



2025 FOPL Chair's Report

Report To: FOPL Board and Members, Annual General Meeting
Report Name: 2025 FOPL Chair's Report – AGM 2026
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Recommendation

THAT the 2025 report of the FOPL Chair be received as circulated.

Report

Dear FOPL Members,

As I reflect on everything which has been achieved since our last AGM, and this my last one as the Chair of the Board, I am deeply satisfied with everything which has been achieved.

Interestingly I came to FOPL through my appointment by Toronto City Council to the Toronto Public Library Board.

People often will ask me a bout the relevance of public libraries. I always begin my answer by telling them often I drive by my local public library on the way to work....and people are lined up to get into it!

Public libraries are far more important than they might seem at first glance—they're one of the most quietly impactful public institutions in modern society.

At a basic level, public libraries provide free access to information. This includes not only books, but also digital resources, research databases, internet access, and educational tools. In a world where so much knowledge is behind paywalls, public libraries help level the playing field, so income doesn't determine who gets to learn.

They also play a major role in education beyond schools. From early childhood literacy programs to adult learning and job search support, public libraries function as lifelong learning hubs. This connects to the broader field of education, and the idea learning doesn't stop after formal schooling.



Another big piece is digital access. Not everyone has reliable internet or devices at home, and public libraries often fill that gap. FOPL through our Advocacy Day at Queen's Park has had to remind government officials of all political stripes of this particularly important role. It makes public libraries essential for applying to jobs, accessing government services, or even staying socially connected. Without them, the "digital divide" would be much worse.

My first reaction when I read about municipalities cutting the public library budget, or even closing branches for economic reasons is "They are only going to make things worse for their residents.....not better."

Public libraries also function as community spaces. They're one of the few places where you can exist without having to spend money. People use them for studying, meeting others, attending events, or just having a safe, quiet place to be. This is especially important in urban areas where public space is limited.

Unfortunately, for example during COVID, I heard loudly and clearly from residents, in particular youth living in apartment buildings in the area I represent as a City Council how their gathering space had been taken away or diminished. It greatly impacted their mental well-being.

There's also a civic dimension. Public libraries support informed citizenship by giving people access to reliable information, which ties into the functioning of democracy. A population which can freely access information is better equipped to make decisions and participate in society.

I think FOPL has done an excellent job of advocating for public libraries from one end of Ontario to the other. We have strongly been a voice for our Indigenous public libraries with the Provincial government. There is much more work to be done as we move further in our mandate.

Finally, public libraries adapt. Many now lend things like tools, musical instruments, and even provide maker spaces with 3D printers. They're not just about preserving knowledge—they're evolving with how people create and share it.

If you're wondering whether they still matter in the age of the internet: in many ways, they matter more. The internet has information; public libraries help people navigate it, access it fairly, and use it well.

It has truly been an honour to be not only a member of the Board of Directors of FOPL, but also the Chair! I can not thank our amazing staff enough for all the work they do. No one has broader shoulders than Dina and Diana! We have a Board of Directors who care so much about public libraries and work so well in a collaborative and thoughtful manner to protect our public libraries now, and planning for their future!

All my Best,

Paul Ainslie