**2019 Ontario Budget – Community Consultation - January 16th, 2019**

**Donna Bright, Chief Librarian and Executive Officer, Ajax Public Library**

Good Morning Minister Fedeli. Thank you to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs for the opportunity to participate in your 2019 Pre-Budget consultations. I am delighted to contribute to this discussion to determine strategies to enhance the capacity of Ontarians to be successful while meeting government objectives and priorities. My name is Donna Bright, and I am the Chief Librarian and Executive Officer of the Ajax Public Library.

At the Ajax Public Library, our mission is to support the personal aspirations of Ajacians and other residents of Durham Region, through programs, collections and services.

Our strategic focusses include:

* + **Learning and skills development:** the Ajax Public Library supports the life-long learning activities of residents of all ages. From early literacy, to ESL practice, coding and robotics for youth, and employment retraining for adults, the Library provides expertise, collections, space and digital access to allow residents to pursue learning to enhance their capacity for success. These resources address learning needs beyond the traditional. The library now serves as an authority, a trainer and a coach on the literacies of the 21st century. Literacy no longer refers solely to reading but also includes the ability to distinguish authoritative content from junk, in the largely unregulated digital knowledge platforms of the present and to judge content relevance and usefulness. This expertise is essential in a knowledge-based economy where individuals and organizations must remain globally competitive.
  + **Economic development:** as small and home-based businesses continue to generate job growth, the library supports small business development, alone and in partnership (e.g., with Chambers of Commerce and municipal economic development departments). Our library supports the individual learning required for entrepreneurship, business development and job readiness or retraining in a knowledge-based economy.
  + **Technology access and participation:** The Ajax Public Library guarantees a free and level playing field so that no one is left behind. We provide the infrastructure for access to learning resources, and the platform for citizen-generated content and exchange.
  + **Providing the information needed to help residents to inform themselves of their civic rights and responsibilities:** The Library provides access to government information, i.e. assistance in navigating the province’s Digital Government – Service Ontario and Service Canada, permitting residents to take full advantage of their rights and to acquaint themselves with their personal responsibilities as a citizen.

While I am unable to speak for Ontario’s 300+ public and First Nations libraries I can comfortably state that most libraries share a similar mission – to help residents achieve their aspirations while meeting government priorities. Ontario’s public library staff help to save taxpayers’ money by providing free information, digital access, and, learning, leisure and recreational opportunities, through more than 1,100 service points in the province. As mentioned, these services support Ontarians to achieve their educational goals, to find a job, to start a business, and to live happy, healthy lives.

In September 2018, Ajax Public Library staff attended the Durham Region Smart Cities forum where we were delighted to hear Ontario’s Chief Digital Officer, Hillary Hartley, outline the concepts behind the Province’s Digital Access Plan including the commitment to: create people-centred programs and services; and, establish equity, inclusion and access.

The Ajax Public Library fully supports the Government’s vision to bridge Ontario’s digital divide. We’re encouraged to see a people-centric approach thatfocuses on user needs, will drive user success and aims to make the Ontario Government work better for the residents. The work of Ontario’s public libraries supports the government’s objectives as libraries have been, and continue to be, early adopters of emergent technology, making it public to our communities through access to hardware, software and to training.

However what is needed to ensure that Ontarians receive the library services necessary to help them achieve success is predictable and flexible funding that allows for long-term, cost-effective planning.

Provincial base funding for Ontario’s public libraries is provided through the Public Libraries Operating Grant (PLOG), an annual grant that respects local priorities and decision-making. Unlike other transfer payment programs/recipients, base funding for public libraries has been frozen for over 20 years, and many libraries are struggling to keep up even as demand continues to rise.

While the province’s fiscal challenges are recognized and understood, there is an immediate need to bring financial stability to Ontario’s public libraries.

An enhanced grant will allow Ontario’s library sector to make immediate and long-term plans that best respond to local needs and include working with the province to provide better, faster and consistent access to government services.

The inherent strengths of all public libraries can be a major lever for the government in its commitments to social cohesion, learning and literacy, innovation and prosperity. Ontario’s public libraries are one of the few institutions that people of all ages, socioeconomic statuses, genders, cultural background, educational attainment, etc. can freely visit to take advantage of a service of their own interest. The province has the libraries’ existing facilities and technology infrastructure, including broadband with well-trained knowledgeable staff, and long hours of service that can take on a leadership role in assisting the government to deliver programs and services and to save taxpayers’ money.

Thank you.