

Vending machine library hits the spot

By Joanne Chianello, The Ottawa Citizen July 25, 2010



Councillor Maria McRae admits the library kiosks were seen as a bit of a risk at first. But at last count, almost 1,700 items have been checked out since the program began in April and the costs associated with the kiosks are a tiny fraction of what it would take to build and run a library.

Photograph by: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

It looks like a regular vending machine, the kind you might feed loonies and toonies in exchange for a chocolate bar or bag of chips.

But if you were looking for a quick junk-food fix from this unit, you'd be out of luck. Instead of a box of Smarties, it dispenses Stella, Queen of the Snow.

These library kiosks — there are two of them in the foyer of the Hunt Club-Riverside Community Centre — are the first of their kind in Canada. They work just like regular vending machines, except that users swipe their Ottawa library cards instead of inserting coins into the machine. And instead of buying a pack of gum, the user is borrowing a library book or DVD. The printed receipt tells the library customer when the item is due back.

At last count, almost 1,700 items have been checked out since the program began in April. One machine stocks children's materials, while the other offers items for teens and adults in both English and French. The selections are chosen by library staff from the most popular, in-demand titles. Between the two kiosks is a return bin, where residents can bring back not just items that they borrowed from the kiosks, but from any library in the city.

It's been such a hit, says Councillor Maria McRae, that she once saw a little boy hugging the machine.

The pilot project grew from McRae's frustration that the area didn't have its own library. In fact, she began to complain about the fact that the 12,000 residents of River ward didn't have library services almost from the moment she was elected in 2003.

"I was the indignant rookie councillor, beside myself that my ward didn't have a bricks-and-mortar library," admits McRae.

The opportunity to do something about it arose about five years ago when McRae and city staff began serious discussions for expanding the community centre, which was originally built about 25 years ago. The councillor wanted the refurbished centre to be a "one-stop shopping" resource for the community, where residents could do everything from take an exercise class to get a referral for substance abuse — or take out a book.

And that's where Barbara Clubb came in.

"We knew that this was an area where people had to leave their constituency to use a library," says Clubb, the Ottawa Public Library's chief librarian.

Over the years, there had been a number of attempts to get a library into the area, "but it just didn't happen, because of the time or the money or the circumstances just didn't come together."

The money for a full-fledged library still wasn't there, but Clubb knew that library vending machines, popular for years in Europe and starting to appear in the United States, could "fill the gap" for the community.

"One of the rules of librarianship is, 'Save the time of the reader,'" says Clubb. "Anything we can do within our power to do that is heading in the right direction."

McRae credits Clubb — along with Linda Standing, one of the city's managers of public services, and Councillor Jan Harder, who's been the chairwoman of the library board for four years — for championing the program.

"It's was a bit of a risk, having never been done before," says McRae.

Indeed, there were a few hiccups when the machines were first installed, mostly to do with cards not working properly, but those issues have been ironed out, says Standing.

And while the costs associated with the kiosks are a tiny fraction of what it would take to build and run a library, they aren't free either.

The capital expenditure for the two machines, which included installation and set-up costs, was \$100,000. Another \$50,000 in operating costs are associated with handling returns and re-stocking the machines, plus a new service where staff hold "library hours" twice a week at the community centre. (This is in addition to weekly bookmobile service in the area.)

Meant to augment the kiosks, during these hours library staff can issue library cards and also deliver items that residents have put on hold online from anywhere in the library system.

Although this is a one-year pilot program, other areas of the city are already inquiring about getting their own kiosks, including a "major request" from a new community complex planned for north Kanata.

"We're just in the early stages of getting the machines to work and figuring out all of the implications, so we need to do a thorough evaluation before we look at a roll-out plan," says Clubb.

And while they seem to be popular with the public, especially among children and the seniors who live in a co-op across the street from the community centre, kiosks shouldn't be considered a replacement for full-service libraries, warns Clubb.

"This is a supplementary, a stop-gap," she says, although she admits that the vending machines may have an impact on the location of new library branches.

Kiosks can't work with groups, offer free computers, personal assistance or foreign-language materials. "This is a supplementary service," says Clubb. "This is like your Mac's Milk versus your Superstore. They have different features."

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