

## MANAGEMENT REPORT

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Meeting Date: February 22, 2023  
TO: Library Board  
FROM: Tim Bottomer, Chair, SFHR Committee  
SUBJECT: **Challenging Older and Classic Titles in VPL Collections**

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### **SUMMARY**

Vancouver Public Library is committed to offering diverse collections that provide access to the world's information and ideas and meet the needs and interests of individuals, while respecting and reflecting communities of various cultural, ethnic, religious and philosophical backgrounds. In recent years the Library has seen increasing concern expressed about historical material, particularly titles for children. This report discusses principles for deciding if older or classic titles should be retained once they have been identified as including content we now recognize as unacceptable and exclusionary.

### **PURPOSE**

This report is for information.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

That the Board receive this report for information.

### **POLICY**

Vancouver Public Library is committed to offering diverse collections that provide access to the world's information and ideas and meet the needs and interests of individuals, while respecting and reflecting communities of various cultural, ethnic, religious and philosophical backgrounds. Two key policies inform decisions to retain or remove material from the Library's collections: the [Collection Development Policy](#) and the [Inclusive Library Services Policy](#). Library staff may also consider the role of digitization in providing access to historical material, using the [Digitization and Lending of Print Books policy](#).

## **INDIGENOUS CONSIDERATIONS**

Some of the material in the Library's collection contains dated and objectionable content about Indigenous peoples, and staff will consider this material using the principles and process outlined below.

Removing all content that reflects dated or objectionable views limits our communities' ability to understand the depth of historical context, which is necessary to the Truth in the process of Truth and Reconciliation. In cases where objectionable material is retained, our robust selection of current titles by Indigenous authors that explore Indigenous experiences are the means by which the Library balances its role in providing access to historical context with its efforts towards Reconciliation.

In collection development, our primary expression of this commitment to Reconciliation is in the work that we do to establish, build, maintain and refresh Indigenous Collections in each branch. These collections are based on a profile that emphasizes Indigenous authorship and voices, and that Library staff developed in consultation with local Indigenous community groups. Their prominent physical presence in all branches provides a venue for Indigenous users to see themselves reflected in our spaces and collections, and provides non-Indigenous users a place to engage with Reconciliation and to educate themselves.

VPL staff have changed catalogue subject headings pertaining to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples to reflect their life, communities, works and world view. VPL's work to replace subject headings began with material about Indigenous peoples whose traditional territory is within what is now called British Columbia and subsequently expanded to include North, South and Central America, and replacing all subject headings originally titled Indians of North America.

## **STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS**

The work discussed in this report supports the following areas of our strategic plan:

*Learning & Creativity – Goal 1.3: Provide relevant physical and digital collections in diverse formats and languages.* A collection that contains material which is diverse enough to spark agreement with some items and disagreement with others is a key way libraries foster the development of critical thinking. Our collections need to be sufficiently diverse to allow users to explore varied perspectives of both controversial and uncontroversial topics, and understand the historical context that informs modern understandings.

*Belonging and Connection – Goal 3.4: Establish the library as a forum for civic conversation and understanding.* Critical thinking cannot be developed through reading and reflection alone, it also requires participating in the exchange of ideas and discussions. While the work of Goal 3.4 will be achieved primarily through programming, the collection is a critical support.

## **BACKGROUND**

VPL holds both current and historical material in its collections, with historical material primarily held at Central Library. For many years, VPL received provincial funding to act as a provincial resource collection, supporting other public libraries in the province. The Central Library continues to provide a historical resource collection, focused on BC, available locally and through interlibrary loan.

In September 2022, the Library Board approved the [Digitization and Lending of Print Books policy](#), which states “Libraries have an additional role in ensuring the preservation of Canada’s published literary heritage, and providing access to this history in formats that are accessible to all library users, and in ways that support learning and the acquisition of knowledge.” In the case of material published in British Columbia or about the region, VPL retains material for research purposes. Sometimes older material becomes dated and contains content we now recognize as unacceptable and exclusionary. Due to VPL’s role as a repository for our cultural heritage, requests to remove historical material in the collection require careful consideration.

VPL has a long-standing process for patrons to submit requests for reconsideration of material when they believe an item should be removed from the library’s collection, and VPL provides training for public service staff to assist them in having preliminary conversations about intellectual freedom with patrons.

Concern about exclusionary and unacceptable content is disproportionately focused on children’s material, based on the idea that children are less prepared to engage critically with ideas, and may experience harm from exposure to them.

While decisions about retaining or removing material need to be made on a case by case basis, decisions should be founded on a common set of principles to ensure that they are consistent and appropriate. Every decision must balance the Library’s commitment to inclusion with intellectual freedom and maintaining access to a broad and diverse collection.

