

Library services

Winnipeg Public Library (WPL) branches are not only places to borrow books; they are welcoming spaces that provide free access to information, technology, education, and social connection. Libraries reflect the communities they serve and function as connectors, community builders, and hubs of democratic life.

WPL consistently outperforms most other municipal services in public satisfaction. According to the City of Winnipeg's 2025 Resident Satisfaction Survey, 91 per cent of respondents reported satisfaction with library services, an eight-point increase from the previous year. This is notable given that overall satisfaction with city services declined to 72 per cent, the lowest level in five years.¹

Despite this strong public support, libraries receive a remarkably small share of municipal funding. In the 2025 City budget, library services accounted for just 0.03 per cent of a property tax dollar.² Winnipeg has the second-lowest operating cost per dollar among comparable cities, according to Winnipeg's own budget research: \$40.90 per capita, compared to \$42.70 for Calgary and \$49.60 for Hamilton.³

Winnipeg's libraries have become more popular places to visit. Annual attendance across Winnipeg's library system has increased 28.3 per cent since 2022 from 1.67 million visits to 2.15 million visits. Over the same period, the number of materials distributed increased by 18.9 per cent.⁴ This disconnect between public value and public investment limits WPL's ability to respond to growing demand, expand access, and ensure safe working and learning environments.



Winnipeg public library / Alanna Yuen

Staffing, safety, and the limits of a security-first approach

Libraries are increasingly expected to respond to social vulnerability. WPL is notable for both its safety challenges and its innovative responses. Increased staffing — particularly staff trained in de-escalation, trauma-informed practice, and harm reduction — improves safety outcomes for both patrons and workers. By contrast, increased reliance on police or private security has not been shown to improve safety and may instead create exclusionary environments.⁵

Safety remains a concern at the Millennium Library. While it is positive that the City has contracted for community safety ambassadors at Winnipeg Libraries, attendance specifically at the downtown library has declined significantly.⁶ At the same time, planned physical improvements to improve safety, including to the lobby are in process but are yet to be completed. Design-based safety measures, including lower shelving and clearer visibility, are well-documented best practices and should be prioritized over punitive approaches.

A new library is needed in Garden City, but existing libraries like Westwood and Fort Garry also need renovations.

An increase in staffing hours would ensure that libraries are open every Saturday all year long. A 2023 major review of Winnipeg library services finds the city needs to hire 12 more full-time positions over the next four years to keep libraries open an average of 250 more hours per year, including Saturdays all summer long. This will cost the city \$3 million in 2026 and would go toward hiring more staff, increasing operating hours, and improving collections, programming and services.⁷

Governance gaps

Winnipeg Public Library is the only large urban library system in Canada without a governance board. Currently the Winnipeg Public Libraries board lacks authority over policy, budgeting, and strategic direction. This limits WPL's ability to advocate for itself, plan long-term expansions, and respond flexibly to emerging community needs.

Other cities have direct governance. Regina Public Library is governed by a board of directors that sets the library's plan and budget.⁸ Hamilton Public Library's board exercises authority over strategy, financial stewardship and advocacy.⁹

Transforming the Winnipeg Public Library Board into a governance board in Winnipeg would give the WPL board authority to govern the library's affairs.

The closure of Community Connections

The closure of the Community Connections space at Millennium Library illustrates the consequences of failing to invest in proactive, community-based approaches. Opened in April 2022 through collaboration with Indigenous leadership and community organizations, Community Connections provided crisis support, referrals, and de-escalation services without additional City funding.¹⁰ After receiving one year of City funding, the program was closed despite strong performance outcomes.

Following the closure, front-line service desks reported significant increases in complex service requests. One department saw customer queries increase from 1,357 in the second quarter of 2024 to 6,469 in

the same period in 2025. Data shows that approximately 76 per cent of interactions involving Community Safety Hosts reduced incident severity and reduced calls to emergency services.¹¹

The Manitoba Library Association has noted that closing Community Connections runs counter to the City's own safety audit,¹² as well as commitments outlined in the OurWinnipeg 2045 Plan and the Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Strategy. Removing preventative supports has not reduced demand; instead displacing it onto already overburdened front-line staff.

Community members wrote about the problems with shuttering the Community Connections space and the cut that paid for one librarian, one dedicated social worker, and some part-time library assistants.¹³ It was replaced in 2024 with a service of only 20 hours per week as a joint effort of the province and city.¹⁴ More supports and coverage is needed for all the hours the Millenium Library is open.

