



**BRIEF TO THE CITY OF MONTRÉAL CONCERNING
THE DETERMINATION OF ITS CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT
POLICY**

SUBMITTED BY

THE FRASER-HICKSON INSTITUTE

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Bibliothèque FRASER-HICKSON Library

Introduction

The Fraser-Hickson Institute has operated a public library in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce since 1959. Prior to that, it operated a “free library open to all” in downtown Montréal beginning in 1885. Until 2003, its operating costs were financed entirely from private sources. Since November 2003, the City, in conjunction with several boroughs, is paying for one-third of the operating costs under the terms of a three-year agreement. The Institute provides the remaining funds necessary to continue this service. The objectives of the agreement are to gain an experience of ‘public-private partnership’ in the supply of community library services and to provide time for the City of Montréal to establish a comprehensive policy for library operation within its boundaries.

Purpose of this Brief

With 120 years of experience in delivering library services to the public as a private institution, the Fraser-Hickson Institute has a deep and abiding interest in the determination of a cultural development policy for the City of Montréal. It recognizes the great challenges the City must face in defining priorities and allocating resources within the broad spectrum of opportunities. Montréal, as Dr. Richard Florida observed so eloquently in a speech to La Chambre de Commerce de Montréal Métropolitain on 27 January 2005, is enormously gifted with all of the components to develop a creative society – the challenge is whether the right choices will be made and applied successfully to fulfil our potential.

This brief is a declaration of the vital role of libraries in strengthening the creative society that is Montréal and a strong appeal for the encouragement of a “library culture” in our City.

Montréal has always been far behind Toronto and most other major North American cities in the creation of a public library system and the growth of a “library culture” in the population. Both its facilities and collections need substantial enrichment to close the gap. Despite its many assets, Montréal knows it is handicapped as a « Ville du savoir » as long as its population is under-served by its library system.

The intent of the City (contained in the Cultural Development Policy proposal released in November 2004) to raise library standards to at least the average of the ten largest cities in Canada, is a bold and necessary step in the right direction,

provided the investment focuses on improving the quality of library services at the user level.

The Role of the Community Library

One of the great liberating developments of the last century in democratic societies has been the free access to information. The founder and benefactor of the Fraser-Hickson Library, Hugh Fraser, anticipated this when he initiated a free public library in Montreal. Great progress has been accomplished since then in enabling the population to read and learn as they prefer, but the comparative benchmarks of other cities challenge Montréal's future as a leader among creative societies in North America and the world. Libraries are a critical component in developing and maintaining an aware and creative population.

But libraries are more than just places where books can be borrowed. They must be accessible, well-equipped and friendly. They supply answers to questions and access to the Internet. They stimulate the interest of children in books and reading. They offer a hospitable location to browse the collections and to find answers to questions in the reference section. They provide programs to learn about science and to hear authors read from their latest books. They recycle used books and raise money from book sales to buy more to lend. Libraries are an essential part of a civilizing and healthy community.

The Public-Private Partnership

The Fraser-Hickson Library knows how much a local community needs and wants a full service library. When it was forced to close in April 2003 because of overwhelming operating losses, the public outcry was profound – over 11,000 signatures were on a petition submitted to the City Council urging action to re-open it. The result has been a pilot project to test the feasibility of a “public-private-partnership”. This initiative brings the City and participating boroughs together with the Fraser-Hickson Institute and its generous private sector supporters to sustain the Library as a community centre on a collaborative basis.

This combination of public and private resources to deliver library services in a community is showing success after its initial fifteen months and may be the way of the future. Given its innovative role when it first began, the Fraser-Hickson Institute is pleased to be involved in this challenging project that could have far-reaching consequences into the future in the way library services in Montréal are delivered and continuously improved. As awareness of the value of libraries expands in the community, participation of private sector assistance in funding these activities will also grow, as long as bureaucracy does not overwhelm service.

Conclusion

In his presentation, Dr. Florida said, “design is where wealth comes from”. Whether it relates to a concept, a process or an object, good design responds to the needs of the user. If we are truly going to enrich ourselves in knowledge terms, we must design and use our libraries in imaginative and creative ways. Based on the experience gained in the Fraser-Hickson Library, we urge those responsible for the definition and application of a cultural development policy in Montréal to

- give priority to the upgrading of libraries in Montréal,
- encourage good design in the way libraries are operated and used,
- design a system that allows the community library to flourish,
- create a coherent city-wide network that responds to user needs and
- stimulate the participation of private donors in funding the costs.

Our Library is ready to participate actively in achieving these objectives.

Respectfully submitted,

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