

An old library with a bright, modern skin

Public gets its first look at conceptual plans for \$40-million renovation to main branch

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KITCHENER — Once the Kitchener Public Library's main branch emerges from a \$40-million transformation in three years, you may hardly recognize it.

Covered in a transparent skin of long glass panels that will actually glow at night, it will be far cry from the brick and stone block that was erected on the same spot along Queen Street in 1962. It will feature a green roof above the entrance to a 412-space underground parking garage, a "secret garden" reading courtyard, and a central "grand hall" that will shoot up through the second floor.

Many at the first public unveiling of the project's conceptual plans applauded the bigger, brighter, more open concept design. But at least one man, local historian Rych Mills, wasn't cheering.

"Kitchener has a reputation that we tear down everything," he said, urging the Toronto firm behind the project to scale back its design. "It's a striking new building, but I think it disguises the old one too much. I think we have a chance here to save more of it."

The library has gone through several renovations in its 47 years, including one most recently in 1994, but this would be the main branch's most ambitious and extensive makeover yet. The construction would add 33,000 square feet of space, including a greatly expanded children's section.

The work would also demolish a former addition built at the back of the branch, fix the decaying roof, improve energy efficiency and bring the whole structure up to the latest standards for disability access.

New parents Tyler and Dawn Lessard heaped praise on the "clean" and "fresh" design, especially plans to make the expanded children's library a central fixture on the ground floor. They think it's a nice blend of the old building and more modern styles.

"I think it's a pretty good middle-of-the-road approach," Dawn said, adding that the renovated library could bring new vibrancy to the city's core. "I think more young families will gravitate to downtown because of that."

City hall has already approved the \$40-million expansion — about four times the library's total spending last year, including salaries and books.



Dale Dyce, a coordinator with the Kitchener Public Library, stands beside architectural drawings on display at a public open house Tuesday at the main branch.

Photograph by Rick Koza

The library hopes to raise \$4 million of that through a fundraising campaign.

That price tag is still significantly less, though, than the \$60 million proposed earlier this decade to build a brand new main branch on the city-owned Centre Block lands. Council balked at spending that amount, and eventually killed the project in 2006 in the face of growing public opposition.

Some, like Vernon Bowman, wanted to know why the library was so “adamant” it needed a new building only a few years ago, when a renovation project like this could have met its needs.

Library chief executive Sonia Lewis said, “we’re dealing with a renovation now and not a new building,” adding, “and we’re happy with that.”

Toronto’s Levitt Goodman Architects is working on the library expansion — the same firm that designed the Waterloo Region Children’s Museum on King Street. Work on the library should begin late next summer and finish by 2013.

A second open house on the expansion plans is planned for 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. this Saturday, Nov. 7 in the Kitchener Market, at 300 King St. E.

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