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Never ignore the true value of the library: learning to love books

By LEZLIE LOWE
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Summer is when you lie on the beach and take in a good book.

Me? I've been more into plain old thinking about libraries.

It's this mucky Toronto library business. The short of it, if you've been busy reading, like you're supposed to, rather than obsessing over national news, is that Toronto councillor Doug Ford thinks his Etobicoke ward has more library branches than Tim Hortons. He's suggested shuttering entire branches as a cost savings.

Halifax Regional Council is, happily, free of library killers. We're instead getting a brand spankin' new central library, whose only fault so far is how long we've been waiting for the damn thing (reports suggest the current main branch wasn't meeting demands for service as far back as 1987).

The new library's design appeal process closes Monday, after which HRM will rocket forward to modern library glory, confident the \$55-million cost is the soundest kind of investment there is.

Er, maybe.

See, proving the value of a library — the payoff — is one sticky wicket.

There's a perfectly lovely way to dollarize your every library visit — the library value calculator (<http://www.halifaxpubliclibraries.ca/about/news/library-value-cal.html>).

You just pump in how many books or magazines or DVDs or ebooks you borrow in a month, and toss in how many puppet shows your kids attend and how many questions a reference librarian answers for you and blammo! — out pops the tidy sum you'd have to shell out if you were actually paying for all that stuff.

You minus the average monthly portion of your household taxes that funds libraries (a measly \$4.97) and voila. (I came out \$620 in the black. For one month.)

But that's not the whole story, is it?

The worth of a public library isn't just its book value, if you will. It's something greater. It's something that lies in the value of universal access to 1.1 million items, over 14 branches, for free.

Then there's this:

In my house, growing up, there lived two softcover books: James Clavell's *Shogun* and Alex Haley's *Roots*. I picked them up and puzzled over them from time to time, but I never saw another human handle them. They resided in the linen closet. (Where else do you store books when you only have two of them?)

I had my own books, naturally: Nancy Drews and Dr. Seusses and a nine-book boxed set of Little House on the Prairie as decoration on my dresser.

The point? I learned to love books through public libraries. No where else.

How many others are there out there like me? For whom the Dewey Decimal System sets alight their hearts? I can't hazard a guess.

And how does one even begin to appraise the value of that literary nurturing? In a world where measurable economic spinoffs are the height of heights, how do you even start to quantify the value of a love of books? Of libraries?

You can't.

That makes it easy to see libraries as a drain, rather than as a wellspring. To imagine closing libraries won't hurt anyone but a couple of dozen whiny writer-types and poor folks there to use the computers. To ignore that Halifax libraries had 2.3 million in-person visits and almost five million items checked out last fiscal year. To fantasize that HRM could use its portion of the library build — \$23.7 million (and the province is in for \$13 million) — to widen a road or pave a stretch of highway or fund a miniscule portion of the proposed downtown convention centre.

Ah, but look, our library build is practically a done deal. So settle back down to your summer reading and feel good about it, because Halifax has made the right call on this one. And be glad, for the millionth time, you don't live in Toronto.

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