

# Saint John's Free Public Library A Happening Place

by Jane Barry

*The Greater Saint John Community Foundation*

In 2010 the conventional notion of a library as a rule-bound, reserved and restrained place where hovering librarians are shushing everyone is a thing of the past. With a long and impressive history, the Saint John Free Public Library has changed with the times to become a welcoming, modern and comfortable community resource where all who seek information, learning and enjoyment have free access to resources, books, and other media. The library can meet many needs which don't at first come to mind: meeting space, computer access, free programs and events, buying used books, books in multiple languages, reference services and even a substantial art collection. Just last week, the finishing touches were put on the newly re-furbished reading area. Visitors are re-discovering the beautiful stained glass windows, views of the harbour and appreciate the new soft colours, updated seating and tables.

Suzanne Ball, Board Chair, explains that these changes are part of their new strategic plan designed to bring the facility up to date and appealing to all demographics and reach their Vision "as a vibrant hub of activity integral to an engaged community, working to build on the foundation of our past, to innovate for our present, and to explore our future." Teens are welcome and can relax in the ZONE, a space they can call their own. The multi-purpose room hosts monthly games sessions and the children's area is now colourfully re-decorated and furnished. Bridgit McGale, a board member, and photographer Martin Flewelling lent their talents to the exterior facade in the Market Square atrium to create larger-than-life "bookshelves" with copies of books that are actually in the libraries collections, making it more visually obvious that a library lies inside.

Patti Chisholm, Vice Chair of the board, reminds us that the most recent issues of the latest magazines are available free in an atmosphere not unlike the trendiest coffee shops and soon will be displayed according to subject not alphabetically. A fireplace and coffee area are on the "to do" list. New regulations now permit library patrons to bring beverages into the library as long as they are covered. In addition to those mentioned, Nicholas Barfoot serves as Chair of Finance along with Jason L. Alcorn, Maryanne Lewell, E. Donald McKim, Malcolm Somerville and Michael Richard as volunteer board members and Municipal Liaison Officer, Pat Woods.

Joann Hamilton Barry, City Librarian, points out how the Large Print section has eye-catching new end panels on the shelving and attractive display racks of the newest selections. The library values bequests and funding from groups like the Skinner family, the McKean and James Venner Russell Foundations to help such projects. The Greater Saint John Community Foundation has supported the Storytent program in Crescent Valley. Its Old Ladies Home Fund, which targets seniors' charitable causes, has frequently supported the purchase of large print and talking books for both the visually and physically challenged, for a total of over \$117,500. Talking books are available at the East Branch Library.

Ms. Hamilton Barry states "Since 1980, we have been proud to offer our patrons the choice of books in alternate formats such as Talking Books. Staff carefully select material, individualized for each Talking Book patron. Staff record patrons' reading preferences, genre and author. Over time, a relationship is built between patrons and staff, who work hard to find the material that they know would be enjoyable and not repetitious." Staff can pre-arrange Talking Books for the patron to pick up. Over a one year period in 2008-9 this special service was used 85 times. A free mail service provided 181 Talking Book patrons in the same time frame. Records show a total of 2,683 Talking Book borrowings last year. The East Branch Library's Talking Book service to the visually impaired is unique in the southern part of the province.

Some library users are able to read independently when the print is very large and bold. The popular demand for new Large Print titles exceeds the library's collection of 7,519. They were borrowed 12,894 times last year from Branch libraries and the Market Square collection. Patrons who can no longer read regular print derive a great deal of pleasure from books in alternate formats. The library has been loaning audio books on CD and has recently begun loaning "Playaways" – a new format of audio books. This also affords caregiver some respite when their charge is enjoying a new book from the library.

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Photo: Suzanne Ball, Saint John Free Public Library Board Chair, Joann Hamilton Barry, City Librarian, Patti Chisholm, Vice Chair of the library board and Sophia Guitard Treasurer of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation admire some of the library's unique collection of large print and talking books for readers with disabilities, augmented through the Foundation's support.



*Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to [www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca](http://www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca)*