A brief history of the SECHELT PUBLIC LIBRARY (1961 - present)

Before 1960, there were two established libraries on the Sunshine Coast in Gibsons and the adjoining mill town of Port Mellon, plus reading rooms located in the smaller centres. The Sechelt Library began as an initiative of the Sechelt Elementary School PTA. They rented the apartment above Jack Redman's Sechelt Service for $100 a year and filled it with books. Patrons joined for $2 a year. An experienced librarian volunteered to be the first custodian and taught an all-volunteer staff the requisite tasks. The Sechelt Library first opened its door to the public on September 21, 1961.

In the spring of 1966 the library was forced to move to a smaller building behind the 'Hospital Cottage.' The building proved inadequate as the roof leaked and the building needed substantial repairs. Later that year, the library group bought a plot of land on Trail Avenue for well below market value and a movement was begun to solicit donations to build a new library. The first $450 was raised at the Halfmoon Bay Country Fair and all local donations were eventually matched by the Canadian government's "Centennial Dollars" program. The new Sechelt 'Centennial' Library was dedicated in December 1967. A 1972 expansion was financed with a provincial grant as part of the celebration of BC's entry into Confederation.

The Sechelt Public Library Association was chartered in 1981 to bring the group into conformance with the provincial Public Library Act. At this time the library had a membership base of 250 patrons and a collection of about 6,000 books. We then inherited much of the collection of the recently-closed Port Mellon Library. By the spring of 1982, there were 347 patrons and a collection of more than 11,000 volumes. Two years later, the Sechelt Village Council undertook a floorspace expansion from 816 ft^2 to 1,840 ft^2 so that the library became eligible for yearly provincial operating grants.

In 1986 the Shi'shalh Indian Band achieved self-government and the resulting rearrangement of the Sunshine Coast Regional District saw the transformation of the various neighbourhoods in Area 'C' into the incorporated District of Sechelt. This brought the Wilson Creek reading room under the authority of the SPLA. That reading room eventually moved into the community centre in Davis Bay.

In 1987, our first paid employee—a clerk/typist—received $5/hour and was given use of an Apple II computer retired from the municipal offices. The SPLA hired its first certified Library Technician in 1989. The Friends of the Sechelt Library group was formed to provide fund-raising capacity for special programs and equipment. And in October of 1989, Sechelt ratepayers defeated a referendum to build a new civic complex that would have included a municipal hall, library, a recreational complex and a swimming pool.

In 1993, taxpayers were again asked to permit the District to borrow money for a new library building and voted roughly 2 to 1 to do so—but defeated (by nearly the same percentage) a referendum to build a new town hall. The town council of the day circumvented the wishes of the townspeople, selling off various municipal properties and arranging a mortgage guaranteed by the SCRD and built a second story onto the Library Building to house a new Town Hall. This action caused serious divisions within the voting populous and its repercussions are still being felt to the present day. The current library and municipal office building on Cowrie Street was opened on November 23, 1996.

Under the terms of the provincial Libraries Act, our association was grand-fathered in the ownership of the Trail Avenue property but we were forced to sell once we moved into a government-owned building. That property was sold to the Community Services Society and today houses its Childcare Referral & Resources Centre The monies realized from the sale were used to furnish the new Cowrie Street premises.

By 1998 the library had 5,500 patrons and a collection of almost 27,000 items including talking books, compact discs and videos. We nearly doubled these figures during the next ten years. We now maintain a collection of more than 50,000 items for roughly 10,000 registered patrons. During 2010, a quarter of a million items were borrowed during 120,000 patron visits (about 385 visits per day). There were 12,500 in-house computer sessions and our librarians answered more than 10,000 information inquiries. All our traffic figures increased about +20% during 2011.

The Sechelt Public Library features an RFID materials handling system that includes a self-serve checkout station and an inventory wand; we provide various ebook readers on loan and free access to the materials to fill them; an industrial-strength wireless hub on the premises permits patrons to access the internet through their own personal laptop computers and tablets.

Our service area now officially includes roughly 16,000 residents—more than half the population of the Coast. Halfmoon Bay (SCRD Area B) and the Sechelt Indian Government District remain an integral part of our system. The Pender Harbour Reading Room is now linked to the Sechelt catalog and we provide delivery and pick-up services for patrons living in SCRD Area A. We support the Davis Bay Reading Room and share the support (with SCRD Area D and the Gibsons Library) of the Roberts Creek Reading Room. We have provided workspace and played host to the Sechelt Community Archives for many years.

We continue to be one of the most economically challenged libraries in BC—one of the busiest libraries per capita, yet operating with one of the tightest budgets. Sechelt ranks 67 out of 71 provincial libraries with respect to dollar support per items lent. According to 2012 BC Public Libraries Statistics, the provincial average for per capita funding by local governments was $41.76. Gibsons received $43.30 because of a special function guaranteeing support from the mill at Port Mellon. Sechelt received $30.53—less than 75% of the provincial average.

Over the past few years the SPLA board in conjunction with our previous chief librarian and our SCRD liaison (who is also chair of the SCRD) have made a vigorous effort to change the thinking about library funding. We are on the verge of signing a service agreement that involves all our local funding partners that will provide us with a series of raises of 6% per year over the next 5 years. This will raise us to about 90% of the BC provincial per capita average by 2018. As well, it provides us with a guaranteed funding formula upon which to base our budgeting:

2012 (base)	2013 (special)	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
$469,631	$504,558	$497,809	$527,677	$559,338	$592,898	$628,472

At the time of its opening, the library was asked to sign a 'lease' agreement by the District. This 'lease' was fashioned from the boilerplate text of a standard commercial contract (inappropriate to the library's circumstances) and had the library paying an exorbitant 'rent' ($135,000 annually) to its main funder. In fact, this was simply an accounting function that the District (as landlord) used to ensure that the various SCRD entities contributed to the mortgage and the upkeep of the property. Throughout the years this arrangement has been a major irritant in the relationships between all parties. As well it skewed the public view of the library budget, adding and then immediately subtracting from our totals roughly 20% of our overall budget—money the library never saw.

We have now negotiated a memorandum of understanding with the DoS that repositions both parties with regard to our shared responsibilities for the building. The document begins with an acknowledgment that the building was purpose-built for use as a library and puts to rest all the intrusive legaleze that obscured the original 'lease.' It also puts to rest the 'rent' issue which has effectively been removed from our budget process. The last item in the document reaffirms our commitment to work together on a plan to expand the library premises from our current 5,600 ft^2 (effective space) to something more viable, considering our traffic levels.

The SPLA board maintains a cordial and collegial relationship with our unionized staff and volunteers. The independent Friends of the Library now number about 30 active members and they have been having great success running more than a dozen sales per year of quality books donated by the community. We also are served by the Sechelt Public Library Foundation that oversees the investing of larger gifts (estate bequests, etc.) that will eventually be used to benefit the library. All of this is made possible by an extraordinary community that loves its library...

Meet you @ the Library!