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Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Infrastructure Sector COVID-19 Impact Hearings

Submitted by:

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3 PM STEPHEN'S REMARKS:

Good afternoon and thank you to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs for the opportunity to participate in the infrastructure sector consultations on the impacts of COVID-19.

I am Stephen Abram, the Executive Director of the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries. And it is great to be before this important committee once more.

The Federation of Ontario Public Libraries will present recommendations and justifications today as we work in tandem with the Ontario Library Association in support of Ontario's library industry sector. I know that you also heard from the president of OLA, Andrea Cecchetto earlier this afternoon on the important issues facing school and public libraries.

We are excited by the strong passion of Ontarians for the support they have received from Ontario's public libraries for over 150 years – but especially during this pandemic.

It is a fact that public libraries are vastly different and have greater economic and social impact than 20 years ago and that is extremely exciting. Today I'd like to provide the Committee with an understanding of the modern Ontario Public library's community hub roles (digital, community engagement, programs) and provide recommendations for how **infrastructure funding** can help better support our communities' success in our province.

Libraries are NOT seeking a NEW normal, we're inventing the NEXT normal. We have a centuries long tradition of very successfully adapting to change!

Indeed, over a dozen, recent, independent research reports have shown that public libraries are an excellent government investment in infrastructure. The ROI of \$1 dollar in local

public libraries averages over \$5 in economic return-on-investment and close to \$25 in average social return-on-investment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that Ontarians in all communities depend on digital access – to work, to learn, to connect to community and government services, to find or train for a job and to access health information. Sadly, it is true from our independent research data that public libraries are the critical place where over 25% of Ontarians access computing, Wi-Fi, the internet, and equipment including software and peripherals. This percentage is even higher in our small town, rural, First Nation, Northern and remote communities.

According to CIRA, the number of Canadians working from home has grown seven-fold. Nearly half of all households report having two or more people working at home due to COVID-19. 38% of respondents said their home internet speed is slower than before physical distancing began. Over half of Canadians are spending more time using video or teleconference technology to connect with others.

In our written submission we will share dozens of stories from Ontario residents about the impact of the public library on their quality of life and success.

Today, we're asking the Ontario government to be a greater part of our journey. Our Ontario government has no other stigma-free public service institution that enjoys our level of trust, has talented and professional staff, maintains longer open-hours than nearly any government service, has deep technology, education and information literacy skills, high customer service standards, AND is available in over 98% of Ontario communities. You have is a unique opportunity to exploit this sector for the benefit of Ontarians.

Throughout the years, public libraries have evolved to meet the needs of communities in many different ways. Public libraries are an essential access-point for technology and broadband internet – especially for hundreds of thousands of Ontarians that cannot afford in-home internet access. This fits very well with the province's anti-poverty strategies. This is especially vital for many rural and Northern communities across Ontario where at-home connectivity is limited. Without public libraries to depend on, rural and Northern communities would have limited options for accessing technology and broadband internet. And books and answering questions continues to be our core business and this is ever more important in the pandemic.

Local public libraries across the province have been providing Wi-Fi connectivity for residents and essential municipal staff via hotspots lending, in parking lots or through bookmobiles. Lending laptops/PCs and peripherals to municipal and essential staff to continue working from home. Providing access to e-resources such as e-books, free streaming platforms, reference materials and more. Pivoting to move a ton of programming online to help families and individuals, e-learning, e-government access, delivering virtual story time, tech training programs, book clubs, and more. Organizing "care calls" to vulnerable community members, including seniors.

Public Libraries Need a Digital Investment to Serve Ontario's Communities' Needs.

The COVID-19 emergency has magnified the weaknesses and opportunities in exploiting the role of public libraries in every Ontario community. **The next normal is not a return to the old normal. We know that.** It's clear that the next normal will see increased work-from-home, learn-from-home, and safe and trusted spaces being needed to maintain local community vitality.

At Ontario public libraries, digital services are growing exponentially and are highly in-demand. However, in many libraries access to these services is limited by the **availability** of broadband access and enough hardware, peripherals, and software. Many branches still do not have high-speed broadband access or have outdated internet infrastructure that does not meet today's residents' needs and the demand for digital access across Ontario communities.

We can prove the Value of Technology Access in Public Libraries

A recent independent study involving 50 urban, rural, First Nation and Francophone Libraries, demonstrates the impact of technology access in public libraries on local communities' digital capacity and employment readiness.

Workforce Development

Educational Activities

- **59%** did educational activities. Younger patrons (24+), immigrants, and visible minorities were more likely benefit.

