

# **COMMUNITY PARTNERS: LOCAL GOVERNMENT, PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THEIR FRIENDS**

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Thank you for the kind invitation to join you in today's celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Friends of Mackay Libraries. Friends of Libraries Australia is pleased to recognise the occasion by placing the following address on its new website at [www.fola.org.au](http://www.fola.org.au) for the information and benefit of other Library friends and public library advocates worldwide.

It is really only the last 30 years or so that has seen the development of Friends groups for local public libraries in Australia, and it is likely that the Friends of Mackay Libraries was among the first ten of them. Through its three decades of support for the community's libraries and its partnership with local government, it has assisted in their development and funding, been a voice of the community about their importance, and provided an exemplar for the establishment and continuity of Friends of Libraries groups throughout Queensland and Australia.

Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA), although it is the second national volunteer organization of its type worldwide, is itself just half the age of the Friends of Mackay Libraries. It is therefore a privilege to participate in your celebration and to have the opportunity to reflect on the importance of public libraries to so many people in Mackay, in Queensland, in Australia and elsewhere throughout the world.

## **The issues**

This address focuses on the understanding, partnership and shared advocacy between local government, public libraries and their Friends which is required if Australian public libraries are to continue to thrive in the context of the fiscal and other challenges facing all levels of government – not least in Australia and New Zealand, local government as the operator of the public library systems of both countries.

The major fiscal challenge to be faced by local government, public libraries and Friends of Libraries in Australia is the insidious withdrawal of state governments from funding their public library systems in true partnership with local government. The State Government of Queensland is the second worst example of this in Australia.

The major political challenge is for the states to audit properly the performance of their public library systems and for the Australian government to be persuaded to hold the states to account for that performance, as it does in other community-critical areas such as school education and health.

Just because public libraries are now so well established in Australia; just because almost everyone in Australia now has access to one; just because they are by far the most heavily used and valued community service in Australia, provides no grounds for complacency about their future.

It has come as a shock to many in the UK, for example, that the financial pressures on local government from Westminster requiring cuts in annual expenditures as high as 25%, have resulted in the proposed closure of about 600 branch and mobile public libraries in the UK, and the bizarre suggestion by the UK government that something as complex and multidimensional as a modern public library could be run completely by volunteers. These proposed closures, some of which have already occurred, represent 20% of public libraries in the UK, and are despite the fact that in the UK, unlike in Australia, local government has a statutory requirement to provide public libraries for all.

In New Zealand, local governments have recently proposed to charge \$2 directly for book loans, in addition to existing short sighted revenue raising requirements of libraries which have already undermined the

accessibility and use of what was once a world-leading totally free public library service. Needless to say, the public outcry has been great.

In the USA many libraries remain under threat of closure or reduced services as local and state administrations attempt to balance their budgets in the financial crisis. This is occurring despite the fact that US libraries are very highly used by people of all ages and circumstances, their use is tending to increase, they are remarkably cheap for what they represent and provide, and demonstrably, from extensive research, provide a very high socioeconomic return on investment. Friends of Libraries and the US public are fighting back, however, and to good effect. For example New York, which had decided to close and restrict the hours and services of many of its 90 public libraries to save \$30million, has recently completely reversed that decision after being persuaded of the irretrievable damage it would do to so many of its most needy and vulnerable children and citizens, and to communities in general.

With the financial situation as the excuse, even in Israel public libraries are being closed or proposed for closure, to the great anger of communities.

There is a risk of library closures, major cutbacks and charges becoming an international contagion happily fostered by those who are philosophically opposed to the concept of free public libraries or mistakenly believe that ebooks and the internet are making public libraries redundant. This may too readily be accepted by those decision makers at all levels of government who lack knowledge and understanding of what ready access to a free-at-the-point-of-use modern public library demonstrably means for individual lives and advancement, community capacity building, and community wellbeing.

