

Libraries will be open Sundays beginning Oct. 28

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SUSAN O'NEILL

Sunday service will be restored Oct. 28 at the 16 libraries affected by the city's cost-containment measures after an arbitrator ruled the closures violated the union's collective agreement.

The closures, which took effect in mid-September, were intended to continue for the remainder of 2007 and would have saved \$400,000.

But the Toronto Civic Employees Union (CUPE Local 416) is seeking payment for the wages and benefits lost by workers due to the Sunday closures, which means the cost-cutting measure likely won't result in any savings for the city.

"It is a blow," budget chief and Ward 33 (Don Valley East) Councillor Shelley Carroll said Tuesday. "The loss of savings creates, yet again, like the community centres, a huge amount of pressure on the 2008 budget. As you know those reductions were to build enough surplus to fill the budget gap in 2008. So that gap is now larger."

Toronto library board officials were notified last Thursday the union had won a grievance with regard to the service reduction.

The union argued the service cuts, approved by the board at a special July 25 meeting, violated the collective agreement.

Ward 43 (Scarborough East) Councillor Paul Ainslie, who serves on the library board, said the situation illustrates how much control unions have at city hall.

"It was our opinion on the library board that Sundays were considered overtime and that we could close libraries," he said. "They grieve it and the arbitrator agrees with the unions. ... Who's running the city, the unions or your appointed and elected officials on agencies, boards and commissions?"

Ainslie continued saying, "I thought I was helping to run the city. ... This morning I feel like the unions are running the city."

Carroll said she is relieved that Sunday service will be restored across the city.

"No one enjoyed making that reduction in the first place," she told reporters, noting that finance staff are still trying to determine what, if any, cost savings were realized.

"That is the heartbreak here. We acted with a heavy heart, but with legal advice and the arbitrator doesn't agree with that legal advice," she said. "That's the thing that is most heartbreaking for me that there's no cost savings, but there was heartache for every resident who marches up the steps to the library."

Carroll noted that the Fairview Mall branch in North York, one of those affected by the closures, is among the busiest in the city.

"It broke my heart and not to have realized the savings is a tragedy," she said.

Mayor David Miller said he found the arbitrator's decision "quite curious."

Miller said the arbitrator recognized that it is within the library board's power to set Sundays as voluntary.

But the arbitrator found that once the board has decided to open on Sundays, it can't change its mind.

"I think the library management and the board have the ability to manage and I find the decision a very, very surprising one," Miller said. "The city has been unionized for well over 100 years and you have to abide by collective agreements where they exist. I'm advised by the library board that they had strong legal advice supporting its interpretation, the arbitrator disagreed."