

Calgary's new Central Library
IN THE NEWS

Building new library a chance for big ideas

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City council recently approved an allocation of some \$40 million toward construction of a new downtown central library facility. And there has been speculation as to what location might be determined as being most suitable. The East Village has been suggested as one possibility.

Another contender is thought to be the Louise Crossing site (at 4th Avenue and 9th Street S.W.) adjacent to the Louise Bridge over the Bow. It's a great site from the perspective of accessibility. Within the downtown core, it's within easy walking distance to the LRT, right on the bank of the river and just over the bridge is the Kensington area. It also has great visibility and there's potential for a significant presence on the downtown skyline. And, more importantly, with enough physical area for any new building, there can be space to properly frame and enhance the facility's capability to serve as one of the images and icons of the city.

A public library carries a lot of historically symbolic associations. It's a collection and repository of knowledge, a focus for arts, science and cultural diversity and a gathering place.

A new central library offers the potential of being a special place that is recognized within the community as an elemental component of city life and vitality. And the Louise Crossing site seems to offer the necessary characteristics to support that potential.

But one other site has also been the subject of considerable speculation and that site is exactly where the existing main library building is now. The present main library occupies the west end of the city block located just north of the old City Hall.

The court facilities that occupy the north portion of the block are slated for demolition, to make way for expansion of Bow Valley College. In that process, there has also been some consideration for trading part of the college's lands with city lands on the same block, which would result in an expanded site for the potential new library building. This would be a great idea if a new library is going to be erected on the block as it would provide additional space to achieve an appropriate design.

And there are plenty of good reasons to re-use that site for a new library. It's close to City Hall, LRT stations and Bow Valley College, kitty corner from Olympic Plaza and within two blocks of the potential urban campus site being considered within the East Village. So perhaps the potential of creating a truly wonderful new facility might also suggest that the time has come for a "big idea." And that's dealing with the surface LRT line running through the downtown. Needless to say, it will never be any less expensive to make use of the existing LRT tunnel under the municipal building that is waiting for LRT trains to run underground, through the downtown, below 8th Avenue.

As it happens, such a change to the LRT would also tie into and enhance the current considerations for the urban campus lands interfacing with the existing LRT. Such a consideration is certainly not on the radar screen of city hall at the present time. And, admittedly, it could only be thought of in the context of the notion of a big idea.

So at that level, and as an "and/or" consideration, there is another significant possibility for creating a dynamic opportunity that would work in total synergy for the library site. And that's closing the portion of

2nd Street S.E. that runs between City Hall and Olympic Plaza. It's another big idea but it's not a crazy one. A number of years ago, the street was closed on a temporary basis for about a week for security reasons during the World Petroleum Congress. Traffic did not come to a standstill. In fact, it did not result in any noticeable difference to traffic flow at all. Vehicles simply diverted one block eastward along 9th Avenue and connected right back into the downtown grid pattern.

The benefit of doing this is all about creating a truly integrated public space, one that would physically connect City Hall to Olympic Plaza. It would provide for a much more significant library site expanded into what is now simply a road right-of-way, with a direct interface to the plaza as well as prime visibility. Together with enhancements to all of the buildings surrounding the plaza, it would bring vitality and a reason for people to gather together within what should be the "living room of the city."

It's not easily achieved, but it is all achievable. In this centennial year, which acknowledges heritage, perhaps a major new library could be the catalyst to assist in coalescing opportunities for the future of Calgary.