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GTA

They're the 'beating hearts' of the city's neighbourhoods. So why are Toronto's public libraries still chronically underfunded?

By **Jennifer Pagliaro** City Hall Bureau

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By mid-afternoon, the Malvern branch of the Toronto Public Library is alive with activity.

Teens stream in from surrounding high schools, moving directly to the loud and colourful youth hub, where they fill plates with vegetables, popcorn and other snacks.

Through double doors, past the friendly security guard, in a massive, brightly painted space that's just for them, they settle into groups: lounging around a big TV to play video games, studying on loaned laptops, hanging out in the dance studio, or attending a workshop by singer and rapper Dynesti Williams.

"Say something that's going good for you this week," Williams says as she opens her discussion with four teens. "Every single day, you're building, you have a purpose ... you have abilities."

This library figured out how to be a cool place to hang out — no easy feat in the heart of a lowrise Scarborough community that is often portrayed as dangerous and crime-ridden. More than anything, it presents itself as a safe place.

In a rapidly growing city struggling with escalating violence and poverty, Toronto's libraries increasingly serve as community centres and shelters, as well as offering social interaction that counters the isolation of the digital age.

But at the same time, they have seen a significant drop in staffing, a budget that leaves them chronically underfunded, and service levels that are declining rapidly compared with the city's growing population.

In 2006, library officials pitched what it called the "Open Hours" initiative as a way to ease those pressures. But almost 15 years later, while city officials debate how to spend a 2020 operating budget totalling \$13.53 billion, that comprehensive plan to extend library hours and services has never been approved for funding.

The first two phases of Open Hours would cost \$5.1 million, an expense that city staff did not include in this year's budget recommendations to council. It is now up to Mayor John Tory and the 25 councillors whether to find that money before the 2020 budget is finalized on Feb. 19.

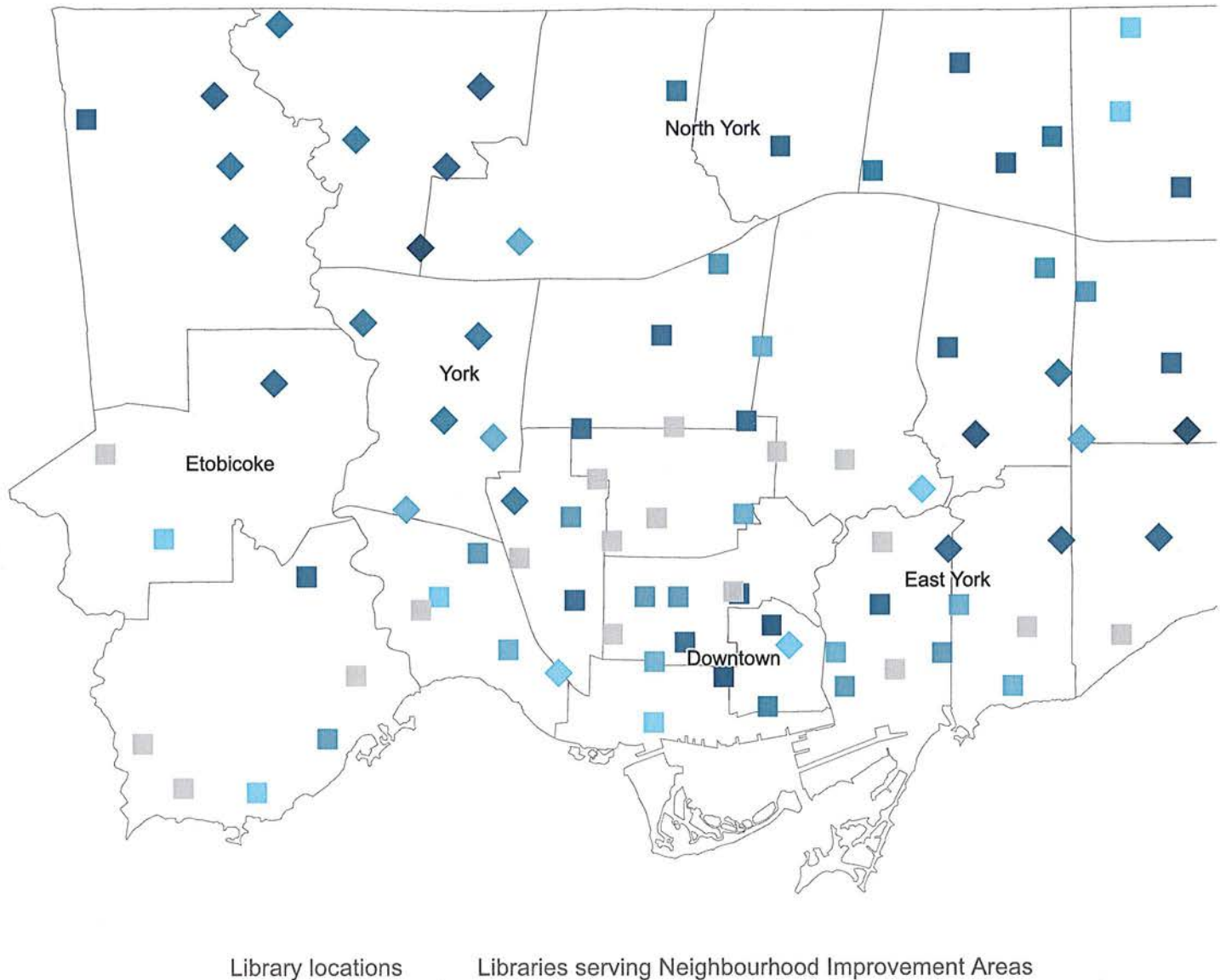
If fully implemented, Open Hours would use \$18.2 million to add 55,500 hours of service across 80 of the city's 100 libraries, with priority given to 31 branches in neighbourhoods with higher rates of poverty and unemployment.

