

Other voices

Libraries are essential in the Information Era

By PAULA J. MILLER

Pundits and scholars alike agree that we live in the Information Era, that we've become a knowledge society, and that we're entering the conceptual age. Knowledge is a valuable commodity. Access to information is one of the most powerful economic development resources we have. Yet, The Gazette's Oct. 8 Our View, "Checking out?" questioned the value of local library service and the future of publicly supported libraries. I'd like to "check in" on those issues.

Let's start with value. Nationwide, independent studies have shown that public libraries provide a great return on investment — typically four times as much in return as is expended. At Pikes Peak Library District, we benchmark ourselves, to be certain that we are providing the most efficient service possible. Our average cost per circulation is lower than typical libraries our size. When it is more financially efficient to do so, we outsource some aspects of our service — processing of materials, delivery service and janitorial services, for instance. We utilize the buying and sharing power of consortia to get the best discounts and the best return on investment for services. We are responsive to public needs and wants, and it shows in our public usage figures. We serve more than 3 million visitors annually. Our annual turnover rate (average times each item checks out) is higher than most libraries. In 2007, residents will have borrowed our materials nearly 7 million times.

Now let's talk about Thomas Jefferson and the role of libraries. Our founding fathers did believe "public libraries provided a place for regular folks to educate themselves." They believed that without equal and free access to books and information, we could not have an informed citizenry, capable of making good individual and community decisions. The need for that equity of access has not passed, as the editorial suggested. In fact, library usage actually spikes during economic downturns! Our libraries continue to provide books, audiovisual materials, computers, databases, and high-speed electronic access for those who cannot afford these necessities. Yes, necessities — whether for educational support, to create resumes and seek jobs, to communicate with friends and family or for personal enrichment. As for the contention that there are more outlets for books and information today than in Jefferson's era, that's true. There is also a lot more information being produced today than 200 years ago. Frankly, it's great that we have so many outlets and



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options. For each consumer or would-be reader, some things should be purchased and owned. Many others should be borrowed and passed on. Our book and information alternatives are not competing. They are complementary.

I agree with the editorial's comment that "libraries' role in society is likely changing ... libraries must consider if it's not time to change the way they do business in a changing world." Libraries have changed! Most, including PPLD, are not the libraries many of us remember from our childhoods — quiet spaces, just books, just checking out. We take our stewardship seriously and have evolved to be more efficient, effective, and responsive.

Today, libraries are so much more than books and the "stuff" within their walls. Public libraries support schools and colleges by making homework and research resources available. They grow the economy by providing resources for job seekers and small business entrepreneurs. They enhance our quality of life through diverse programs for the entire family. In many communities, public libraries are now the "village green" of yesterday — an open, gracious space where groups meet, where discussions and forums are held, where issues and ideas are exchanged, where knowledge does much more than exist in books — where knowledge grows.

The bottom line? A new nonfiction book at retail price is roughly \$30. At a used book store, you might get six or so books for \$30. At a garage sale or flea market you might even get 30 books for \$30. At Pikes Peak Library District, for about \$44 per capita, you have access to a collection of more than 1.2 million items, a significant local history and special collection, myriad databases, computers with high-speed access, staff to help you find and evaluate information, cultural programs, instructional classes, storytimes that teach emergent literacy skills to your children, and community and family spaces.

PPLD plays a vital role in our learning community. What a return on investment — for our workforce, our students, our businesses, and our residents. Another of our Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, made a statement that is as true today as it was 200 years ago: "An investment in knowledge [always] pays the best interest."

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