

No new library - so now what?

Kitchener Public Library officials hope residents will back proposal to expand existing main branch

TERRY PENDER
RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER

In the coming months city councillors will be asked to support the renovation and expansion of the Kitchener Public Library's main branch on Queen Street North.

"There is a lot of potential to renovate and expand the existing site," Sonia Lewis, the library system's chief executive officer, said in an interview.

"We are really hopeful the public will find the plan to stay on this site appealing," Lewis said.

City councillors abruptly killed an earlier proposal to build a new central library on Centre Block, which is bounded by King, Young, Duke and Ontario streets.

Councillors withdrew their support for the project following an outcry from some citizens opposed to the increasing costs. As library administrators and board members prepare to go public with their new plans, they are all too aware of the need to keep public opinion on their side.

"We really want to ensure we have the community's support when we take things forward," Lewis said.

"We want to be successful," Lewis added.

The project has been off the public radar for the past 18 months.

Library officials have worked on the plans, which will likely feature adding new space to the back of the existing building.

"Hopefully, in the next couple of months, we will come forward to council with some recommendations," Dan Carli, the library board chair, said.

"What we looked at is basically -- is it possible to enhance and expand the current site? That was the scope of our study," Carli said.

In May 2005, city councillors supported the move to build a new main library on Centre Block. Councillors earmarked \$32.5 million for the project.

During the following 14 months the estimated cost of a new central library on that site, with new furnishings and an underground-parking garage, increased to upwards of \$65 million.

City councillors voted to kill the project in July 2006 after a small, but vocal group of citizens opposed it.

The vote to kill the project on Centre Block occurred about four months before the 2006 municipal elections. The issue was not debated in any significant way during those elections.

"Certainly I believe there is a need for a new central library," Coun. Berry Vrbanovic said in an interview.

He is one of two city councillors sitting on the library board. The other one is Coun. Kelly Galloway.

"You can't keep growing as a community without seeing some revitalization of this facility to meet our needs," Vrbanovic said.

He said the \$32.5 million city councillors earmarked for the project still stands.

In addition to the main branch on Queen Street, the Kitchener Public Library operates four other branches--Grand River-Stanley Park, Forest Heights, Pioneer Park and Country Hills. A fifth branch for the rapidly growing southwest corner of the Kitchener is part of the city's 10-year spending plans.

tpender@therecord.com

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