

# High-tech gadgets keep Library ahead of curve, but come with challenges, cost

**By Brock Weir**

Technology can keep institutions like the Aurora Public Library ahead of the curve when it comes to being able to give the people what they want ? but like so many things, technology itself is a double-edged sword.

Appearing before Council last week to make a pitch for a three per cent ?maintenance increase? in their budget, Aurora Public Library CEO Jill Foster said the Library's mission has been and remains providing Aurorans the means to begin a journey of ?discovery and inspiration? with a commitment to ?literacy, long-term learning and the love of reading in general.?

Evidently, it is a winning formula as year after year more users frequent the Yonge and Church Street landmark and year after year new bells and whistles are offered to keep them coming back for more.

?We are going to invest in our staff and our systems,? said Ms. Foster. ?We need to maintain our service levels and stay up to date with technology. Technology is not something you can leave for five years and then catch up. You need to keep up to date and do it incrementally.

?We also intend to meet the demands of the mobile community to the public.?

To this end, they have bought 10 Google Chrome books for users to test out within the Library and get a feel for tablets.

?We're hoping that will be a very popular service to meet the evolving needs of society. We're also going to increase public awareness around the Library's technology equipment.?

Tablets aside, one of the more recent acquisitions at the Aurora Public Library is a new 3D Printer. The library, Ms. Foster said, is still in the preparation stage of how to present the printer and how it can be used by the public, but it is all about attracting both traditional and new users into the Library community.

?I think it might be a real magnet for people who don't normally think of the Library as a place for them,? she said. ?We need to reorient space in the Library for the best opportunity in presenting those types of services and that is the kind of thing we're going through this year.?

Technological advancement at the Aurora Public Library can also be felt aside from big ticket items like a 3D printer, or items like tablets you can hold in your hand. You might have seen these advances first hand in small ways like quick emails to let you know when your book or DVD is about to become due, or when the e-book you have borrowed from the Library suddenly returns itself when you are just a couple of pages away from finding out whodunit.

These small changes, however, come with their own challenges both practically and financially for the Library.

?Most of our revenue comes from fees and fines,? said Ms. Foster, noting revenues took a hit in 2013 despite usage going up. ?We are quite restricted in how we can raise funds by the Public Library Act. Our funds went down considerably because we do this very kind thing and notify people when their materials are just about to become due! It is a service they very much appreciate, but it means we're having less and less overdue fines.

?We are increasing our circulation of e-books. They are never overdue. They are just automatically returned so they do not generate any revenues and I anticipate that will likely be a trend that will continue.?

But while that trend is likely to continue, it will be a continued challenge to the library because it is often the case that securing licenses for e-books is costlier for libraries than stocking tried and true books.

'E-books is actually quite a quagmire within the publishing world,' said Ms. Foster. 'It costs libraries more to buy e-books than it does for you to buy books for your own personal use. Publishers don't like offering e-books, so it is a battle we're waging nationally. It is not cheaper, but it is popular and it is not going to go away, so we continue to purchase even though the terms are not necessarily the best for libraries.'

Looking ahead to the Library's future, an item continually up for review is whether or not the Aurora Public Library needs to expand to suit the current and future needs of the community. As an item which has been on the books as a possibility for years, options examined have included expanding onto the existing building and, more practically, building a satellite library elsewhere in Aurora.

Surveys will be underway this year to poll users on library space and service needs in the years ahead, added Ms. Foster. When questioned by Councillor Wendy Gaertner last week, however, on the possibility of expansion, Ms. Foster said she had a 'gut feeling' the current space would continue to serve the community well over the next 20 years.

'If we're considering a second location, there are many things to consider, one of which is maybe we don't want to replicate what we have,' she said. 'Maybe it will be a service that isn't book oriented. These are things we would need to [consider] as we assess that whole project.'