

A great library should be city's top priority

THE RECORD

It's ironic and a little odd that after voting to pay \$48 million for a new public works yard, Kitchener council is suddenly worried it can't afford a similar amount for the main library.

Frugality is usually a virtue in politicians. In this case, however, the city's approach to spending suggests its priorities are out of whack and need adjustment.

Building a better library for the citizens of Kitchener is arguably the best and most important thing this assortment of politicians can do in this term of office. We're in the information age.

Knowledge is power and wealth. The economy of Kitchener, and Waterloo Region, is in transition. And as traditional manufacturing jobs are being lost and shipped offshore, new jobs are opening up all the time in the high-tech sector.

Life in the 21st century will be good, for workers who are educated and adaptable, and for citizens who are informed. The 21st century library is therefore an essential building block for the modern economy and the modern community. Knowing this, Kitchener council should be trying to create the best main branch library for the public that it possibly can. An investment in this library is an investment in the people and their future.

It's understandable, and it's fitting, that councillors are concerned about what all this will cost. But they should remember that similar cost concerns were no roadblock to the new public works yard now being prepared in the south end of the city. We don't recall quite the same kind of agonizing over affordability and economy when the new yard was approved last year.

Sure, that yard will make life better for city staff. In time, and despite its hefty price tag, it might even prove a more economic way of maintaining the city's equipment. However, we doubt that anyone can or would try to make the case that the citizens of Kitchener need this public works yard -- essentially a glorified garage and parking lot -- more than they need a renovated and expanded main library.

So where does this leave us? Well, building that grand public works yard doesn't mean the city is compelled to spend a similar amount on its library. But the question remains: If this municipal government can find the cash to spend on housing snowplows, why can't it find the cash to spend on housing the information that has become so essential to living in the modern age?

To its credit, council agrees it should spend at least \$32.5 million to renovate the main branch. And it's assigned city staff to explore how the city could also afford various library expansion options which could ring in at as much as \$50.4 million.

Those are sensible first steps. City hall should get a handle on what the people of Kitchener want. It should resist overbuilding. But it should not be intimidated by the cost of providing to the community what it truly needs. The main library branch matters more to the city than the public works yard. Council's ultimate decision should reflect this.

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