

Investing in libraries will produce long-term dividends

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EDITORIAL

When you stop to think about what a public library is and the function it serves within a community, it almost seems like a mythical place.

No, really — think about it. A public library is a place in which hundreds upon hundreds of books — containing a universe of ideas, thoughts, stories and characters — are available for anyone to borrow and read, free of charge. It's a place in which information is made accessible to anyone, also free. It's a place where one can read newspapers, rent movies and use the internet, as well as access innovative community programming aimed at making us a more compassionate and less ignorant society. Again, all for free.



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Coun. Brian Mayes at the St. Vital Library reopening.

Public libraries are incredible things. They are the bedrock of literacy and democracy, which is why it's encouraging that the City of Winnipeg is continuing to invest in ours. This week, the St. Vital Library reopened after undergoing a \$2.4-million facelift that included the addition of an elevator, more washrooms and a new roof — all improvements that will boost usage.

The renovations provide, quite literally, a new lease on life for the St. Vital Library. Five years ago, it was slated for demolition. And later, it was slated for amalgamation with Windsor Park.

St. Vital is one of the 10 libraries included in Winnipeg's 2013 library redevelopment strategy, which acknowledged, quite correctly, that libraries can't

truly be accessible places for all if the spaces themselves are not accessible. The decision to improve rather than shutter these brick-and-mortar community hubs was forward-thinking then and it's forward-thinking now; in an era of fake news and misinformation, it seems we need libraries more than ever. In the relentless storm of information that bombards us every day, libraries are lighthouses. Their existence ensures that information and knowledge are not just for those who can afford to buy books or pay for a Wi-Fi connection.

Libraries offer more than just access to books. Those who haven't set foot inside a Winnipeg Public Library location since they got their first library card in elementary school might be surprised at all that's on offer. Word processing and research courses, book clubs, guest lectures, documentary screenings and even a story time led by drag queens are just some of the programming you'll find at our libraries. It's programming such as this that fosters community, connection and learning.

The forthcoming Idea Mill at the Millennium Library, a space that will include 3D printers, sound-recording booths, a crafting area and photography and video equipment, is another example of how our city's libraries are innovating to fulfil their role in modern society.

And with libraries come librarians, who are resources themselves. They aren't bespectacled, cardigan-wearing shushers; they are there to educate and empower, whether it's sourcing research materials or helping someone figure out how to get ebooks on their iPad.

But perhaps most crucially, libraries and librarians help nurture generations of young readers. They remain a critical link between children and reading for pleasure, which is no small thing considering how much our lives are populated by

screens. Research has shown that children who read for pleasure perform better in other areas of their lives and are more likely to grow up into adults who read.

To invest in libraries is to invest in the future.

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