

Ushering in a New Era of Collaboration: The new RBCM-GVPL partnership broadens a community's cultural offerings

By David Alexander and Maureen Sawa.

There's a popular motivational poster that's ubiquitous in banks, insurance company offices and corporate cubicles across the continent – I've even seen it in the occasional museum. Sometimes it's a photo of a baton being passed from hand to hand; sometimes just a poem on a chalkboard. But the lettering very clearly spells T.E.A.M.: Together Everyone Achieves More. And a new partnership between the Royal BC Museum and the Greater Victoria Public Library embraces just that philosophy.

Spearheaded by Maureen Sawa, CEO for the Greater Victoria Public Library and David Alexander, Communications Manager for the Royal BC Museum, the new library museum pass program aims to bring the museum experience to a wider spectrum of users than is possible through paid admission alone, while adding a richer dimension to the library's lending repertoire. "I both sit on the Library Board and work in a museum," says Alexander. "And I see an amazing connection between the two."

A closer look at the program

Offering 20 passes in total (two for each GVPL branch), the RBCM-GVPL partnership provides free general admission for two adults 19 years and older and up to three youth aged 6-18. Youth under five are free. The pass can only be checked out by adults and does not include special events or discounts. Upon checkout, patrons can keep the museum pass for a week, a lending period that's consistent with existing library loan periods for limited availability/high demand items. Patrons can put a museum pass on hold, but the passes aren't renewable.

All museum passes are laminated and bear a GVPL sticker for easy identification by museum staff. They are kept in CD cases with customized covers bearing the same graphic as appears on the pass, plus an informative blurb about the museum and the pass program.

The importance of museum-library partnerships

In years gone by, libraries and museums opened their doors to a waiting public. Now, the focus is on outreach and finding ways to expand their collections to incorporate an experience – both tangible and virtual – of the institution itself. The emphasis is on being relevant to the community and to the lives of the people who live there.

Museums and libraries make good collaborative partners, as they frequently serve the same community in similar ways. They provide access to information from the past; they preserve and protect community heritage; and they create and support opportunities for lifelong learning. Museum-library partnerships aren't a new concept, having been embraced in cities such as Kingston, Ottawa, Toronto and Pembroke, and even farther afield, in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia and Pasadena. While not a new phenomenon, however, these partnerships are still relatively rare – and this is the first of its kind in British Columbia. By merging their energies and offerings, cornerstone cultural institutions like libraries and museums can reach out to a broader audience and remind the local community of the many gifts within its midst.

As British Columbia's provincial museum, the Royal BC Museum's mandate is to offer services to the entire province. Partnering with the Greater Victoria Public Library allows the museum to reach out to an audience that might not otherwise have access to a museum. The lending pass creates a strong partnership with another community organization, generates excitement about the museum, and brings positive publicity to the museum and archives – especially when people share their thoughts about the program with a wider audience through social media.

A partnership like this confers similar benefits to libraries: heightened publicity and a rewarding partnership with another community organization. More than that, a museum pass partnership expands a library's offerings beyond the realm of books, movies and music. Being able to "lend experiences" broadens a library's relevance in a world where books and cultural experiences are increasingly forced to compete with *digitalia* for people's attention.

"Libraries are committed to fostering a passion for lifelong learning among people of all ages," says GVPL CEO Maureen Sawa. "The museum pass lending program is a wonderful example of how the library serves as a wellspring of ideas, new discoveries and community connections."

What's next?

The RBCM-GVPL partnership is expanding with the addition of 20 youth passes into the system thanks to a grant from the Victoria Foundation. Now, a youth can take out a pass and bring a friend to the museum – yet another powerful way of reaching out to the community.

The current family pass has proven to be popular with over 2000 holds on the passes – a waitlist of up to a year. "We would love to increase the reach of the program but don't have any funding to do so," says

Alexander. "If we had a sponsor come on board to cover the cost, that would be great."

Feedback from the community

"We had the pass the week before Christmas when the kids were out of school and at loose ends," writes Victoria resident and GVPL user Kate Rutherford (and, full disclosure, GVPL employee). "My husband went with them one day and they visited the mammoth and the old town (his favourites) and I took them the next day and we saw the Wildlife Photography exhibition (astounding!) and the First Peoples Gallery (my favourite). Then, on the third day, we all went together, along with my (paying) sister and her two kids. We sent the kids off to explore on their own while the adults peacefully lingered in the photography exhibition. In the past, our visits to the museum have involved rushing around trying to see everything and leaving exhausted. With the pass, we were able to visit repeatedly and see everything we wanted to see at a much more relaxed pace. Because we live in James Bay and walked to the museum all three days, I could justify taking the kids to the cafeteria for lunch, something I've never done because we always blew the budget on entrance fees."

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