Nor may they recognise what is now confirmed by substantial international and Australian research – that worldwide public libraries are the single most used and valued community provision, uniquely by people of all ages and all circumstances, and that they produce the highest socioeconomic return of any public investment.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the US Scottish-born industrialist Andrew Carnegie asserted that ‘A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people’. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, no less is true.

### **Public libraries in Australia**

However, first and much more happily, where are public libraries in Australia today, 170 years after free public libraries commenced in the US and the UK – but only about 70 years ago in Australia?

There is very much which is positive to report, but numerous challenges remain if we are to achieve better, more accessible, libraries for all in Queensland and elsewhere in Australia.

Informed by the UNESCO *Public Library Manifesto* we have seen increasing policy attention to public libraries as unique, multidimensional, and very cost effective community anchors, capacity builders, and places of connection – as the community’s Third Places after home and work.

In Australia, although a late developer overall of a comprehensive public library system, this is reflected by the fact that

- about 60% of people in Australia, or 13 million people, use and value their public libraries. No other public service or agency is more heavily used; their buildings are the most heavily and regularly trafficked public buildings in Australia; and they are by far the most valued service provided through councils in partnership with state governments. However councils as a whole still spend less 3% of their total outlays and typically less 4% of *your* rates on *your* public libraries, about \$38 per capita per annum (property rates are on average only 37% of local government funding)<sup>1</sup>. State governments in 2010 only provided an average of 17% of public library funds, compared with 83% by local government.<sup>2</sup> Queensland was below the average, at about 13%, and which in 2011 is possibly even less.

- on 15 March 2008, as a consequence of the local government restructuring here in Queensland, the very last council in Australia – the Shire of Fitzroy – not to support a free public library service for its community, became part of the Rockhampton Regional Council. Almost all people in Australia thus now have at least some access to a free local public library. This is a significant achievement, largely by local government in partnership with state governments. Within the lifetime of some of us here, there were relatively few free local public libraries at all in Queensland. The residents of metropolitan Brisbane only had access to a poor quality subscription library service which employed no librarians, and which was little used as a consequence. Just 30 years ago many people, particularly in regional and rural Australia, still did not have access to a free local public library.
- there is growing investment in new and redeveloped public library buildings, internationally and nationwide. Many of the Australian and New Zealand buildings are world class in providing attractive, spacious welcoming facilities open seven days a week. Recent examples in Queensland are to be found in Brisbane, Logan, the Gold Coast, Cairns, Mackay, and the award winning redevelopment of the State Library. These new and redeveloped libraries typically report a great increase in membership and use as a result of their improved presence in their communities.

This is surely what all communities and their elected councils should be aspiring to – more people, of all ages and circumstances, benefiting from the myriad and very cost effective advantages of a modern public library service. A service which, unlike most others, can never be overused but can certainly be underused if library buildings, facilities, opening hours, resources, staffing levels and marketing are poor.

Stirling in South Australia, for example, opened its new library about three years ago. It was already the fifth most heavily used public library in the state. With a catchment population of only about 15,000 it now has over 2500 new members as a result of its attractive, spacious and very visible library building, which is already experiencing pressure on its space. However, despite the wide community support for the building of the new library, a number of elected members of the Adelaide Hills Council opposed its construction. It required a very effective campaign of advocacy and practical support from its 25 year old Friends of the Library group to get the project approved. Without that political and funding support by the Friends, the community in Stirling would be still trying to squeeze into the old library, and library staff would still be trying to provide a quality service in very difficult circumstances.