The plan was revised in 2018, with a recommendation to phase it in over three years; for a 10 per cent increase in the library's operating budget, library hours would be increased by 20 per cent.

Library's plan to increase open hours

Proposed increase in total hours open a week

+5 +10 +15 +20 +25 +30 No change proposed



SOURCE: TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY

TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

"It responds to population growth, poverty, changing patterns of work, and it drives greater digital inclusion opportunities through increased access to the internet, Wi-Fi and computers," Vickery Bowles, the city's head librarian, told the Star in an interview. "We can provide increased early childhood literacy programming and we reduce barriers to access for all equity-seeking groups, including seniors and youth and newcomers."

Bowles said increasing operating hours would allow the city to leverage resources it already has — the existing branches — without the need to invest money the city doesn't have to build new ones.

In a report drawn up for this year's budget, library officials note that those branches welcome 50,000 people through their doors on a typical weekday. In the past decade, program attendance has increased by 32.6 per cent, surpassing one million attendees in 2018, largely thanks to the opening of new, dedicated youth hubs like the one in Malvern.

The library's funding, however, has not kept pace. The average increase to its base operating budget over the last nine years has been about 35 per cent below the rate of inflation.

The library system's total proposed 2020 budget would be \$192.5 million without the Open Hours funding, a 2.3 per cent increase over 2019 — roughly the same increase it's received on average over the past six years. But when population increases are considered, budget increases that only correspond roughly to inflation mean fewer dollars per person — essentially, a funding cut.

That follows a trend across the city, where per capita spending has declined by \$205 in the last decade. Critics blame the squeeze on austerity measures prompted by Tory and his predecessor, Rob Ford, who insisted on keeping property taxes low.

The library has also seen its workforce drop by 14 per cent since 1998, and it has remained relatively flat since 2014.

In response, the library has made creative moves — Bowles notes efficiencies such as self-serve checkouts to free up staff time — that have allowed it to complete about 30 per cent of the original Open Hours plan.

Hours that have been added have focused on Sunday service. The 2020 budget recommended by staff includes another \$208,000 for Sunday hours at eight locations, bringing the number of branches open on Sunday to 58 — just over half — as well as \$461,000 for two new youth hubs.

There is a "willingness" from the city to invest in the library, Bowles said, and she remains hopeful the plan will be funded. But while optimistic, she acknowledges the library has mapped out a backup strategy to continue to implement the plan more incrementally if the money it needs comes in trickles.

It's not been easy for library systems elsewhere, either.

The New York Public Library has 92 locations and received \$42 (all figures Canadian) for every resident, according to New York University sociology professor Eric Klinenberg's 2018 book "Palaces for the People." That's compared to San Francisco's system, which got \$132 per resident.

Toronto's 2020 proposed funding, not including the Open Hours plan, works out to about \$65 per resident.

ANDREW CARNEGIE
2 EAST 91ST STREET
NEW YORK

23rd January, 1903.

Jas. Bain, Esq., Chief Librarian,
Toronto, Ont., Canada.

Dear Sir,

Mr. Carnegie has read your letter of 20th January, and asks me to say that he will take pleasure in giving Three Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars for a new Central Library Building and Three Branch Library Buildings for Toronto, the latter to cost Seventy-five Thousand Dollars. This is conditioned upon Toronto guaranteeing by Resolution of Councils to support the Libraries at cost of not less than Thirty-five Thousand Dollars per year, and to give suitable sites for the buildings.

