

## **Kitchener should expand its library**

THE RECORD

There is no better way for a city to spend public money than to invest in public libraries. In this electronic age where information bursts through wires at the speed of light, the public library is the great equalizer, the great conveyor of literacy, culture, knowledge and thought to everyone -- regardless of who they are, where they live or how rich they may be.

With this in mind, Kitchener's political leaders should not hesitate to endorse an expansion of the city's main library when they debate the matter next month. The biggest challenge is knowing which plan is best -- one costing \$26 million, one that would take \$39 million to complete or the \$51-million, deluxe version.

To answer this, the politicians at city hall should keep in mind the two parts to a public library. One is the library building itself. The other is the public that is being served and that pays the bills.

This newspaper fervently believes that this is a time for city council and the people of Kitchener to dream big and in colour. This is the moment for them to be ambitious and see with the eyes of visionaries. They should know that a state-of-the-art, 21st century library can make Kitchener an even greater player in the 21st century world where the rapid sharing of new information is more important than ever.

An enlarged main library branch can and should be this kind of world-class information centre. Of course it needs an expansive, up-to-date collection of books of all kinds. But it should also offer access to public computers with Internet access for the substantial part of the community that lacks this vital information source.

It should be a first-rate research centre. It should employ librarians trained to help the public get the information they need as consumers, as taxpayers, as voters, as learners and as citizens, whether that information is on a library shelf or a computer screen.

It should be able to offer services to new Canadians, to immigrants whose first language is not English. It should promote literacy -- of computers as well as books. And it should be a link between the community and Waterloo Region's educational and knowledge institutions -- its public school system, its universities and college, its Centre for International Governance Innovation and the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics.

Beyond this, let the expanded library be an architectural marvel, something that preserves the charm of the current structure that has served the city for nearly 50 years while adding something striking, new and beautiful to the Kitchener core.

All this is within the city's grasp. But before council can reach for it, the politicians need to know what the public thinks. Less than two years ago, the dream of building an entirely new library in Kitchener was shattered by the roar of citizen opposition. Rightly or wrongly, many taxpayers concluded the new library was being proposed because the city could find no other use for land it had purchased in the core.

This time, the city must ensure that all options are laid out before the public and that the public has the time and opportunity to make its wishes known. Some citizens might prefer a more modest expansion of the main branch followed up by a greater investment in the city's excellent but less costly community branches. Well, they should be listened to.

City council should be chastened, both by what happened the last time it tried to improve the public library system and by the current public concern over city hall's purchase of part of the old BF Goodrich plant for nearly twice what a developer paid for it. Now is the time for the city to talk to the people. Determine what they need and want in a library. Then demonstrate that the option city council chooses will best meet this need. The coming month will offer this city council an opportunity to do something great if it can be bold as well as wise. It should seize its chance.