- there is an increasing number of Friends of Libraries groups, large and small, incorporated or not incorporated, being established to support their communities through their public libraries, and as a voice for their communities about their importance. At about 170, there are more Friends of Libraries in Australia than other community Friends groups. Queensland has some of the oldest and best organised groups in Australia, including Mackay, Ipswich, Toowoomba, Brisbane, Beaudesert, Bundaberg, Aitkenvale, Caloundra, Cairns, Oakey, Gympie, Nambour, Moreton Bay, and the Sunshine Coast.
- Friends of Libraries Australia has now existed for 16 years, as only the second such national organisation worldwide, to foster and help Friends groups, and as a national voice for the 13 million public library users. Its vision is *Better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia*. It encourages local Friends groups to consider adopting a local version of that national vision, for example *Better, more accessible, libraries for all in the Mackay Region*.
- public libraries are unique in endeavouring to meet the needs of the whole population, literally from ‘cradle to grave’. No other single community agency has such a broad remit and responsibility. They routinely, and often too quietly, deliver much more than they claim. However there is also now high quality international and Australian research which confirms what library users and supporters have always known – public libraries provide a great return on investment (between \$4-\$8 for every dollar invested in them), and that people want more invested in them to enable them to reach equitably all sectors of the community, from babies through BookStart programs, students through online tutoring access, to outreach services to homebound people and those in aged care.

## Public library research findings

The Australian research includes the world class Victorian \$1.3 million project and series of reports called *Libraries/Building/Communities (LBC)*<sup>3</sup> which surveyed and interviewed over 10,000 Victorians, both users and nonusers of public libraries. It is recommended reading for all libraries and their Friends. Its final report showed that the 13% of the community did not use public libraries and were not even aware of them, but might do so if they were more visible, accessible and welcoming. Extrapolated to the Mackay regional population this means that about 15,000 potential users are not using Mackay Libraries, and may not even know they exist, what they provide, or that they are free to use.

The first *LBC* report concluded (using 2005 dollar values)

Regardless of whether they use libraries or not, the research shows that Victorians value the availability of free public library services in their communities...

Participants in the *LBC* project were asked to place a monetary value on the library services available to them.

Among users of large libraries with large resource bases, the following annual values were given.

- \$500+ per year for light users
- \$4000 per year for heavy book readers
- \$7000-\$10000 per year for frequent users of a range of library resources

For smaller libraries the value was placed as

- \$200-\$300 per year for light users
- \$1000 per year for heavy users.

This would suggest that a large library with about 150,000 registered borrowers would be adding value to users of about \$730 million each year and a small library with about 20,000 users somewhere in the order of \$10million. This far exceeds the annual expenditure on Victorian public libraries, which varies from \$350,000 to a maximum of \$11million.

The fact that library services are valued highly by the community does not mean that there is a capacity to pay for service. Concern was expressed that if users were asked to pay for library services a significant proportion would be unable to meet such charges and many of the individual and community benefits described by the *LBC* project would be lost.

If the Victorian calculation is applied to the 55,000 or so membership of the Mackay Libraries, this means that it is adding value to its users of about \$330 million each year.

Sunshine Coast Libraries undertook in 2008 a return on investment (ROI) study based on a conservative methodology used in numerous international studies. Those studies have shown that there is at least a \$4 return on investment for every dollar spent on public libraries. In the case of the Sunshine Coast Libraries the amount was \$5.45.<sup>4</sup> A similar ROI is likely for the Mackay Libraries. More recently, another major piece of very robust public library research from Victoria published in 2011 is the 240 page *Dollars, sense and public libraries*<sup>5</sup> which confirms other international and Australian research about the socioeconomic return on investment in public libraries. It is freely available electronically, but it is well worth purchasing the attractive and inexpensive print version of 240 pages.

The *Libraries/Building/Communities* executive summary also observed that

Public libraries have taken on new roles over the years without a proper re assessment of the appropriate resources, including skills, needed to support these. It was widely thought by all *Libraries/Building/Communities* participants that public library funding should be completely reviewed in the light of the information society and the demands this is placing on them.

What is true for Victoria is true for Queensland, and its state government in particular – the need for a comprehensive, informed, rethink about how the state's public library system is funded. The outcome of the State Library of Queensland's 2011 research project to measure the economic and social contribution of public libraries should be considered by all Friends groups, with a view to it being a catalyst for that rethink about public library funding in Queensland.