### **Current Environment**

VPL’s consideration of collection challenges takes place in the broader context of increasing efforts to ban titles from libraries on ideological grounds in the United States, including coordinated political campaigns against libraries. These censorship efforts focus on works with LGBTQ+ characters and storylines, and books that cover issues of race. More detail about these trends is contained in the [Collection Development Policy Update Report](#) from the January 25, 2023 meeting.

## **DISCUSSION**

The following principles guide VPL staff in making decisions when someone expresses concern about the material found in library collections. The foundation of these principles is VPL’s

commitment to the value of intellectual freedom, as defined by the [CLFA Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries](#), and VPL's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion, as defined in the [Inclusive Library Services Policy](#).

**1. *VPL provides material that represents a broad range of perspectives on ideas and issues so that people have access to information to make their own decisions***

VPL supports equity and inclusion by building a diverse collection that includes material representing a broad range of perspectives on ideas and issues. This approach is part of the Library's role in supporting the development of critical literacy skills, and encouraging their use.

Narrowing the ideas reflected in VPL's collection by removing controversial perspectives limits a patron's ability to explore and engage with an idea or topic. VPL does not take steps to protect the public from ideas that may be included in library collections; the Library provides space for patrons to make their own decisions about the ideas they choose to access through library materials. This is the case for both adult and children's collections.

**2. *VPL affirms the right of access and the right of representation of diverse groups and experiences in all of the Library's activities and services***

Rather than exclude difficult ideas and perspectives from VPL's collection, library staff work towards VPL's equity and inclusion values by proactively purchasing material that supports inclusion and acceptance of all identities, and by highlighting marginalized or equity-denied groups. Staff selectively promote titles that support VPL's values and goals through in-branch and online displays. This proactive, values-based approach is aligned with VPL's programming strategy, which supports community discourse around topics of interest through an equity and inclusion lens.

Freedom to Read Week is an annual event organized by the Book and Periodical Council that encourages Canadians to think about and reaffirm their commitment to intellectual freedom, which is guaranteed them under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. VPL participates in Freedom to Read Week through activities such as programming, displays, curation of reading lists, and social media posts.

**3. *VPL provides a broad range of topics and ideas for children at a developmentally appropriate reading level, interest, and comprehension level***

Material for children has the additional consideration of developmental appropriateness. This concept reflects the idea that children are on a cognitive, social-emotional and physical development trajectory that can be generally described in terms of stages. Although there is significant divergence between individuals, research around childhood development suggests that for each developmental stage, a broad range of materials may be considered developmentally appropriate.

The library selects materials for children to align with these broad stages of development, with the intent of collections being accessible and interesting to a wide range of children within the target age audience. The concept of developmental appropriateness may influence selection decisions around reading level, interest, and comprehension level, but does not limit the range of topics or ideas included in the collection.

#### **4. *Guardians of children are responsible for their children's reading materials***

Guardians of children are responsible for selecting materials that they feel are appropriate for their children from the library's collection; VPL does not act in the place of a parent.

### **Operational Implementation**

The process of reviewing material after someone expresses concern about it is largely the same for all types of material. For both adult and children's material, titles that are felt to be racist, sexist or otherwise problematic in the purpose or majority of their content will be reviewed by staff. As discussed above, VPL generally retains historical material relevant to British Columbia.

For both adult and children's material, titles that are felt to be racist, sexist or otherwise problematic in the purpose or majority of their content will be reviewed using the Challenged Materials Process. This operational process begins when a member of the public raises a concern with public service staff, and can be escalated through a formal written complaint to the Manager, Collections and Technical Services, who will evaluate the material. The evaluation includes considering alignment with VPL's Collection Development policy, examining reviews of the material, and considering any specific concerns raised by the person filing the complaint. Decisions may be further escalated to a director, and to the Chief Librarian & CEO. The Library Board guides the approach through policy; the Board does not have a role in making decisions about individual items in the library collection.

Generally, adult material that circulates well but has some outdated content will be retained in the collection. Material with considerable outdated content and particular historical value in British Columbia may be moved to another area of the collection, if appropriate, such as Special Collections. Staff rarely removes adult material from the library's collection due to outdated content alone, although material is regularly removed due to age and condition, in order to make room for new materials.

Children's material that has some problematic content, but is still developmentally appropriate in that it is relevant to the experiences, identities and interests of children, and circulates well, will generally be retained in the Children's collection. Material that has some problematic content, and is not developmentally appropriate in that it has diverged strongly enough from the experiences, identities and interests of children to no longer be relevant to most readers in the audience, is likely to be removed from the collection. It may be considered for reclassification, such as to the teen or adult collection, if it continues to circulate or meets other retention criteria.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Staff address challenges to material in the Library's collection within the library's regular operating budget. Activities organized as part of Freedom to Read week are incorporated into regular library programming and services.