

Kitchener will pay \$35.8M for library plan

Terry Pender
RECORD STAFF

Councillors voted yesterday to spend \$35.8 million to renovate and expand the Kitchener Public Library on Queen Street.

The decision comes after years of talk about whether to expand or build anew.

"We are excited about council's decision," Dan Carli, chair of the library board, said in an interview after the finance committee voted for expansion plan.

Compromise was the order of the day. The library drastically scaled back its hopes of four years ago for a \$60-million building next to City Hall.

Councillors nixed that idea just months before the 2006 municipal elections after an outcry over the cost.

After more study, the library board came in with three new options: renovate the main branch for about \$32 million, renovate and add about 30,000 square feet for \$39.8 million, or renovate and add 54,400 square feet for about \$60 million.

The library board recommended the second option. It hopes to raise \$4 million on its own, reducing the cost to taxpayers to about \$35.8 million.

With a construction start in 2010, the expanded library could open in 2013.

There was a lot of support among councillors for the plan.

"I'm glad we are moving forward," Coun. Geoff Lorentz said.

"It's been 15 years, maybe 20 years, we have been talking about this," Coun. John Gazzola said.

"It is time to move on with it."

The library building will grow by 30 per cent and collections by 20 per cent.

The number of public computers will increase by 50 per cent.

The money for the expansion will come from several sources:

\$32.5 million from an economic development fund. Councillors earmarked this money for a new central library years ago.

\$4 million from a fundraising campaign by the library board.

\$1.1 million by deferring other library projects.

\$528,000 from development charges -- fees that developers must pay before constructing new buildings.

\$1.6 million by increasing taxes two years before more operating funds are actually needed for the bigger central library.

Some cost-cutting may be possible when the expanded library is designed, Sonia Lewis, the library's chief executive officer, said in an interview.

"We could save a million dollars by reducing the size of the addition from 30,000 to 25,000 square feet," she said.

The Kitchener Public Library operates four branches, plus the central library.

Mayor Carl Zehr strongly endorsed the expansion plan but wasn't crazy about a fundraising campaign to help pay for the project. He suggested if regular users of the library each donated \$20, the board would have its \$4 million.

"I think this is a way of getting the public involved," Zehr said. "Those who are going to use the facilities now and in the future, I think, will be quite willing to donate a \$5 bill a \$10 bill or a \$20 occasionally as they come through the library."

Support for the library plan wasn't unanimous. Coun. Kelly Galloway, who sits on the library board, opposed spending any more than the \$32.5 million earmarked for expansion years ago. The rest should be spent on the branch system, she said.

"We met with a number of community leaders, and it was said the library of the future is probably going to be smaller satellite centres, where people can gather for various reasons," Galloway said.

But Coun. Berry Vrbanovic was pleased the library won most councillors' support.

"I think the library board really struggled with finding the right balance in terms of the right project to bring to council for approval," Vrbanovic said.

The library board will now hire architects to produce a detailed design. The final design must be approved by city councillors.

tpender@therecord.com