

Kitchener civic district unveils master plan

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The parking lot where Sonia Lewis is standing could one day be part of a bustling urban space with cafes, benches, pedestrian walkways, parks, squares, an amphitheatre -- a district for the arts.

Lewis, the chief executive officer of the Kitchener Public Library, worked with the heads of the Centre in the Square, the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery and the Registry Theatre to produce The Civic District Master Plan.

The district, which is roughly bordered by Weber, Queen, Ellen and Frederick streets is home to four of the city's most important cultural institutions.

But the spaces between those buildings, with the exception of a small park featuring a memorial to firefighters, are filled with parked cars during the day and empty stretches of asphalt over night.

Lewis and the leaders of the other cultural institutions want to see this area transformed into a district showcasing public art exhibitions, theatre and music.

There's room for a university campus, walkways connecting the library to the Centre in the Square and lush landscaping.

If the Civic District Master Plan ever gets implemented it will bring more residents downtown and help lure creative class workers to the area with a cutting edge arts district, Lewis said.

"The idea is creating attractive public spaces, making that district less about parking and more about open spaces."

Late next summer, construction will begin on a 400-space underground parking garage. It will be located behind the main library. Some of the surface parking will disappear and a public square will be built. Shortly after that, work begins on a 25,000-square-foot addition to the main library and a complete renovation of the existing building.

When city councillors voted Monday night to adopt the plan, they acknowledged there is no money available to start work. Mayor Carl Zehr likened the Civic District Master Plan to the preliminary work more than three decades ago that led to the creation of Centre in the Square.

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