

In the digital age, public libraries are more relevant than ever

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I spent a lot of time in public libraries when I was younger. There were many late nights in the John Robarts stacks at the University of Toronto. As a journalist, I used libraries for research. When my children were younger, we would go to look for books, or to attend events.

But it has been a while since I visited my local library. So on a sunny day, I wandered over to the Kitchener Public Library.

I signed up for a free library card. The woman who served me was friendly and helpful. If I had taken my computer with me, I could have used the free wireless network.

I checked out three travel books, and thought of other books to check out on my return.

There was a vitality to the place that had me thinking that public libraries are still important. Groups of children were busy with activities. A steady flow of people used the computers.

Soon after, our editorial board met with Kitchener Public Library staff to review their expansion program, and discuss how the library is transforming in the 21st century.

It appears I'm not the only one rediscovering this great institution during the recession. Sonia Lewis, chief executive officer at the Kitchener Public Library, says that in the first three months of this year the number of all items circulated, including books, CDs and DVDs, has increased by more than eight per cent over last year.

Program attendance is up almost two per cent.

There has been a 39-per-cent increase in the use of electronic resources, such as public computers and databases.

Sonia and her staff are eagerly awaiting the selection of an architect for the 25,000-square-foot addition to the central library on Queen Street North.

The current building, 82,000 square feet, dates back to 1962 and will be renovated.

Sonia says they're looking for a design to open up the space and transform the library from a storehouse of information to a community centre. "We're trying to establish a community living room," she says.

The history of supporting literacy and lifelong learning has not changed, but the library wants to encourage more interactions. For example, staff are encouraged to leave their desks and approach people, offering assistance and guidance.

Dale Dyce, co-ordinator of marketing and communications, points to new features like real-time online chat references, the possible extension of hours when the auditorium is available, and popular free Sunday movies in the 200-seat theatre.

Construction is more than a year away, but staff are already planning for a vibrant environment.

This will reflect the changes seen since the library opened its doors in 1884 as a reading room in the Berlin Town Hall.

The 125th anniversary this year coincides unfortunately with a gruelling recession.

But it seems some people may be turning to public libraries even more in hard times. This may be helpful when the library launches a fundraising campaign for its expansion in the coming months.

"We are continually challenged with the question, 'are public libraries still relevant in this digital age?' I think we have even more relevance," says Sonia.

"The problems with the recession may be driving more people through the doors, but it's much more than that. In a digital age, people still need spaces where they can socialize."

Sonia hopes the ongoing transformation of the library will make it a hub of activity for many more years.

With all the plans and ideas for an even better library system, I'm betting I won't be the only one who plans to spend more time at my local public library.