Collections

Contributing to information equity by providing access to a wide range of materials across formats is at the core of public library service. Books in other languages are not catalogued in WPL, but this would ensure these collections are accessible/findable and could help with Indigenous language learning and preservation. Cataloging would require professional staffing and staffing hours to accomplish.

An increase of 10 per cent in the materials budget would help bring WPL closer to being able to serve the needs of a city Winnipeg's size.

Access, outreach, and the library as a third space

Libraries are a smart public investment. For every \$1 invested in Canada's urban libraries, \$6 is generated in community economic impact.¹⁵ However, reduced hours, limited outreach staffing, and inadequate collections all restrict who can benefit from library services. Winnipeg Public Library employs only four outreach staff for the entire system, limiting its ability to reach underserved communities.

From the perspective of social capital theory, libraries actively build the relationships and networks that support individual well-being and

democratic participation. They are not peripheral services; they are foundational to a healthy, inclusive city.¹⁶

Public libraries function as vital “third places,” shared, non-commercial spaces outside of home, school and work where people can gather, interact, and build social connections.¹⁷ Declining access to social infrastructure contributes to social isolation and alienation. By contrast, libraries create accessible spaces for connection across differences, helping to strengthen the social bonds that support healthy, resilient communities.

As trusted public institutions, libraries are also uniquely positioned to lead public education efforts about information literacy, democratic values, and the role of shared civic spaces. A coordinated public-facing campaign that highlights what libraries offer can help counter the misconception that libraries are obsolete in the digital age.

Libraries can engage the public by being transparent about how collections are curated and cared for. A public campaign that frames libraries as essential civic infrastructure — spaces that connect people, reduce isolation, and foster shared understanding — would reinforce their role as cornerstones of democratic life and help ensure they are valued accordingly in municipal decision-making.

Actions

- **The AMB will** restore and permanently fund a Community Connections-style program at Millennium Library, including funding for additional social workers, community crisis workers, and outreach staff. \$300,000 per year
- **The AMB will** increase front-line library staffing across the system to improve safety, reduce burnout, and ensure equitable access to services, and ensure all libraries are open on Saturdays year-round. 12 FTEs at \$3,000,000 per year
- **The AMB will** adequately fund the library collections fund, increase Library materials spending and Indigenous languages resources: \$350,000 per year
- **The AMB will** transform the Winnipeg Public Library Board into a Governance Board for Winnipeg Public Library, bringing Winnipeg in

line with governance models used in other major Canadian cities. No cost

- **The AMB will** launch a public education campaign highlighting the value of public libraries, countering misinformation and reinforcing libraries as core public infrastructure: \$250,000

Notes

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- 4 City of Winnipeg. (2026). "City Library Visits Up More Than 28% Since 2022." February 18, 2026. <https://www.winnipeg.ca/news/2026-02-18-city-library-visits-more-28-2022>
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- 6 Maclean, Cameron. (2026). "Incidents down at Winnipeg libraries, but attendance also drops at Millennium." February 26, 2026. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/winnipeg-millennium-library-attendance-incidents-drop-9.7107659>.
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- 8 City of Regina. "Service Partners – Regina Public Library." <https://www.regina.ca/business-development/service-partners/index.html#outline-regina-public-libraryopens-in-new-window>
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- 10 City of Winnipeg. (2022). "Community Connections space opens in Millennium Library." News release. April 25, 2022. <https://www.winnipeg.ca/fr/node/33252>
- 11 <https://clkapps.winnipeg.ca/DMIS/ViewDoc.asp?DocId=25086&SectionId=&InitUrl=>
- 12 Manitoba Library Association. (2024). "Statement regarding Community Connections at the Millennium Library." December 10, 2024. <https://mla.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Community-Connections-statement.pdf>
- 13 Samson-Fellows, John. (2025). "Millennium Library/Community Connections Space." Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba. August 19, 2025. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/millennium-library-community-connections-space/>
- 14 Scott, Lauren. "Revamped support hub opens at Winnipeg's Millennium Library." CBC News. October 24, 2025. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/millennium-library-downtown-resource-corner-9.6952339>
- 15 Canadian Urban Institute. (2023). "The Case for Canada's Public Libraries." https://canurb.org/wp-content/uploads/CUI_Overdue_report_10.04.23.pdf

- 16** Qian, Xueqin. "Social Capital Theory." The SAGE Encyclopedia of Research Design. <https://sk.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-research-design-2e/chpt/social-capital-theory>
- 17** Project for Public Spaces. "Ray Oldenburg." <https://www.pps.org/article/roldenburg>