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Joint Newmarket Public Library and Community Services Information Report: Dissolution of York Info Community Services Partnership

Report Number: # 2019 - 11

Department(s):   Newmarket Public Library
                   Community Services Commission

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In accordance with the Procedure By-law, any member of Council may make a request to the Town Clerk that this Report be placed on an upcoming Committee of the Whole agenda for discussion.

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to update Council on the York Info Community Services Partnership.

Background

Newmarket Public Library has for over two decades been a leader in compiling and providing community services information. Beginning with a print catalogue of services which evolved to a locally-hosted database, the Library recognized a need for an authoritative, up-to-date, and neutral listing of organizations, programs, facilities, and in-take/eligibility data for a range of community services, from homeless shelters to mental health hotlines to service and social clubs that were publically or charitably funded. For years, the information has been available to access online for residents and referral agencies, and provided in person and phone by library staff at a dedicated desk.

Initially called Newmarket Connections, the service evolved into a partnership with five of the libraries of the Northern Six municipalities of York Region. At the same time, a volunteer recruitment module was added to the database, with NPL staff compiling volunteer opportunities at the listed agencies so that residents can search and be matched to areas of interest. In 2010, the program was rebranded as York Info and became the sole provider of data on services across York Region for Findhelp Information Services, the agency that provides data for the provincial 211 community information phone and Web service.

Recent developments have led the partners to reconsider the project. These developments relate to the Region of York's decision to contract with Findhelp to provide comprehensive data for the Region's referral service, called Access York. Access York is aiming to be positioned as the one-stop referral service during business hours, with after-hours needs being referred to the 211 phone service or website. Findhelp is contracted to compile data from York Info and other sources, increasing the demands for quality, completeness, and timeliness to a point that York Info may not be able to manage. Findhelp is receiving funding (reimbursement) for their role in coordinating the data which is not flowing through to York Info and the sources of the data despite the higher data maintenance effort or expectations. Even the limited reimbursement York Info had traditionally been receiving for its work is no longer at a meaningful level and is projected to disappear in 2020.

All of this has led the partners to question whether the library system is the appropriate agency to complete this work. When NPL began compiling community service data, it was in order to contribute to community connectedness using the unique "hub" position of libraries. Use of the yorkinfo.ca website has been very strong, mainly due to the database's "search engine optimization" which sees its pages rank high in search results. However, given the increasing pressures, the rise of agencies providing complementary services, and the lack of appropriate compensation, the York Info partners have taken the decision, with the support of the NPL Board, to opt out of providing data to 211, passing responsibility for the existing database to Findhelp, and to instead focus on using 211 and Access York as referral points for library users, effective January 2020.

Another issue that has been building is that of the competition to York Info's volunteer matching service in the community. Since 2009, Neighbourhood Network, a project of the Magna Corporation, has been operating a similar service modelled on the library-based database and organization. While the two services have co-existed well since then, the software York Info is tied to has not developed in the same user-friendly manner as Neighbourhood Network's interface has. As a result, activity levels have stagnated. The Library Board has therefore made the decision to discontinue this part of the service as well, referring library users to Neighbourhood Network and to large agencies that recruit their volunteers directly.

Discontinuing both the community information and volunteer referral modules of York Info will free up resources that will allow the library to more adequately resource areas of its own programming that are struggling to keep up with demand. These include the library's Maker Hub, on-demand tech help programs, and virtual services through its website, as well as its own volunteer programs. A surge in demand for educational placements and other volunteer roles has created a need to develop new avenues to place volunteers in roles that complement paid staff.

Conclusion:

The discontinuing of York Info Community Information and Volunteer Centre will have a net beneficial effect on the ability of the Library to provide core services to the community as well as to continue acting as a hub for access to community information and volunteer opportunities. Both the Region of York and Findhelp Information Services are prepared to take on the information referral and data aggregator roles previously fulfilled in by Newmarket Public Library within the partnership. The wind down process has already begun and is expected to be completed by January 2020.

Contact

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Approval

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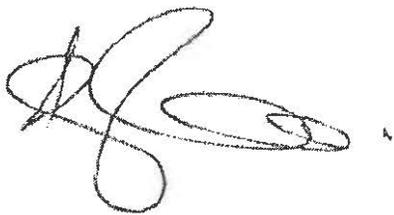
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Ian McDougall

Commissioner of Community Services