



# SPEAK OUT! IN-DEPTH CASE STUDY

## BYPASSING THE SASKATOON PUBLIC LIBRARY

Political engagement can take on many forms and often involves engaging in several different ways. It also can involve finding common interests across different groups. Consider this as you read the following case study about how citizens of Saskatoon stopped city council from diverting \$750,000 in taxes designated for the public library into the construction of a freeway overpass.

### The Background

Since 1966, the Francis Morrison branch of the Saskatoon Public Library has served as the city's main branch. Intended to serve the public for 25 years, the current facility is now inadequate. At 78,000 square feet, it is only half the size of what a 2004 report revealed is needed to operate efficiently. As Saskatoon *StarPhoenix* reporter Darren Bernhardt outlined:

Rows of book stacks and irreplaceable archival material for the Local History Room line the basement where flooding is a risk. Public materials and shelving run the length of corridors restricted to staff. Book trolleys choke every corner and up to four staff members share work desks while others are relegated to makeshift offices in the windowless basement.<sup>1</sup>

Due to the space crunch, the library has been forced to turn away donations and even important archival material such as old city blueprints. However, the city has been slow to commit to a new main branch. After redirecting \$15 million in federal grants earmarked for library expansion into developing the River Landing area, city council approved a plan to redirect a further \$750,000 of taxes designated for the public library into the construction of a freeway overpass.

### The City's Proposal

The problems for the library began when First Pro Shopping Centres approached city council in 2006. First Pro wanted to build a "big-box power centre" anchored by Walmart on the south end of the city. However, the developer's proposal was contrary to the recommendations of the city's \$120,000 public study on the feasibility of commercial development.

Ignoring what their own study recommended, city council approved the developer's proposal in a 10-to-1 vote. Council rejected the study because they "didn't think the pace of development should be determined by bureaucrats so much as by those who were willing to risk their money."<sup>2</sup>

Soon, complications from approving the proposal surfaced. One major problem was that the development would create traffic congestion. If it was to go ahead, construction of a freeway overpass would have to be fast-tracked. Unfortunately, the city lacked the cash reserves to build the overpass. While the developer said they would pay for 20% of the cost of the overpass, the city was still stuck with 80% of the bill and no funds to pay for it.

To get around this problem, the city decided to borrow the money. They planned to pay the loan back by diverting all tax revenue from the big box development for seven years. This included all taxes dedicated to the library and the school system. However, the plan soon ran into problems. As *StarPhoenix* columnist Randy Burton revealed:

This happened in such a rush that it was all done over the telephone. The library board didn't even hold a meeting to approve the deal. At the time, the board was under the impression that



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the province and school boards would also divert education taxes to the interchange. The province wanted no part of it, and in order to make up the shortfall, the city moved to a 15-year diversion deal on municipal and library taxes.<sup>3</sup>

With the plan rejected by the province, the city decided to more than double the amount of municipal and library taxes to be dedicated to the overpass. The city took the position that “if a development doesn’t occur, then we’ve got nothing, whereas if we can assist in a development then at least we’ve got the tax base coming in the future.”<sup>4</sup>

#### The Opposition

As public understanding grew that the city was using library tax dollars to build a freeway overpass for a Walmart, public pressure for the city to drop the plan also grew. A civil society group called ShEEP (Should Exploitative Economics Persist) was on the forefront of bringing concerns about the plan to the public. This included voicing concerns through local media and through making contact with city council. In addition, dozens of letters in opposition to the plan were written to city council, the public library board, and the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* by the public-at-large.

Opponents were primarily concerned with the diversion of library taxes into a freeway overpass, especially given the need for a new central branch. However, the concern did not end there. Many questioned the need for yet another Walmart in the city. Others took issue with the city tossing aside the recommendations of its own urban planning report to accommodate a multi-billion-dollar developer. And some were concerned with

the relationship between the developers and city council: one ShEEP member observed that the relationship between council and a representative of the developer may have been too close, noting that at a public meeting they were “quite chummy.”<sup>5</sup>

#### The Resolution

Opposition to the city’s plan reached its peak at a protest at Saskatoon City Hall on March 13, 2006. Approximately 100 protesters—including representatives from the union representing library and municipal workers, members of ShEEP, and the general public—came to city hall with the aim of stopping the tax diversion and hopefully stopping the Walmart from being constructed. While the concerned citizens were unsuccessful in halting the development, city council did rescind their motion to divert library taxes to the freeway overpass.

The work of these concerned citizens, however, did not expedite the construction of a new library. The under-sized main branch still stands as the library’s headquarters today.



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### THINK

1. Opposition to the city's plans came from several fronts. This included:
  - workers' unions
  - voluntary civil society groups
  - concerned individuals

While the core issue was the diversion of library taxes into a freeway overpass, people were also concerned with the relationship between city council and corporate interests, and the need for more big-box retail in general.

  - a) What does this tell us about the importance of different groups co-operating to bring about change?
  - b) Not everybody got exactly what they wanted. How does this reflect the nature of democracy in a diverse society?
2. The opposition's battle took place on several fronts. Public awareness was built through such things as formal speeches to city council, letters to local media, letters to the library board, and a protest in the city's public square.
  - a) What "Speak Out" tools did the people opposed to the city's plan use?
  - b) Given the rise of social media, how would you approach this situation today?
3. If common citizens do not politically engage, who will have the most influence in a democracy?

1 Bernhardt, D. (2007, August 15). Library naming rights could be up for grabs; Frances Morrison looks for way to fund \$34-million expansion. *The StarPhoenix*.

2 Klein, G. (2006, March 15). Sod turned for civic election. *The StarPhoenix*.

3 Burton, R. (2006, March 11). Council set to take overpass exit. *The StarPhoenix*.

4 Burton, R. (2006, March 11). Council set to take overpass exit. *The StarPhoenix*.

5 Coolican, L. (2006, March 14). Stonegate big box centre on south side clears council. *The StarPhoenix*.