Respectfully yours,



P. Secretary.

The city's early branches were conceived as dignified and welcome places that would be available to all of Toronto's residents.

In 1903, the city's first chief librarian, James Bain, received word from an associate of the Scottish-American steel baron and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie that his application for grant money — \$350,000 — had been accepted, according to the library's [own history](#).

It was Carnegie's wish that the city not build one great central library or expand its academic catalogues.

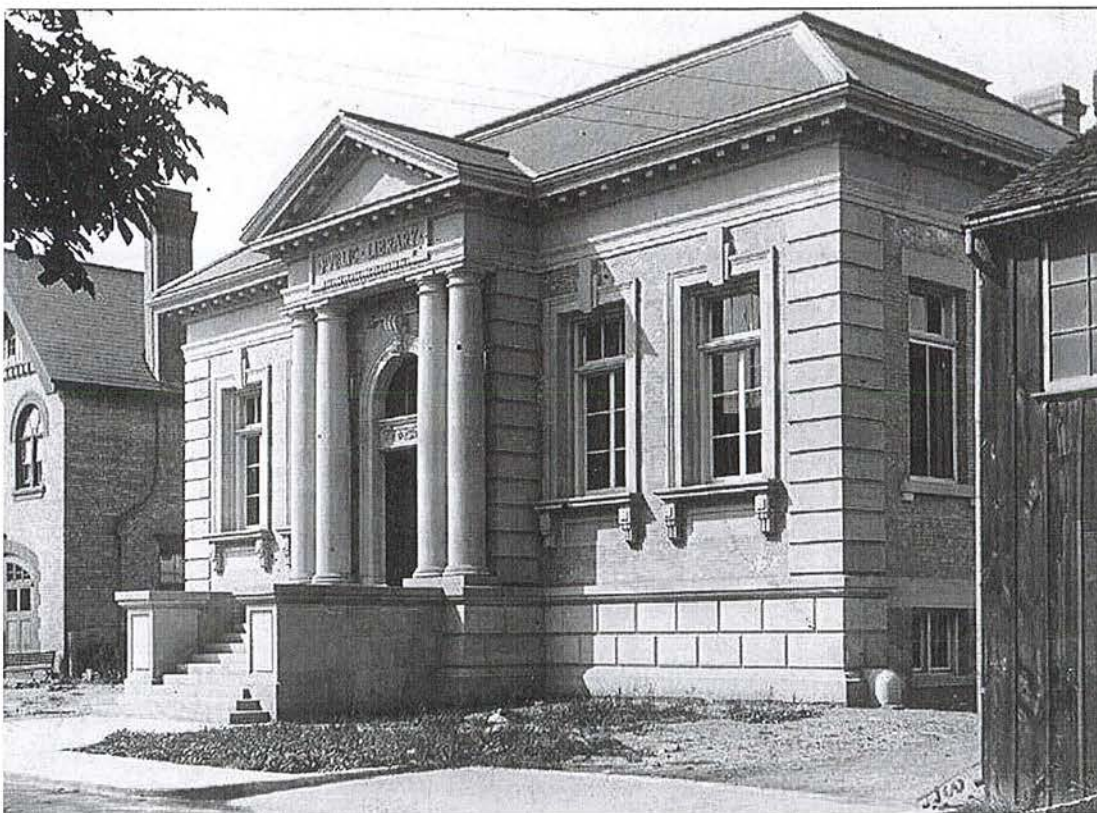
"The money is yours, but I would have many library branches," Carnegie said of his donation during a 1906 visit to city hall, the Globe reported.

"I want the branch libraries to be near the people. I want them to attract the young, for young men may go to other objectionable places if libraries are not convenient."

Carnegie wanted the libraries his donations created — more than 2,000 worldwide — to be, Klinenberg wrote in his book, “palaces for the people.”

The money funded construction of libraries in Yorkville; at Queen Street West and Lisgar Street; in Riverdale; and at College and St. George streets — stately and dignified buildings with columns below peaked pediments in the Beaux-Arts style.

Bain's successor wrote in 1910 that the city's growth had been “phenomenal” and, as a result, “the demands for more branches are very insistent.”



Toronto's last new library was the Scarborough Civic Centre branch, which opened in 2015, the year Bowles became chief librarian. She said the current facilities master plan includes branches at the Etobicoke Civic Centre and eventually in the Port Lands, although neither is currently funded in the city's 10-year capital budget.

As the rain pours outside, in the back corner of the busy Parkdale branch on Queen Street West on a recent Saturday morning, a young boy quietly practises his multiplication tables out loud.

