



VIA EMAIL: [board@vpl.ca](mailto:board@vpl.ca)

June 21, 2019

Vancouver Public Library  
350 West Georgia Street  
Vancouver BC, V6B 6B1

Attn: Vancouver Public Library Board

Dear Board Members,

**RE: Public Meeting Rooms & Facilities Use Policy**

---

I am writing on behalf of the BC Civil Liberties Association (“BCCLA”) to provide our strong support for VPL’s proposed Public Meeting Rooms & Facilities Use Policy (“the Policy”). We have reviewed your May 27, 2019 discussion draft document and we congratulate VPL on situating a strong and principled commitment to intellectual freedom and freedom of expression within the library’s shared values of social inclusion, equity and diversity.

The BCCLA is a staunch supporter of libraries’ unique and essential mission and mandate within a free and democratic society to facilitate access to the broadest possible range of ideas. It is inevitable that the library will find itself enmeshed in ideological controversies, and demands that certain books or materials be removed from the shelves are a consistent and unavoidable feature of the library fulfilling its mandate.

There is of course nothing ‘new’ about the library’s commitment to expressive freedom. What is new, arguably, is how fraught this terrain has become.

Many commentators have observed an increased public popularization on a range of issues, about which people feel very passionately. The tactic of “no-platforming” has become commonplace as groups seek to silence their ideological opponents. Groups calling for “no-platforming” often attack even people and institutions who may agree with their substantive positions, but who will not support silencing strategies. This typically generates very public, sometimes extremely vituperative social media activity, ranging from the merely unpleasant to the criminally threatening.

The library, with its critically important access to public meeting space, has found itself in the cross-hairs of all of these developments. We would like to acknowledge that the library and its staff and supporters have, and will continue to have, very difficult conversations in relation to the controversies that come to the library by way of room bookings and speakers.

You will be aware that some libraries faced with these challenges have unfortunately changed their room booking policy to limit access. Such a policy shift is understandable, but misguided and ultimately, counterproductive. In our view, libraries that set themselves up as adjudicators of appropriate speech not only undermine library values, but also invite deeper involvement in public controversy and complaint as essentially “sanctioning” speakers.

It is imperative that the library draw a clear demarcation between what it programs and what it does not program. The Policy gets this exactly right. The library’s own programming is the appropriate place for the library to take sides: critically the ‘side’ of inclusion, diversity and equity. The public meeting room policy is where the library is content neutral, as the provider of public space where anyone is free to exercise their

constitutionally protected rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association. There are many members of the public that do not currently understand this crucial difference. The remedy for that is, of course, public education and outreach.

The BCCLA congratulates VPL on the Policy. We are very aware that the defense of intellectual freedom requires courage in the current climate. We are also aware of how vigorously the library has championed social inclusion and the extent of the work that you are engaged in to make meaningful and manifest all of the library's values.

We thank you.

Very sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Vonn", with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Micheal Vonn,  
Policy Director