Other circumstances are tending to substantiate the need for more, bigger, and better public libraries throughout Australia. These circumstances include

- increasing realisation that public library outcomes contribute to many governmental agendas and policy areas. In correspondence with the federal government, FOLA has identified that the work of public libraries is directly relevant to at least seven government ministerial portfolios, in areas such as literacy, education, lifelong learning, families, health and ageing, digitization, e-government and the NBN, local government, community services, immigration and citizenship. Public libraries in Queensland are similarly relevant to numerous state government agendas and policies. No other public agency has such a wide impact on government policy outcomes.
- the increasing emphasis on joined-up collaborative government investment in community services, of which public libraries are very effective catalysts and focuses because so many people of all ages and backgrounds use them.
- the growing focus on literacy, education and lifelong learning, which in 2012 will include Australia's first National Year of Reading(NYR). This provides a great opportunity for Friends to partner and invest in initiatives and projects with local government and public and school libraries.
- the baby boomers are starting to retire, and will often have higher expectations of public services, such as libraries, than their predecessors. As one Queensland library commented in response to FOLA's Report to the Nation on library services for older adults<sup>6</sup> 'we are concerned about retiring baby boomers and our inability to provide services to meet their demands'.
- the increasing recognition of the needs and possibilities of Australia's active and other ageing population.
- as the media overseas and in Australia has been commenting, at a time of greater budgetary, employment and transport constraints for families and individuals, the accessibility, resources, services and technology of a free local public library is even more highly valued. This has been a factor in the increasing and wider range of use being reported by public libraries in several countries.

### **Other factors**

Four other topical factors are coming to bear on why, and how, to improve Australia's sparring and uneven investment in its public library system.

- the Australian government's stated determination to address the funding and responsibility 'blame game' between the three levels of government in Australia, and of which decent investment in Australia's public library system has been for too long a largely hidden casualty.
- the move to have local government formally recognized as the third, and a major, level of Australian government, able to receive more funding directly from the Australian government.
- in an environmentally sensitive world, public libraries are the ultimate sharers and recyclers. New public library buildings, using ESD principles, are setting a lead for communities.
- in a world facing major personal transport changes, more public libraries will be needed if public libraries are to be truly accessible to all in Australia. There are still many examples in Australia where the council is providing too few library access points, and this is never audited or questioned by anyone, particularly state governments. Toowoomba in Qld and Tea Tree Gully in SA are the worst in Australia, with effectively just one library each for urban populations of over 100,000. They should have at least three. Many children and young people in those cities will rarely, if ever, get to the public library.

By comparison Mackay Libraries has four static libraries for a growing population of about 115,000 spread over 7,261sq kms, or one library for 29,000 people. Experience worldwide suggests that in urban environments one library, at least, is needed for every 30,000 people. The Australian average is 1 static library for every 16,000 people, but that does include low population rural areas. Having too few libraries is

certain to exclude parts of communities, especially children, young people and older adults, from regular inlibrary use. This is an issue because the more children and young people are able to readily visit their local public library, the more likely they are to acquire a habit and a unique community socialization experience which will stand them, and society, in good stead for their lifetimes.

The assumption behind modern shopping centre, library and other community services developments, has usually been larger units to which most people will be able to drive. However, we are seeing changes in the way that people approach their use of shops and libraries because of fuel and other costs. Even transport rich London has a target that a public library should be available within 1.6kms of everyone. This is close to the 'pram pushing distance' once used as the indicator for public library provision, until car ownership became common.

In The Netherlands they are attempting to ensure that everyone is within 30 minutes walking or cycling distance of a public library, and in Finland that 'the trip to the library should be less than 2km, or should not take more than half an hour'.<sup>7</sup>

Just how really accessible their libraries are to all in their communities should therefore be surveyed and analysed by local government, to inform the strategic planning of their library services. It rarely is. This should be a concern of Friends of Libraries who should not see themselves as not just representing library users, but more broadly those who may have difficulty in getting to and using a library.

