

# Taking the relevancy test: The Nelson Library goes to the polls

By Anne DeGrace.

Amid all the talk about the relevancy of libraries in this digital age, the Nelson Public Library took the question to the streets—or at least to the rural roadways. The answer was gratifying, although there is clearly room to grow.

## Library support referendum

Last fall, the question of library support through taxation went to referendum in the City of Nelson and regional district areas E, F, and a defined portion of H. In most parts of BC, it's not even a question—98.6% of British Columbians access library services this way—however the T-word, when it comes to Nelson and its rural neighbours, has long been a fractious issue.

There are just 49,000 people in BC who cannot freely access a library, and 11,800 of them are residents of Regional District of Central Kootenay Districts E, F, and H.

But subscription fees can be a barrier for those who would most benefit from a library: families, seniors, and financially challenged residents of all kinds. And so, after long debate through public meetings, much distribution of educational documents, and careful crafting of the question itself, a referendum was held to see if those barriers might be removed.

## The result?

After fair bit of nail-biting—one area came in by just three votes—Areas F and South H voted in favour, so that now 8,049 more people can enjoy barrier-free library access. Area E opted to continue to pay a subscription fee, and this has left some library users and would-be users disappointed.

Memberships from the areas who voted in favour are now up by 50% over previous numbers, and overall circulation at the Nelson Library is up 14% since referendum day. This is good news as it underlines the continued importance and relevance of libraries, with room to grow as we meet challenges of both new technology and old-school ideas. If we learned anything through the process, it was that for some, ideas about what a library is and does lives on in old stereotypes of shushing librarians and dusty, uninteresting books; clearly there is work to be done.

Since the referendum, the Nelson Municipal Library has become the Nelson Public Library, reflective of the expansion to our service areas. In coming years, we'll continue to embrace change, maintain a high level of relevancy, and be as innovative as we can be.

In the world of taxes and politics, no doesn't necessarily mean no forever.

*Anne DeGrace is the Adult Services Coordinator for the Nelson Public Library.*