

BOARD REPORT

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TO: Library Board
FROM: Ziming Yang, Chair, SFHR Committee
SUBJECT: Intellectual Freedom Challenges – 2024 Annual Report

SUMMARY

This report provides background and context for intellectual freedom challenges within the context of public libraries, and summarizes the complaints received in 2024.

PURPOSE

This report is for information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Board receive the report for information.

POLICY

Intellectual freedom is one of the values of VPL, and is fundamental to the operation of public libraries in Canada. It is incorporated into many VPL policies, including: Collection Development, Programming at VPL, Public Meeting Rooms and Facilities Use, and Public Space.

INDIGENOUS CONSIDERATIONS

VPL is committed to supporting learning and action for Truth and Reconciliation by providing strong Indigenous collections and sharing Indigenous voices and culture at every library branch, in alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action on Education for Reconciliation; UNDRIP Articles 15 and 21; and relevant objectives from the City of Vancouver's UNDRIP Strategy and VPL's Indigenous Rights and Reconciliation Strategy.

VPL is committed to working with xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations and local Indigenous community groups to inform the materials that are selected for and de-selected from library's Indigenous Collection.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

This report reflects the following strategic goals:

- Learning and Creativity: Provide relevant physical and digital collections in diverse formats and languages
- Belonging and Connection: Establish the library as a forum for civic conversation and understanding

This report also reflects the library's vision, mission and values, specifically the value of intellectual freedom.

BACKGROUND

Intellectual Freedom

Commitment to intellectual freedom and freedom of expression are fundamental values of public libraries, as well as being bedrock values for democratic society. VPL includes intellectual freedom as one of its core values.

Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

The Canadian Federation of Library Associations' (CFLA) statement on Intellectual Freedom is included in the library's Collection Development Policy. This statement and the current version of the Collection Development Policy were approved by the Library Board in January 2023.

Collection Development

When creating and maintaining library collections, VPL selects materials based on the belief that individuals have the right to access all expressions of knowledge, opinion and creativity of some value or significance. As a result we acquire and make available a wide range of materials representing the full range of these points of view, including materials which express controversial or unpopular ideas. Inclusion in the collection does not constitute endorsement by the library. Criticism of the collection may also extend to the selection of items for displays and promotion in the library.

Individuals and groups will always have the right to criticize selections; however, the library's collection development policy must not be limited by the personal views of any group or individual.

As per the collection development policy and the *CFLA Statement on Intellectual Freedom*, it is not our practice to remove items from the collection simply because they represent controversial, unpopular or outdated ideas. If a staff member considers action necessary, there are a range of approaches that staff might take to address the issue, including the addition of contextual information or moving the item to a different area of the collection.

Materials Challenge Process

Through our Collection Development Policy, VPL provides our patrons with the right to request a review of any item that they feel should not be a part of the library collection. Typically materials challenges begin with a patron bringing their concern to a member of public service staff, who is expected to listen to the concern and explain our collection development policy as a first step. If the patron is not satisfied with the initial response from the staff member, they fill in a form requesting that the library reconsider the inclusion of the item in our collection. This is sent to the Manager, Collections & Technical Services, who initiates a formal review of the item and provides the patron with a written response detailing the library's decision and actions.

Current Environment

VPL's consideration of collection development policy, and collection challenges, takes place in the broader context of ongoing efforts to ban titles from libraries on ideological grounds in the United States, including coordinated political campaigns against libraries by a growing number of conservative groups. These censorship efforts have typically focused on works with LGBTQ+ characters and storylines, and books that cover issues of race.

Related censorship efforts have emerged in Canada in recent years, including letter writing campaigns against titles related to the SOGI curriculum and vandalism of titles and displays that feature these themes.

While librarians, educators and advocates have been pushing back against this wave of ideological censorship, the general consensus is that efforts to ban books from school and library shelves is unlikely to decrease, and it is more likely that they will continue to ramp up in 2025, especially in the United States. This trend threatens the fundamental role of the library as a place to provide universal access to the world's information and ideas.

DISCUSSION

VPL staff have generally received complaints about very few of the Library's collections in recent years. The three formal complaints received in 2024 are listed below.

2024 Collection Challenges

Date Resolved	Item Description	Summary of Complaint	Findings and Action Taken
August 2024	Truth About Muhammed – non-fiction book	The book is racist and may encourage hate crimes against Muslims.	The item had not circulated for some time and was in poor condition. It was weeded on this basis. A response was shared with the patron advising that the library would not remove the title from the collection based solely on its viewpoint, but that it was being weeded in accordance with our standard guidelines around circulation and condition of materials.
Dec 2024	Taxi Zum Klo – adult DVD	The scene depicting sexual abuse of a child is illegal.	Research confirmed that the scene in question was filmed with an adult actress. Item retained.
Feb 2025	Wealthy Barber – non-fiction book	Includes a racist anecdote that refers to “Indians selling Manhattan for beads.” The advice provided by the book on investing is out of date.	Agreed with the patron’s view of the anecdote, and that the advice in the book is somewhat dated. However the title remains in high demand and continues to appear in lists of recommended reading on this topic. Item retained.

Collection Vandalism

Concerns and complaints about materials arise routinely, and most are addressed informally by library staff without escalation through the challenge process. However, VPL is among the libraries that have been seeing an increased incidence of vandalism of titles and displays. VPL began tracking these formally following a noted escalation in 2022. A summary of the 2023 and 2024 incidents is below.

In 2023, 23 incidents were reported. 11 titles had been permanently vandalised; 5 items included the addition of commentary through post-it notes and stickers; and 7 were cases where the item had been removed from a display, reshelfed, or hidden.

Of the 23 incidents, the 7 misfiled items were reshelfed appropriately or returned to their display, 9 items were repaired and returned to circulation, and 7 items were discarded due to the damage. Of the vandalized materials, there were 4 adult titles, 13 children's titles, and 6 young adult titles. The majority of the titles were on LGBTQ+ topics.

In 2024, 15 incidents were reported. 14 of the titles had permanent vandalism of the title; 1 title had been censored through the addition of stickers. 14 titles were discarded due to the damage; the remaining item was a newspaper, which remained in circulation with the vandalized page removed. Of the 15 titles, 14 were adult titles or materials and 1 was a children's title. The titles covered a range of topics including Middle Eastern history and politics and LGBTQ+ topics.

While these incidents have increased since 2022, the overall number remains relatively low.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Staff time to address challenges is incorporated in the operating budget.