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Library Board Report

To: Newmarket Public Library Board

From: Todd Kyle, C.E.O.

Date: November 20, 2019

RE: **Proposed dissolution of York Info partnership**

Background:

Newmarket Public Library has for over two decades been a leader in compiling and providing community services information. Beginning with a print catalogue of services which evolved to a locally-hosted database, the Library recognized a need for an authoritative, up-to-date, and neutral listing of organizations, programs, facilities, and intake/eligibility data for a range of community services, from homeless shelters to mental health hotlines to service and social clubs, that were publicly or charitably funded. For years, the information has been available to access online for residents and referral agencies, and provided in person and phone by library staff at a dedicated desk.

Initially called Newmarket Connections, the service evolved into a partnership with five of the libraries of the Northern Six municipalities of York Region. Each library pays into a common fund which is used to pay expenses such as the software subscription and related memberships, and which is used to offset some of the staff costs at NPL. The other four libraries assist in compiling and updating services unique to their geographic areas, with the bulk of the work being done by NPL staff including a dedicated Community Information Coordinator. At the same time, a volunteer recruitment module was added to the database, with NPL staff compiling volunteer opportunities at the listed agencies so that residents can search and be matched to areas of interest.

In 2010, Newmarket Connections was part of an effort to create an authoritative data partnership to compile services across York Region to feed into the provincial 211 community information phone and Web service. Because of capacity issues with Civic York, the counterpart in the southern parts of the Region, the northern partnership was given the opportunity to be the sole York Region data partner for 211 through Findhelp, the agency that coordinates 211 data for the GTA. Rebranded as York Info, the NPL-led service has been providing service data to 211 for the entire region since then. Findhelp has on occasion provided grants for capacity

catch-ups in order to expand and maintain coverage of the southern region. Findhelp also contributed some reimbursement to York Info for its data as part of an agreement to provide data to provincial ministries.

Recent developments:

A number of factors have arisen recently that have led York Info to re-examine its role and relevance in the face of diminishing resources. First and foremost is the increasing requirements from Findhelp/211 in terms of the quality, completeness, and timeliness of data and updates. The standards are becoming increasingly complex, to the point where staff at the other partner libraries do not have the capacity to complete the work, leaving more of it to NPL's specialized staff. As a result of a vacancy elsewhere, the Community Information Coordinator position was converted to full-time in order to ensure adequate resourcing for this. At the same time, there is some pressure from Findhelp to change to a different database software, one that does not have the volunteer matching module.

Another set of factors relates to the Region of York's decision to contract with Findhelp to provide comprehensive data for the Region's referral service, called Access York. Access York is aiming to be positioned as the one-stop referral service during business hours, with after-hours needs being referred to the 211 phone service or website. Findhelp is contracted to compile data from York Info and other sources, increasing the demands for quality, completeness, and timeliness to a point that York Info may not be able to manage. Findhelp is receiving funding (reimbursement) for their role in coordinating the data from sources which is not flowing through to York Info and the sources of the data despite the higher data maintenance effort or expectations. At this time no additional reimbursement has been provided or is expected for the increased expectations or effort involved in meeting higher data standards or responsiveness to requests and expectations of the Region of York.

All of this has led the partners to question whether the library system is the appropriate agency to complete this work. When NPL began compiling community service data, it was in order to contribute to community connectedness using the unique "hub" position of libraries, and in order to serve our own patrons better by having accurate information at hand. The libraries have benefitted by being seen as impartial curators, providing information and referrals without connections to the funding or oversights of the agencies providing the services. Use of the yorkinfo.ca website has also been strong, mainly due to the database's "search engine optimization" which sees its pages rank high in search results. At the same time, however, demand for referrals within the library itself have diminished to the point where the dedicated York Info service desk was recently discontinued.

Discussion:

Given the diminishing demand, the increasing pressures, the rise of agencies providing complementary services, and the lack of appropriate compensation, NPL has for some time been considering alternative approaches. In consultation with Findhelp, some alternative scenarios which might have decreased the data quality obligations or sought some financial

reimbursement were explored. However, the York Info partners have instead proposed that York Info opt out of providing data to 211, dismantling the existing database, and instead focus on using 211 and Access York as referral points for our users. It is hoped that this decision can be made prior to December 31, 2019, at which point the existing data contract with Findhelp expires.

For NPL, this scenario provides a solution to an additional problem, which is adequately staffing other important Library activities. The Library has a need to increase its ability to offer Maker Hub and on-demand tech help services. At the same time, development and management of its website is also under-resourced, with most of the work being done by a staff committee outside their regular duties. Both of these efforts would be well-served by freeing up a portion of the community information staff's time. In order to ensure continued access to community services by library patrons, staff would also continue to compile listings of the community services that are most asked for (for example, shelter, meal, and mental health services).

Another issue that has been building is that of the competition to York Info's volunteer matching service in the community. Since 2009, Neighbourhood Network, a project of the Magna Corporation, has been operating a similar service modelled on the library-based database and organization. While the two services have co-existed well since then, the software York Info is tied to has not developed in the same user-friendly manner as Neighbourhood Network's interface has. As a result, activity levels have stagnated, both at the level of agencies listing their volunteer needs and of residents seeking opportunities to volunteer. Without additional staff time, these levels are likely to remain stable or decline over time. At the same time, the Library has not been able to pursue new ideas for volunteer roles within the Library itself beyond existing programs such as the Homebound and Reading Buddies services. Discontinuing the community volunteer matching service would allow the Library to develop new avenues to recruit volunteers in roles that complement paid staff.

Dissolving the York Info partnership would have some financial impact on the Library but it would be minimal. Preliminary analysis suggests that the net negative effect would be no more than \$4000 per year if partner contributions as well as database expenses were discontinued. If needed, some adjustments to related staff expenses could be taken. At the same time, the partnership's accumulated surplus is roughly \$18,000, which would likely be disbursed proportionately to the member libraries based on volume of service records, and this might be used to offset net costs for a period. Findhelp has been advised of the potential dissolution and understands that a wind-down period could begin in January 2020.

Conclusion:

The following motion is recommended:

THAT the Library Board receive the report on the proposed dissolution of the York Info partnership;

AND THAT the Library Board authorize the C.E.O. to take all necessary steps to give effect to the actions outlined in this report.