

Some libraries open, while others wait and see

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By Mike RileyLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter

Like many businesses during COVID-19, libraries have been hit hard by the government mandated shutdown and trying to navigate a strange new reality in serving their patrons in new and innovative ways to conform to the safety restrictions that are necessary to keep everyone safe from the pandemic. The library in Tudor and Cashel Township has reopened with phase three restrictions in place, while still offering curbside pickup, while the libraries in South Algonquin Township and Carlow Mayo Township have made the decision to remain closed while offering their patrons curbside pickup for the foreseeable future.

Leanne Golan is the CEO and head librarian with Tudor and Cashel Township's Gilmour Public Library, and says that things are going really well there. The library is now open with restrictions on Mondays from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. and Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The restrictions include mandatory masks, use of hand sanitizer at the door, and distancing with a maximum of five people in the library at any one time. They also quarantine returned books for a week before allowing other patrons to check them out. Contact free curbside pickup, available since May 25, is still available for those not wanting to enter the building. They can call the library or message them on Facebook to order their materials. At the library, Golan has decluttered as much as she could, had the floors cleaned and waxed, doubled the internet speed and updated the software on the public access computers.

"I also have a Keurig [coffee maker] that I'm hoping will further the Internet café vibe I'm going for. I've also changed the hours and added a morning to the mix, and I'm getting new patrons as a result," she says.

Golan says that when she got to the point of needing to purge old books, DVDs and other materials, a library technician walked in, Sherry Plumbé, and agreed to volunteer on Monday nights to help her reorganize the library's collections. She also says that when Trent Hills Library heard about her efforts in Tudor and Cashel, they donated six boxes of books from their collection to help them out. She says they also have a couple of volunteers set to serve on the library board. "Mayor Libby Clarke and the Tudor and Cashel council are excited about all the changes and are 100 per cent behind the library and willing to support us even more, as I work toward introducing overdrive e-books, a large print pool for our seniors population and computerizing our entire collection over the next six to twelve months. I'd also like to introduce a movie night once a month and possibly some adult/senior programs if we have the volunteers to do that. Relying on donations and volunteers is critical," she says.

Golan would also like to have a portable library, a "book nook," put into place in Millbridge, with some of their inventory stocking it on a rolling basis. The details still need to be ironed out on this endeavor. This would save Millbridge residents the 30-minute drive north to the Gilmour library to get their book fix.

"I hope to see the library grow in the days to come so that we can better serve the community. I really feel good about this library," she says.

In South Algonquin Township, the two libraries, in Whitney and Madawaska, opened up with curbside pickup on July 6. Charlene Alexander is the CEO and head librarian in South Algonquin Township, and supervises both libraries. On Aug. 31, she said they are still doing curbside pickup only.

"It started up slowly, but it is catching on," she says.

Alexander said at the time of the curbside pickup introduction, that they had been working hard to come up with a plan to keep everyone safe, staff and patrons alike. This included limiting loans to books and DVDs. She was also quite enthused at the time about the new web OPAC program and its positive effect on membership and circulation. They purchased OPAC to allow their residents to go online and browse library materials they wanted to take out. Overall, she was very excited about the changes and the

opportunities that have been presented to grow and become current and available.

While Holly Hayes, the clerk with South Algonquin Township, said at the time she thinks residents are missing the services they've had to reduce with COVID-19 and its restrictions, the libraries are still only offering curbside pickup to their residents to ensure their safety.

With the curbside pickup, only staff are allowed to be in the library building to receive orders, pick the books and media and arrange a pick-up time with the patron. Quarantine and sanitization following the materials being returned allow for them to be processed for the next patron.

The Madawaska branch is open for curbside pickup on Tuesdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Thursdays from noon to 7 p.m. Access to their Wi-fi is available during those hours. The Whitney branch has WiFi access 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and is open Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Thursdays from noon to 7 p.m. People can order their books by phone, email or by OPAC. Patrons can also download e-books using Overdrive.

Carrie McKenzie, the CEO and head librarian of the Hermon Public Library in Carlow Mayo Township, says that they are still using curbside pickup for their materials through phone and email.

Because of the constant circulation of the materials, when they are brought back, they are placed in quarantine for 72 hours and then disinfected.

She says they took the month of June to discuss what proper restrictions would be most effective for their library. "We also discussed with other libraries in our tri-county area about their reopening plans were, so we had some different ideas to go from. We had a board meeting to discuss preparations. Proper sanitizing materials and locations were created, physical distancing barriers are marked out and proper PPE is provided to staff and if requested, to the public," she says. McKenzie says they started doing curbside pick up back in July once the school year had ended. They are not on a restricted basis for people to come by and get materials, there are markers on the ground for physical distancing, and masks are required while using their curbside pickup service.

They offer free WiFi constantly outside the building, but do not permit patrons to enter the building to use the computers. McKenzie says this was particularly hard on their community as they had a high computer usage at the library before the pandemic. They also offer e-books through overdrive and Libby.

McKenzie says their library has a partnership with the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board and they share their young adult, juvenile and children's resources with them, so the kids can have ample reading opportunities.

With the full support of Mayor Bonnie Adams and vice principal Taras Humen [at Hermon Public School], the library's board was able to come up with a safe plan to operate the curbside pickup outside of school hours, without having to find an alternate location to ensure the safety of the kids. The hours are Tuesday and Thursday from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The library is closed off from the school on the inside and has its own entrance and exit, to further ensure students' safety. They are currently working out a safe way that the children can also access the library materials while abiding by safety and healthy guidelines.

While COVID-19 and its repercussions have been tough on everyone, including library staff and patrons, McKenzie says that their patrons, while disappointed, are understanding that the library cannot be reopened yet for browsing. "We are thankful to have such dedicated and passionate patrons," she says. "We are also thankful for our municipal council who stood by us through the entire pandemic situation and to the Hastings Prince Edward School Board for our partnership so that we can provide even more to our young patrons."