system. Progress for the all-volunteer body was slow in the early years but, in 2003, a provincial government grant made it possible to hire a full-time director.

Under Knight's aegis, a fundraising infrastructure was set up and progress has been excellent since then. From early 2003 to the present day, the Foundation has raised half a million dollars for book purchases, equipment and new programs. The province continues to help the fundraising effort as well, annually matching what the Foundation raises to a maximum of \$100,000.