Employable Skills

- **34%** developed employable skills. Young patrons (25 -34), and First Nations are more likely to benefit.

Job Search Skills and Success

- Among those who said they used the technology service(s) to develop skills related to finding a job, **62%** identifying as First Nations had a high level of success in finding a job.

Entrepreneurship and Business Development

- **20%** did business-related activities, **85%** hire less than 10 people as small businesses

Digital Inclusion

- **53%** of public library users reported that public libraries were their only access point to the technology service(s) that they used - **71%** got that access to the Internet through Library Wi-Fi

Digital Literacy Capacity

- **80%** increased level of digital comfort. Immigrants are likely to benefit more
- **34%** of the respondents reported being introduced to new technologies using technology services offered by the libraries and **92%** of them will continue to use that technology

Community Engagement

- **78%** engaged with their community. **First Nations** are more likely to find it a lot helpful.

Social Engagement

- **80%** connected with others to be more social. **Immigrants** are more likely to find *learning new skills* and *find support for a personal issue*

Civic Engagement

- **33%** accessed e-government services or resources online. **Patrons 55 and older** and **low-income** group are more likely to benefit.
- **40%** got government forms; **37%** of them learned about government programs or services.

Creativity and Innovation

- **26%** made a creative product. **First Nations and Teenagers (13-18 age)** are more likely to benefit.
- **6%** of them used **Content creation and editing software**. **38%** didn't know the library offered it and are interested in using it.
- **6%** of them used **fabricating and manufacturing equipment** and **electronics, circuitry, and robotics**. **31%** didn't know about those two services and are interested in using them.

Our Recommendations . . .

Get it to our doors and leave the rest up to us!

Leverage Ontario's broadband action plan to ensure that modern broadband connectivity is available in more public library branches in communities across Ontario.

Ensure all Ontarians have fantastic digital access speed.

Even with our physical doors closed, the demand for public library broadband increased during the lockdown period. Libraries have reported a steady stream of people parked or seated outside the library to use the Wi-Fi. These are people working remotely, applying for government relief, and participating in remote learning for K-12 or university & college.

Ensure that small town, rural, Northern, remote and First Nations communities aren't served at Second Class digital Access speeds.

We recommend a strong investment in to-the-door connectivity for sustainable, affordable, and content rich broadband infrastructure. This can provide the beachhead opportunity to rapidly and equitably extend this platform to more people, equitably, from students, job-seekers to seniors. Ontarians require broadband access in their communities to take part and advance in an increasingly digital economy and society on a level playing field.

Great high-speed access is not sufficient. After the door comes wi-fi and the desktop. Ensure Ontario's adults and students have all of the tools to learn, work, create, and discover.

In addition to supporting financially the ability for libraries to upgrade their broadband infrastructure to the most modern standards, public libraries also need programs to support the sustainability and affordability of these services, possibly through a not-for-profit provider. Also, a capital program to add terminals, software, and peripherals (like scanners, printers, hotspots, etc.) is sorely needed.

When the pipes are there it follows that curated and quality content including e-learning needs to be in the pipes.

Provide critical e-learning support through fair access to modern, digital resources for the people of Ontario – no matter where they live – by creating an Ontario Digital Public Library.

Many public libraries in Ontario struggle to pay for or are unable to afford the high-quality resources available in larger urban and suburban communities. People living in Ontario communities of less than 5,000 people have access to less than half the selection of e-books and a third of the online databases available to residents in Toronto, Ottawa, and Hamilton. However, those living in rural areas accessed twice as many e-books per capita through the library as people in urban communities.

Over 80% of libraries serving populations of under 5,000 have no subscriptions to e-learning platforms at all. These resources are invaluable for job training and re-training, lifelong learning, and homework help.

Creating an Ontario Digital Public Library through a targeted provincial investment would leverage the province's significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians access to a common set of e-learning and online resources through their public library – at home or in the library. People living in small, rural, Northern communities and First Nations would be able to access the same wide range of digital resources as the big city libraries.

In conclusion:

Taken together, we believe that these recommendations are critical to providing all public and school library communities in Ontario with a stable foundation upon which to continue adapting to the long-term needs of Ontarians in the COVID-19 ongoing emergency and far beyond.

Furthermore, they'll directly contribute to achieving the Ontario Government's vision of a province where every community is open for business, where a student has the tools to succeed wherever they grow up, where employment and economic and social infrastructure is fairly and equitably available, and where seniors and families can thrive in every community.

We look forward to continuing to work together to maintain robust, locally impactful public libraries throughout Ontario.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Committee and I look forward to your questions.