

## ***Libraries Act Review and Rural Library Services***

Athabasca County and County of Wetaskiwin

*Simple Majority Required  
Endorsed by District 3 (Pembina River)*

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WHEREAS libraries are an important service in rural communities and play a key role in community development; and

WHEREAS rural libraries are distinctly different in size, scope, and service level from libraries in large urban centres; and

WHEREAS the *Libraries Act* provides the legal framework for public library service in Alberta; and

WHEREAS the current version of the *Libraries Act* was adopted in 2007; and

WHEREAS section 14(1) of the *Libraries Regulation* requires a municipal board of any municipality with a population of 10,000 or more to employ a professional librarian that is a graduate of a postgraduate library program; and

WHEREAS the *Libraries Regulation* does not take into consideration population density, distance between service points or number of service points within a municipality; and

WHEREAS the Public Library Grants Program uses the 2016 Alberta Municipal Affairs population lists which do not include the results from the 2016 federal census, and, therefore, 49 rural municipalities receive funding based on their 2011 federal census numbers; and

WHEREAS regional library boards and systems are concerned about the restrictions placed on them by the *Libraries Act*, *Libraries Regulation*, and current library funding mechanisms;

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Rural Municipalities of Alberta request that the Government of Alberta review the the *Libraries Act* and *Libraries Regulation* through a comprehensive public consultation process;**

**FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that the review include a focus on amending population density and service point indicators related to requirements for hiring professional librarians;**

**FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that RMA requests that the Government of Alberta update population lists to the most recent census information to ensure proper funding is provided to rural library boards.**

### **Member Background**

Libraries play an important role in community development. They serve as a meeting place for people to learn and socialize. Libraries provide a variety of services that are often hard to access in rural and remote areas. These include internet access, literacy education, access to physical and digital books, as well as programming for hard to reach demographics such as new mothers or seniors. Libraries are community hubs and are a critical service to support community development. In rural Alberta, libraries are also a service point for the Alberta Supernet. This allows patron access to reliable high-speed internet that can help bridge the digital divide. These services and the others provided by libraries are important to rural communities. However, rural communities also face unique challenges when trying to optimize their library services.

Alberta's library system is operated by municipalities based on requirements in the *Libraries Act* and *Libraries Regulation*. This resolution requests a review of the Act and Regulation to ensure they properly address the challenges faced by rural libraries. The resolution also specifically calls for changes to two current components of the library system that are problematic for library boards; one within the Act itself and one outside the scope of the Act but still crucial to the sustainability of rural libraries. These are explained below:

### Professional Librarian Requirements

Rural libraries are often smaller and provide services to fewer patrons over a greater distance. Furthermore, rural municipalities may have multiple service points that are often open shorter hours and have fewer staff members than their urban counterparts. The requirement in the *Libraries Regulation* that municipalities with a population above 10,000 must hire a professional librarian adds further stress to already limited rural libraries. In some cases, the cost of hiring a professional librarian would take the entire library board budget. This cost could also lead to the closure of rural service points and a reduction in the library services in an area. This can also have unintended impacts for library boards with dispersed populations and few large urban members.

An example of this challenge can be seen in the Northern Lights Library System (NLLS), which is the only one of Alberta's seven library systems with no large urban centres. For every 25,000 persons it serves, NLLS must employ one professional librarian. Therefore, for the 174,000 persons within the NLLS geographic area, NLLS is required to hire seven professional librarians.

If a library system has a member library with a population over 10,000 then that municipality is required to hire a professional librarian. As a result, the library system can deduct that population from the overall system population; therefore, reducing the overall requirement of hiring a professional librarian at the system level.

For Instance, Marigold Library System, with a population of just over 300,000, have several municipalities that are required to directly hire professional librarians. These local libraries hiring professional librarians eliminate over 200,000 persons from the system population. Therefore, with a population reduced to 100,000, the Marigold Library System, according to current legislation, is only required to hire five professional librarians at the system level.

Northern Lights Library system on the other hand only has one member municipality with a population over 10,000. The City of Cold Lake has a population of just under 15,000, which reduces the NLLS total population to 159,000. This reduces the required number of professional librarians to six for the system

NLLS currently has eight professional librarians serving in libraries hired by their municipalities; just because the population served is lower than the 10,000 should not negate the fact that these people have been trained at a master's degree level and they are not being recognized for it due to a change in the interpretation of the *Library Regulation*.

Numerous system directors and system board members have expressed that at one time all professional librarians hired at the municipal level were taken off from the system population count, no matter how many persons lived in that municipality.

The requirement for NLLS to employ at least six professional librarians (master's degree a requirement) has significant impact on budget, operations and service, including the following:

1. Employing six professional librarians has major budget implications, as these positions are in a high wage category; therefore, other areas of operations are not being sufficiently staffed. For instance, NLLS has only one staff member in the inter-library loans department handling over 1,362,842 books a year, compared to three to five staff members in other systems doing the same job. This understaffing can lead to repetitive stress and OH&S problems.
2. Recruiting library professionals with master's degrees to small rural settings poses a significant human resources challenge.
3. Employing more professional staff than any other system impacts on the level of system services, programs and resources (such as delivery services) that NLLS can offer.

4. At system meetings it has also become apparent that municipalities in other systems are opposing the 10,000 threshold and want to raise the requirement to 15,000 before they must hire a professional librarian. Again, this would significantly impact the budget, staffing and services as NLLS will not have any municipality that they could deduct from the overall population count.

#### Current Population Lists

Another challenge facing rural library boards is inaccurate funding from the Public Library Grants Program. This has occurred because Alberta Municipal Affairs has not updated their population lists since 2016. According to the *2016 Municipal Affairs Population List* 49 rural municipalities and one specialized municipality have population numbers from the 2011 federal census. Therefore, these municipalities are receiving per capita funding based on numbers that are eight years old. This adds another challenge to rural library boards as they are not receiving accurate funding to support their rural library.

While this issue would be outside the scope of the Act and Regulation, it is still a crucial advocacy priority to ensure rural libraries are properly funded and can operate sustainably.

#### **RMA Background**

RMA has no active resolutions directly related to this issue.