

City approves \$18.4M core parking project

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Councillors yesterday approved building an \$18.4-million underground parking garage behind the main branch of the Kitchener Public Library on Queen Street.

Mayor Carl Zehr called the underground garage a brilliant solution to parking needs, since it would include financial contributions from the city, the region and the Ontario government.

"It is a win, win, win," Zehr said at a finance committee meeting.

The provincial government will provide \$7 million for the garage because it wants 200 spaces for employees at the new provincial courthouse. The courthouse, to be built on the nearby block bounded by Weber, Scott, Duke and Frederick streets, will open in 2012.

The Region of Waterloo is expected to provide \$4.5 million for the garage because it wants 100 spaces. The region plans to take over the existing courthouse on Frederick Street for office space.

The Kitchener Public Library and the City of Kitchener would provide the rest, about \$7 million.

The library, which plans a major expansion, wants 112 spaces in the underground garage. The expansion should be finished in 2013. The project has been stalled because of a lack of parking spaces, Sonia Lewis, the library's chief executive officer, said in a presentation.

"At the end of the day, nobody likes spending money on parking lots," said Coun. Berry Vrbanovic, who chairs the finance committee. "It's not sexy, but the reality is it's a necessity."

The total cost would increase to about \$20.4 million when fees for architects, engineers, new sidewalks, lighting, parking equipment, public art and project management are included.

Coun. John Gazzola was the only councillor present to vote against the project.

Instead of subsidizing parking lots with tax dollars, Gazzola said, the city should establish a parking authority that would generate enough money from fees to pay for parking operations.

"Bottom line, the users should pay," he said. "On one side of our mouth we talk about green-green-green and getting people out of their cars and yet we make it easy for people to use our parking."

But parking fees are not high enough in the city now to generate enough money to pay for parking operations, Zehr said. A special parking authority would still require tax dollars, he said.

"So we can't go down that path at the present time," Zehr said.

Regional councillors are scheduled to consider the parking project at a committee meeting today.

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