The investment in addressing the outcomes of that planning needs to consider the finding of research in Indiana USA that 30% of public library users also use other retail and community services they would not otherwise use, during their library visits. Public libraries can be key retail anchors for shopping centres and good for their business, for example. They can also be very effective lead partners in converged services with, for example, museums and health and childcare services, and as partners in a joint use library with schools and other educational institutions.

### **Growing the investment**

Identifying public libraries as an investment, rather than a cost, brings us to why there is a need to increase the overall national investment in Australia's public library system. Whilst it is true that Australia has made great progress with that system in the last 30 years, by best international practice it still does invest poorly in it, a total of about \$940million each year, or the equivalent of less than 2% of what is spent on school education alone. The main reason for this overall lack of investment in the Australian public library system is not because more cannot be afforded – Australian governments at all levels waste through inefficiencies, duplication and nonproductive expenditure many more times than the amounts required to bring public library funding to a level appropriate to a wealthy and education focused nation. Rather it is a lack of collaboration between the three levels of Australian government in assessing the nation's needs, and sharing the effort and the funding needed to meet those needs.

Local government is now left as the major library funder, while it continues to have other costs and responsibilities shifted to it. It should more properly be regarded as operating the state's public library system on behalf of the state government and funded accordingly – something which challenges the conventional mindset about just who has primary policy responsibility and oversight for good public libraries for all.

The average annual public library investment per capita in Australia is only \$42 or about 11c per Australian per day. This is *one-third*, for example, of what Denmark invests in its public library system. Of that \$42, as noted earlier, councils now generally contribute over 83%, and in NSW over 90%. The Australian states are contributing much less relatively, and even in real terms, to public libraries than they were just 20 years ago; and the Australian government contributes nothing directly to Australia's public library system – unlike, for example to universities, TAFE, school education, health, aged care, child care and a range of other community services and provision important to the education, welfare, wellbeing and cohesion of the nation as a whole. There is as yet no demonstrable understanding or acceptance at the federal level that an education revolution is not dependent on computers and buildings, but rather on a literate, reading, informed and questioning community – or that the necessary complement to a good school system is a good public

library system, something which is well understood by educationally progressive countries such as Denmark, Finland and Singapore.

### **How are libraries in Queensland faring?**

The answer has to be, not especially well, and very unevenly. Some Queenslanders have ready access to good and even great libraries; others do not.

The state government of Queensland is no longer partnering local government effectively in planning and funding the state's public library system. It is now contributing only about a token \$3.75pa for every Queenslanders. This is about 13% of local public library funding. For some larger councils such as the Gold Coast and Logan that now represents less than 10% of their public library expenditure. The steady decline from the already low 24% in 1998/9, to 16% in 2003/4, to 14% in 2006/7 makes the state government's funding of the Queensland local public library system by a significant margin the second lowest in Australia after NSW.

Another major indicator of the funding neglect of the state's public library system, which is itself a major learning provider, is that in 2000 the public library grant was only 0.173% of the state's operating budget. In 2006/7 it was even less, about 0.06%. In 2011/12 it is almost invisible. Against this the state's Department of Education, Training and the Arts accounted for \$6 billion pa, or 19% of the state's 2006/7 budget. Meanwhile the state's population continues to grow as overall does the scope, expectations of, and demands on its public library system.

The state government might contend, as at least one other state government has in the past, that over the years its dollar funding of libraries has not changed, and that the shift in the ratio of local government: state government funding is because councils have *chosen* to invest more in public libraries because of their very high usage and valuation by local communities. This would be spin and sophistry. Councils have had little option but to try to find more library funding. Some have done it better than others, and some have had a greater capacity to do so. Prima facie Queensland's political and bureaucratic funding decision makers have yet to grasp the unique contribution and potential of the state's public library system in meeting the government's own agendas for better educated, more literate, more informed, more inclusive and better connected communities throughout Queensland.