“Two times six is ...” He pauses. “Twelve.”

“Two times seven ...” he goes on, an older woman gently correcting him when he mixes up an answer.

Younger children are racing around aisles of books ahead of a puppet show that will soon be held in the basement auditorium. Friends young and old sidle up to one another, parents pulling up chairs next to each other to quietly chat as tiny friends call out for familiar faces they see across the room.

This is a regular weekend gathering in the west-end neighbourhood.

Under the Open Hours plan, weekends like this would last longer — Parkdale would be open for eight hours on Sundays. And the Malvern branch would get 22 more hours, most of them later on weekdays.

In the meantime, Malvern staff continue to do their best to serve the needs of an entire community.

After 6 p.m. on Wednesday, someone walks around with a bass guitar, unplugged, strumming. At the computers, a man works on crosswords. A woman comes in with a teenage girl, makes sure she'll call in case of emergency and leaves for wherever she needs to be. More youth sign in to enter the hub. A librarian helps calm a man who has been intermittently pacing for hours; she knows him by name. A boy launches a paper plane.

Minutes before the 8:30 p.m. closing time, those still inside begin a slow march towards the front door, appearing from every corner. Several young people are still around and they leave together in a noisy gaggle.



"It's one of the only spaces now that you can get free education without having to buy a book," said 12-year-old singer and songwriter Azalyne Klukowski, who attended the Malvern workshop with the singer and rapper Williams. "Things like this, they're usually \$100, \$150."

"A lot of people think, 'Oh kids don't want to learn. They just want to sit out there and talk.' But a lot of kids really do want to learn. Everybody has passions. Some people, they're just told to put their passions down."

Building a safe public space for everyone hasn't come without challenges.

The library's decision to provide space for a talk by self-described feminist Meghan Murphy in October drew backlash from the transgender community and allies, including prominent authors, who have criticized Murphy's position on trans rights and challenged Bowles's decision to allow the event.

"I doubt very much that the (Toronto Public Library) would rent a room to an anti-gay activist in 2019. Why rent to an anti-trans activist?" author Zoe Whittall, who signed a petition against the event, told the Star at the time.

But even in the controversy, Bowles saw a silver lining, noting the public discussion it spurred about free speech and the library's role in that debate. It also served to highlight the fact that the demand for public space is higher than ever.

"Physical public space is something that ... people are looking for more and more and there's less and less of it, it seems," she said. The library has heard in public consultations about the need for people to gather but also to be alone together — a need to fight off social isolation in a growing city.

"The public library is the ideal place for people to come, because we're free. We have these open hours. People come in anonymously and they can pursue whatever interest they want and there are professional staff there to help them," she said.

"I think this is part of the unique value proposition public libraries offer, and why people are always asking for more open hours."

Klinenberg said it's difficult to choose between the need to increase the number of branches and to keep existing branches open longer.

"A closed library is effectively inaccessible," he said in an interview, noting there was at one time a collective project across North America to invest in libraries, parks and schools, which were considered "vital" infrastructure.

"We're in this funny moment, because everyone understands our infrastructure is outdated and we need to make a significant investment in the critical systems that make modern life possible," he said. "But we fail to appreciate just how important social infrastructure like the library is."

Coun. Gord Perks (Ward 4, Parkdale—High Park), who sits on the library board, said it has "exhaustively looked at ways to meet the huge demand for library services, and the Open Hours plan is the very best way."



"Public libraries are the beating hearts of neighbourhoods, particularly for young people and even more so for young people who don't have their own room to study in," he said. "The libraries in my ward make the difference between a young person being able to bloom fully and not."

But when asked whether the mayor would support the additional funding needed for Open Hours, Tory spokesperson Don Peat would only highlight existing investments.

"Mayor Tory and city council over the last five years have been focused on moving the library forward — improving and expanding library services, not cutting them," Peat said in a written statement, noting the \$25-million increase since 2014.

Libraries can have impacts that extend deeply into the communities they serve, something library workers know.

Take the librarian sitting in on the puppet show in Parkdale, who lets parents know about additional family programming.

Or the library assistant who calmly and clearly demonstrates how a computer mouse works to a group of older adults at the Toronto Reference Library, encouraging them to "search the internet together."

Or the workshop leader who enthusiastically yells, "Keep going!" as a shy teen tries to spit some rhymes before a group of his peers.

With that responsibility in mind, the Open Hours plan is based on a very simple principle, Bowles says.

"The best thing a library can be is open."



Jennifer Pagliaro is a Toronto-based reporter covering city hall and municipal politics. Follow her on Twitter: @jpags