

E-books strain Library budget ? and they want to turn the page



Aurora Public Library CEO Jill Foster speaks at the launch of Ontario Public Libraries Week on Sunday afternoon. Auroran photo by Brock Weir

By Brock Weir

For some readers, there is nothing better than holding a book in your hands as you dive into a new adventure. For others, however, there is one better: having a few hundred books at your fingertips through your e-reader.

If you fall into the latter camp ? and many people do ? it is putting a considerable strain on Canada's public libraries, including the Aurora Public Library. And they're not prepared to take things lying down anymore.

The Aurora Public Library, and the Canadian Public Libraries for Fair E-Book Pricing Coalition, received a boost from Aurora Council last week, endorsing a motion from Councillor Michael Thompson calling on Ontario's Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport to work with all levels of government ?to find a solution that will allow public libraries to purchase e-books from publishers at a fair and reasonable price.?

Indeed, it is at the publishing level where the problem lies, according to Jill Foster, CEO of the Aurora Public Library. Picking up the latest offering from author Michael Connelly in e-book format sets the individual consumer back \$14.99. Pricing for public libraries for the same content sits at \$106. The wildly popular novel The Goldfinch would cost libraries \$114 for an electronic copy but just \$14.99 for the individual consumer.

Each of these e-book purchases comes with a licensing agreement that governs how long a library can keep an e-book available in its collection, sometimes determined by number of loans or the passage of time.

?The patchwork that is created by the cost discrepancies and usage restrictions imposed on libraries has made it very difficult for us to provide our customers with the same quality and range of materials in e-book format that we are able to do with print materials,? said Ms. Foster. ?Yet, public libraries have a mandate to provide access to information in every format available. This has an accessibility aspect to this as well. Many disabled people prefer digital content for a variety of reasons: it is easier for them to manipulate and to use, so our inability to provide a full array of e-book titles has an accessibility component to it.?

Over the years, libraries such as Aurora's have evolved to meet the demands of the marketplace including moving from a traditionally print environment towards a hybrid model with an increasing emphasis on the digital realm, including e-books and streaming music and movies. Digital content is currently the fastest growing area of borrowing at the Aurora Public Library,

increasing by over 30 per cent in little over a year.

The Coalition was founded out of these mounting concerns to work with multinational publishers to raise awareness and support from the public to make a push towards ?reasonable? e-book pricing structures, added Ms. Foster, noting that many independent Canadian publishers are not imposing the same challenges on local libraries.

?I feel these are very profound issues, not just for libraries and our budget, but for authors and even publishers who want to connect with new readers,? said Ms. Foster. ?The publishing industry plays an important part in the development and expression of Canadian identity and literary culture. With our combined publishing power, libraries contribute to a vibrant publishing industry. Imposing unreasonably high prices and creating barriers between people and the books they want serves nobody's best interests.?

For Councillor Thompson, the call for fair pricing has been going on for years and previous terms of the Aurora Public Library Board have joined campaigns spearheaded by the City of Ottawa to achieve this goal, and the Coalition is the result of those efforts.

Support for the call was widespread around the Council table, with Councillor Harold Kim, for instance, questioning whether these high prices are having trickle-down effects elsewhere in libraries.

The prices, said Ms. Foster, are ?wreaking havoc? with the library's collection budget with different publishers imposing different restrictions on how long certain e-titles can remain in their collections.

?I think similar to electronic industries, one of the big barriers is the platforms,? said Councillor Kim. ?With e-books, there are many different platforms. If all municipalities leverage [the Association of Municipalities of Ontario] and other organizations to team up and have one platform we would have huge buying power. If multinationals won't cooperate, then we just have to lever up, get bigger and have larger economies of scale.?