It is no surprise, therefore, that in a 2007 survey of public library managers in Queensland 97% rated low state government funding as a very high(92%) or high concern(5%), compared with the 64% who rated low council funding as a very high(37%) or high(27%) concern.<sup>8</sup>

In Australia as a whole, if the 1970s 50:50 funding ratio between state and local government had been maintained and if local government had still grown its investment to the current levels, the national annual investment in public libraries would be about twice what it is now(\$1.8billion, rather than \$935million) and with still a marginal impact on state government budgets. This would be only two thirds of world's best practice public library funding, but a lot closer than it is now. The return on that investment would be over \$7billion. Just imagine what that investment would mean for better resourced, staffed, innovative and more accessible library services for all in your community.

### **Changing the responsibility and funding mindset**

FOLA, and other parties, is endeavouring to change this mindset at the national and state levels by urging all three levels of Australian government to stop the cost shifting 'blame game', recognise the uneven and low funding of Australia's public library system, and for a very first time sit down at one table and acknowledge that they have a collective responsibility for a framework for better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia – and how they will share the effort and the costs of that framework. But this will never be achieved unless it is asked and argued for strongly by *local government* and its associations, by library managers and their associations *and* well informed Friends of Libraries – preferably with a united voice. The initiative will never come from the state government.

The major reference in this endeavour is FOLA's position paper *Investing in Australia's future through its public library system – Why, Who, How*. This is available at [www.fola.org.au](http://www.fola.org.au) together with a range of other information resources on funding and other issues, and how Friends of Libraries can make the difference if they realise their potential strength as voices of *their* communities about *their* libraries.

### **Libraries will always need their Friends**

The price of decent investment in the nation's public library system will always be, like the price of democracy, informed and eternal vigilance – at the local, state and national levels. In 1947 British librarian Lionel McColvin in his report on the very poor condition of public libraries in Australia commented that 'Better library services for Australians won't just happen. The few must lead, must fight, must persist'. It is largely because friends of libraries did lead, fight and persist against considerable odds, that almost all people in Australia now have access to a local public library.

However today's counterparts of those early library friends very much need to continue to lead, fight and persist in achieving better, more accessible, libraries for all – a challenge the response to which is easier today because of the wealth of solid irrefutable research which shows how very high the public return on investment in public libraries is.

Yet the multidimensional modern public library still tends to be not well understood by today's decision makers. They may have distant and even negative memories of the public libraries of their childhood, or no memory at all because they had no local library to use during their formative years. Probably only 2 in every 5 public library funding decision makers in Queensland today had access to a good public library during childhood. Whilst this is slowly changing it is recognised as an inhibitor of public library awareness and funding, as is the fact that many library funding decision makers are middle aged or older males, the very cohort which makes the least direct use of public libraries. Experience and anecdotal evidence suggest that men and women use, or do not use, public libraries in different ways and amounts, and that public library strategies rarely recognise this. US research suggests that male usage of public libraries is distinctive enough to warrant special attention from library planners.<sup>9</sup>

Another issue in achieving better recognition and funding of public libraries by local government is that the structures within larger councils in particular have resulted in the professional library manager being more remote from council decision making individuals and committees. To balance this, there is the advantage that larger councils have the critical mass of resources and professional staffing to prioritise, plan and provide better public libraries, as has occurred in a number of the larger Queensland councils post the 1998 restructuring of local government.

However the major issue in achieving better public library funding in Australia is developing a better awareness of their outstanding return on investment; of how little funding they receive from state governments; and of how much more they would return to their communities if funded well.

Every Friends of the Library group has this as its special local responsibility, as a voice of the whole community about its public library service. This is because most councils in Australia still do not have library committees, and if they do, rarely have community representation on them, although there are examples of councils with library committees of which the president of the Friends group is ex officio a member. Thus the Friends of Mackay Libraries are an important voice for the many people of all ages and circumstances who use and value the library service, and who will have ideas and needs for its change and improvement. But you are also a voice for the 13% or so of people who are not currently library users or library aware, and who if they are asked, may provide very good information about what is needed for them to become so.

