

Library building should make a bold statement

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Before they discuss the future of the Kitchener Public Library again, the city's councillors should borrow a few books about municipal libraries and magnificent buildings.

At present, the councillors have no vision to guide them as they consider expanding the library headquarters. This is inexcusable.

The previous council stumbled badly on the library headquarters. It wanted to build a new library on the vacant centre block near city hall -- not because the location was ideal for a library, but because council spent \$9.1 million assembling the land. Council felt it had to put something on the block.

But just before the last election, Mayor Carl Zehr realized the residents of Kitchener didn't want their library to be treated like land fill, something to be dumped on an empty lot. Wisely, council dropped that plan.

Now council is on the verge of stumbling again. It doesn't seem to know how it should respond to the three options the library board presented to it: renovate the main library for \$25.7 million, add 30,000 square feet to the renovation for \$38 million, or add 54,000 square feet for \$50.4 million.

The council is treating this renovation as if it were rebuilding a shed. Does it want a big shed or a medium-size shed, or does it just want a new roof over the old shed?

Consider what Coun. Kelly Galloway said. Referring to the amount council had previously set aside for a new library, she said, "The \$32.5 million is all I want to allocate to the library." Galloway, a member of the library board, is focused on the budget, not on a vision of what \$32.5 million -- or less -- can do for the library and the city.

Alas, this council has given the impression it would be more comfortable discussing a shed than a library. This is the council that happily spent \$48 million for a new public works yard, a place to look after trucks.

The councillors haven't yet realized that a library, when properly planned, is at least as important as a public works yard. Indeed, it is more important.

Kitchener's main library should be the intellectual centre of the city. It should be a cherished asset, an indispensable information centre.

The building should make a bold statement that Kitchener is part of the information age in which we are living. Kitchener and Waterloo are among the high-tech capitals of the world.

Like a good book cover, the new library building should draw readers into it and make them feel that the words in the interior will enchant them. Going to the library should be an adventure; it should be more than driving to a grocery store to pick up milk. The library expansion should be built not just with bricks and mortar but with pride.

If the councillors want to seek inspiration, they should visit the Toronto Reference Library near the intersection of Yonge and Bloor streets. Designed by Raymond Moriyama, the library is a magnificent building. The atrium makes the building seem spacious, belying the fact that the library contains about 4.5 million items.

Furthermore, if the councillors would like to consider how an expansion can stimulate interest, they need look no further than the addition built at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Known as the Crystal, the addition makes the boldest of statements about how the modern can blend with the old.

Kitchener desperately needs someone on council to provide leadership in the library debate, someone who loves books, likes fine buildings and understands the opportunity that a chance to renovate the library gives the city.

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