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12 September 2008

Mrs Jillian Skinner MP
Shadow Minister for the Arts
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

“Libraries – the Hub of the Community”

Dear Minister

Public Libraries NSW - Metropolitan Association (PLM) has read with great interest the NSW Liberal-Nationals Coalition ***“Libraries – the Hub of the Community”*** paper.

The paper has identified both the *opportunities* and *challenges* that the NSW public library system faces. The opportunities presented relate to the library as a neutral and welcoming hub of any community, where multi-faceted services in *education, information access, recreation and culture* are readily available.

The challenges the paper has identified include the financial sustainability of local government, and hence sustainable sources of funding for the public library system.

Currently, there are 152 Local Government Areas in NSW. Not all NSW councils and shires are financially sustainable, as identified in several reviews undertaken in 2006. In NSW at least, around 25% of Councils are financially unsustainable in the current form. Around 50% of a Council's Community Service budget is allocated to its library service. As the paper has identified, the NSW State Government's contribution to public libraries on a *per capita* basis remains the lowest in Australia for any state or territory government.

The public library funding models vary around Australia with the Northern Territory, ACT and Tasmanian Governments the principal or sole funders of public libraries. It is noted that these two territories and one state collectively represent 5% of Australia's population. In the five larger states (NSW, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia) which collectively represent 95% of Australia's population, over 85% of their public library funding comes from Local Government.

PLM agrees with the paper's observations and comments on the Parry Review which addressed the funding distribution model, and not the level of funding *per se*. With inflation at around 4% per annum, at the very least, funding increases to the public library system should cover the level of inflation.

The paper's reference to Dr Alan Bundy, AM, President of *Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA)* is very appropriate. Dr Bundy has articulated in several of his papers, the role of public libraries in providing services that staddle and support many Australia and State Government portfolios. PLM is fortunate that its Executive Director is a member of a small team known as the *FOLA Public Libraries Interest Group*, which has been pursuing the new Australian Government in 2008, with the aim to increase its level of awareness of, interest in and potential financial investment into the Australian public library system.

Australia's (and hence NSW) public libraries will need to consider alternative and enhanced business and service models given the hybrid nature (both physical and virtual) of a modern community library service.

One option under Local Government governance is greater area/regional collaboration including shared services. In this context, the suggestion *that Councils, Community Services and Library Managers, and local communities are empowered to make decisions about funding allocations that meet local needs without undue interference from the government*, is worthy of further consideration.

The paper summarises the NSW Liberal-Nationals Coalition's plans to enhance the library as the hub of the community. PLM fully supports this plan and in particular, the Liberal-Nationals Coalition belief that an increase in State Government funding is essential to enable libraries to maintain the quality and equity of public library services in NSW. At present, and as noted in the paper, the NSW State Government funding injection into public libraries is declining in real terms.

Given the hybrid nature of public libraries and the rapid increase of Web 2.0/3.0 (eg Blogs, Wikis, and Facebook) for social networking purposes, additional public library funding will be necessary for at least:

- Increased numbers and varieties of technological tools for library users to access
- Improved access to the Internet and online information services through use of new and relevant applications
- Improved infrastructure, technical and professional support for library and community services staff
- Professional development for library and community services staff who are required to assist their communities in using new technologies to access information, particularly through the internet
- Increased access to library programs and services that target students eg Homework Centres (for note: the *YourTutor* online homework service is being provided through public libraries in NSW, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory, and financially supported in most cases (not in NSW) by the respective State or Territory Libraries)
- Better information and support services through partnership with other community organisations such as schools, other libraries and the media.

PLM looks forward to an ongoing successful, cost-effective and appropriately funded public library system in NSW, which continues to enrich lives and enhance community development. We strongly welcome the support and interest of the Liberal-Nationals Coalition in this pursuit.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sonya Phillips". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Councillor Sonya Phillips
President, Public Libraries NSW - Metropolitan Association
Mayor, Baulkham Hills Shire Council.