Friends of Libraries also have a special responsibility to support their library manager and staff with practical, funding and advocacy support. The most effective Friends of Libraries groups in Australia, such as the Friends of Mackay Libraries, invariably have a council and a library manager who regard supporting their Friends group as an integral part of good council and library practice.

There are still examples around Australia where this is still not the case and where library managers and even council CEOs do not encourage, the establishment of Friends groups. FOLA has spent considerable time in communicating with councils, their library managers and library staff about the goodwill, funding, grant application and volunteering benefits to them and their communities of fostering and supporting Friends of Libraries as partners in the progress of their libraries – not as a threat to either the council or library management.

Thus the FOLA statement for councils *Friends of Libraries – community voice, council partner* available at [www.fola.org.au](http://www.fola.org.au) suggests areas in which councils can support their library friends.

### **Friends of Libraries, their succession planning, and the future**

Perhaps it is that consideration which should be used as a reference point for the future of the Friends of Mackay Libraries for the next 30 years. That consideration should proceed with the knowledge and confidence that you, and other Friends of Libraries around Queensland are very much needed by their local communities and their library services, and that the response to that need should be focused on knowledgeable advocacy for better libraries and better library funding.

If Friends of Libraries can partner with local government to question and lobby the state government and local politicians about the state's neglect of the Queensland's public library system, they will also provide a great service for all Queenslanders, young and old.

As Vigdor Schreiber observed

Libraries serve democracy not the pursuit of wealth. The constituency for democracy is the People, who have the fundamental constitutional right to exercise exclusive control over the election of our government. That is where the power of libraries also lies if they are wise enough to marshal that unique resource.

In responding to those challenges, Friends of Libraries are in a stronger position than other voluntary community and service organisations, numbers of which are now struggling to retain interest, office bearers and members.

- there are many professional, business, and community minded baby boomers who will be retiring over the next few years, often already library users or past or prospective users. They will bring well developed professional, advocacy and organisational skills to those organisations with which they chose to become involved, but they will favour those organisations which can provide opportunities, focus and outcomes for their skills. To use the mantras of the business world, those Friends groups which will be best positioned to attract and capitalize on those skills will have a publicised mission, strategic plan, and recruitment strategy focused on identifying those library outcomes for their communities to which they can best contribute.
- Friends of Libraries have an enormous resource base on which to call, by far the largest in the country – about 13 million people. Far more people in Australia hold a library membership card than for any other agency or service. The new Mackay Regional Council is, even by international standards, a large, growing and complex local authority. This presents special challenges of communication, management and response to the diverse needs of local communities within that large area, and at the same time providing equity in quality and cost effective library and other services across it. However, there are advantages to be gained from the critical mass and funding base now available.

For example, in the council area you have over 50,000 library users, most of whom would regard themselves as library friends. If you can persuade only 1% of those library 'friends' to formally join you in your aspirations for the best possible library service for all in your council area, you have a membership of at least 500 from which to draw your core committee and office bearers. It can be done. In partnership with their library managers and councils, other long established but renewing Friends of Libraries groups have demonstrated this, by setting recruitment and program targets; by good paper and electronic communication to the whole of their communities; by minimising practical, financial and psychological barriers to membership by both young and old; and by, in association with their libraries, providing membership incentives and benefits. The Friends of the Stirling Library in South Australia, for example, from a library

user population of only about 10,000 has over 400 young and older members, no membership cost – and yet it continues to raise large amounts of money for the library.

