

KPL Chief Executive Officer Sonia Lewis says with the demands of a growing city and the current state of the main branch, it's a matter of ...

“Catch up and keep up”

LAURA JOHNSTON

When the Kitchener Public Library's Main branch was built in 1962 it was designed to serve a population of 73,000. In recent years, however, the main branch has been struggling to keep up with the demands of a growing, sophisticated community of over 200,000.

KPL Chief Executive Officer Sonia Lewis believes that over the years the building has become an icon and the community feels strongly about keeping the main branch in its neighbourhood.

“There certainly is a strong sense of ownership to this building, and this location,” said Lewis.

And for the KPL Board and staff it's that connection the com-

munity feels with the main branch that will play a key role in the future of the library.

At the Centre Block Citizen Forum in 2006, that sense of ownership was further vocalized. The Forum was held to solicit public input on the development of Centre Block and relocating the KPL branch to downtown Kitchener. From the public feedback, the message was clear: the KPL main branch should stay at its Queen Street location. The community also expressed support for an expanded and improved main library.

“There is no doubt that the library plays an important role in this community,” Lewis said.

Each day, an estimated 1,000 visitors come to the main branch. In a month, over 5,000 computer

reservations are made and the KPL website has over 50,000 hits. Lewis believes that as the city continues to grow and the demands on the library increase, the lack of space and limited amenities of the main branch will impact the service throughout the entire library system.

“With the significant growth (of the city) it's time for us to, first of all, catch up – and then to keep up,” she said.

To that end, the KPL Board and library staff have been developing options for the building.

She explained the three proposals for the Queen Street location.

“Our ideal option is to add 50,000 square feet to the existing building. Option two sees an additional 30,000 square feet added and option three is a plan just to renovate our current space.”

“We know the library will always play an important role in this community. The library changes and adapts to things like the internet, new technologies and the way the community uses the facility. We must continue to evolve as we have been doing.”

“Libraries have become gathering places. We are a ‘community living room’ – a meeting place, a social, communal space.”

Lewis added that in the current building, it's a challenge to be both the traditional quiet study place and the social community space.

“Quiet space is still a necessity. We have a variety of needs to balance. Our primary objective is to create an environment suitable for all ages, all needs,” Lewis noted.

“Teens are a significant demographic we want to accommodate with their own lounging space that appeals to their tastes. In some of our children's programs, there is a disconnect. A family will attend an event in the auditorium and not stop to visit the children's area to linger a bit longer. We're hoping to create spaces where people will linger,” she said.

Library staff have been thorough in assessing the role of the



Accessibility, space and storage are a few of the challenges at the main branch of the Kitchener Public Library.

main branch and envision a library that is a ‘desired destination; a third place’. Logistically, the current building can't serve those future needs.

“We've maintained this building, upgraded it and modernized it as much as we can, within our power,” Lewis said. “But, given the age of the building, things like the simple need to run computer cables has been a challenge to the technological infrastructure of the facility.”

The library acknowledges that the internet and technology have changed the way it does business. Lewis points out that the internet has made the library more efficient and more accessible. She noted that now, through the internet, anyone can access KPL resources by logging on to the library's website.

“We continue to evolve while we maintain our role as the hub for the city's library system. Let's not forget that, while we are the central library, we are also a community library serving our downtown residents. And even that's changing. We'll need to be a resource for young families, for the young professionals who move into the lofts in the downtown core, our seniors who enjoy visiting the branch, and, potentially the university students studying at the new downtown campuses,” Lewis said.

Two dates in April have been set for information sharing with the community on the options for expanding and renovating the main branch at 85 Queen Street North. Public meetings are on

April 15th at 4pm and April 23rd at 7pm at the library or visit www.kpl.org to post your feedback. Plans will be on display on the website and at all KPL branches.

“Through the Open Houses, we will be able to share the three options, describe the differences and present the conceptual drawings of the new floor plans for each option. We will be able to give the public the opportunity to visualize the flow of the proposed building,” she said.

Lewis added that the cost estimates of each option will also be available by then.

“We're looking forward to gathering reactions and feedback, as well as having the opportunity to demonstrate just what's possible for this branch,” she added.

“I remember libraries as quiet, solitary places. Today, libraries are so much more. Certainly, the role (of the main branch of the KPL) is as the hub for the integrated network of library locations throughout the city, but we are also a resource destination and an open, safe, public place for people to connect,” Lewis said.

After the April public meetings, the library board will present a summary report to the Finance and Corporate Services Committee in early May. At that point, its report can be approved or they can be asked to do more investigative work.

For more information and the opportunity to provide input visit www.kpl.org and click on the ‘Building on Success’ button on the home page.

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