

Build a library city can be proud of

THE RECORD

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After years of discussion, even dithering, Kitchener city council has voted to spend almost \$36 million to expand and renovate its main library. This decision is welcome.

In the past, this newspaper urged the city to spend what was needed and build a new, signature main library, one that the city would be proud of. But a proposal to build a \$60-million new library on city-owned land in the neglected downtown Centre Block ran into vociferous citizen opposition, and that plan foundered.

Instead, after a few months' further study, the council mulled three options: renovate the existing building for about \$32 million, renovate and add some 30,000 square feet for about \$40 million, or renovate and add 54,400 square feet for about \$60 million. Council chose the middle road.

Had Kitchener opted for the Cadillac version of a new library, this paper would not have automatically found fault. A city that happily agreed to spend \$48 million on a new home for its snowplows and dump trucks should certainly give strong consideration to invest \$60 million in a first-class main library.

But other realities intrude: the very day council approved the library expansion, economies around the world took a beating as the ongoing debt crisis in the United States unfolds. Kitchener is bound to feel the effects of a faltering economy, dependent as it is on a traditional industrial base. To expect council to choose the Cadillac option in such a climate, especially when much of the opposition around the earlier Centre Block proposal centred around its high cost, was not realistic.

But having opted for a more modest but still significant improvement to its main library, the city should stand behind the project wholeheartedly.

The city should make the expanded, renovated library an attractive, inviting space. In the so-called knowledge economy, it's vital to invest in the material, and the tools such as computers, to build that knowledge.

The library is not just a readily available, free source of information; it is a conduit for culture, a key player in the battle against illiteracy, a way for job seekers to hone their skills, for parents to spark a love of reading in their young children, for new immigrants to connect to their adopted home.

In the discussions about the improvements to the library, some councillors made unhappy noises about hitting up library users for \$20 donations, about the need to spend on branches in the suburbs as well as on the main branch, about whether some savings could be gleaned by cost-cutting.

The library is an essential service in a modern society, and its expansion -- long overdue in a structure built to serve a population of about 76,000 -- should not be saddled with a penny-pinching, nickel-and-dime approach.

Money should not be stinted on design. It is not enough to simply take an aging building, tack on a workmanlike addition, and stuff it with as many books and computers as the budget will allow. The addition must be an inviting, comfortable, usable space.

Simply put, build the library the city needs and deserves, within a reasonable budget.