In considering your succession planning to ensure that in 2040 you are as relevant and valued as you have been during the past 30 years, do consider capitalising on two of the major library assets that Mackay has – a progressive and supportive council, and Margaret Spillman, the Mackay school teacher-librarian who is recognised nationally and internationally for her endeavours for young people, and her emphasis on the importance of schools partnering with public libraries. The most recent example of the way she has attracted national attention to Mackay and its libraries, is contained in the 2011 report of the federal parliament's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment *School libraries and teacher librarians in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia*.<sup>10</sup> This report commends the work of Mrs Spillman, and that of the Mackay West State School with Mackay Libraries, and includes a case study entitled *Productive partnerships-Learning for life*.

It is a substantial and productive initiative the expansion of which to other Mackay schools could usefully be fostered by the Friends of Mackay Libraries, as its children and young people are very much the future of Mackay itself. That fostering could include the promotion of a Young Friends of Mackay Libraries, similar to that in Alexandra, Victoria, which has operated very well for 20 years. It has published a guide to Young Friends of the Library,<sup>11</sup> a copy of which I am pleased to convey to you.

You may also wish to consider partnering with council in an evaluation of how Mackay Libraries rate now against the 2011 *Standards and guidelines for Australian public libraries*.<sup>12</sup> There may be issues and needs arising from such an evaluation to provide ideas about where you, together with council, should focus specific endeavours, projects and fund raising in the years ahead.

## **In conclusion**

Australia's public libraries have been described in many positive ways, including that they are Australia's Great Good Places (for a list of 200 public library descriptors see [www.foia.org.au](http://www.foia.org.au)). Those Great Good Places are at the cusp of greater community and political recognition and funding of what they uniquely contribute to community engagement, capacity building and to life quality for all in Australia, of all ages, backgrounds and circumstances.

However, as the recent experience in the US and UK has so clearly shown, nothing can be assumed in the contest for public funds, regardless of the use, cost benefit and justice of the endeavour. A major economic downturn in Australia may not soon occur, but if it does local government, already financially stretched, will be very vulnerable. Consequently Australia's public library system will be too, because it is overly dependent on local government funding as a result of state government cost shifting over the last 25 years.

In the UK the response to severe cuts to local government expenditure and its impact on public libraries, from people such as Sir David Attenborough, has been very strong and has included court actions by Library Friends. However, it is an ill wind that blows no good. As a speaker from the UK at an international conference on joint use libraries which I chaired in Adelaide last Thursday and Friday observed

...an unexpected consequence of economic downturn, and public library closures, is an emerging new appreciation of the educational, cultural and social value of libraries. The contribution that libraries make to a civilized society is now part of a new national discourse.<sup>13</sup>

That discourse has been contributed to by a number of established, or newly established, Friends of Libraries groups in the UK, one of which, the Friends of Somerset Libraries has a film on YouTube, which is worth watching, and which at its end rolls out the list of the 600 libraries proposed for closure in the UK.<sup>14</sup>

However much of the UK response has been necessarily reactive due to the relative lack of formal Friends of Libraries in the UK, which has not had a specific national body like FOLA to foster their development. We should learn from this UK experience, by a more proactive approach to identifying and asserting why the continued improvement of Australia's public library system for all, should be a state, local and federal government concern.

Australia's public libraries will therefore continue to need their Friends, and more of them, as practical and community representative indicators to decision makers at all levels of government that the public library – more than ever – provides an outstanding return on investment in it. If there is one critical message from this address, it is that you should not underestimate your importance to the future of Mackay Libraries, and particularly to its young people. Time and time again over the years, FOLA has seen the evidence that Friends of Libraries can, and do, make the difference as partners with councils and library managers in achieving better, more accessible, libraries for all in their communities.

For 30 years now that is something the Friends of Mackay Libraries has unstintingly, and with much goodwill and volunteer support, achieved in partnership with council and its library service, a partnership on which all are to be very much commended.

Congratulations to you, to council, and to Mackay Libraries. On behalf of Friends of Libraries Australia, I wish you well for your partnership and shared endeavours for your community for the next 30 years.

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