

Calgary's new Central Library IN THE NEWS

Library makeover

Leanne Dohy. Calgary Herald. Calgary, Alta.: May 18, 2006. pg. N.1.

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Gerry Meek is looking for that "wow!" factor in Calgary's new central library, and although it's still years and many steps away, it's closer than it's ever been. "We want it to be the kind of space where you walk in, look up and your jaw drops," Meek says. "The library is the most public of all public places -- the people's university -- and it should be a landmark."

Outdated, overloaded and ill-equipped for the information age, the present facility has been described as being about as welcoming as a prison. Its floors can't take the weight load, and it doesn't meet modern standards for accessibility or the building code. The site on which it sits, however, is still a great home for a central library, Meek says -- and, coincidentally, a block- encompassing revamp is now uniquely viable. "The courthouse will be vacant, Bow Valley College is looking to expand, the police are looking at moving into a more central facility, and the parkade is at the end of its lifecycle," Meek says. "Never again will this block be available as a block."

City council recently agreed to work with the provincial government and the college in coming up with a site plan -- an encouraging step, Mayor Dave Bronconnier told the Herald recently. "This is a decision that says we are going to work with the province and Bow Valley to have two users on a very key site in the downtown core as part of a major redevelopment project," Bronconnier says. "It's a significant first step towards the redevelopment of that project."

In April 2005, council approved \$4 million in funding for the development of a business plan for the expansion. About \$40 million has been committed so far to the project by council. The total estimated cost of the new library is between \$130 million and \$150 million.

At this point in the process, there are guiding principles and plenty of ideas on the table. "The library needs to be a gathering place -- a community activity centre," Meek says. "It needs to be a place that reflects the values of that community, that embraces diversity and encourages the exchange of ideas. "It needs to be the community's living room." Serving a diverse community means meeting the needs of different cultures, ages and abilities. It also means meeting an expectation that the library will carry both the latest in technology as well as the left-behind. "We've got 16-millimetre (film), VHS, DVD, DVD, hi-fi, audio books, tapes, CDs and MP3s," Meek says, laughing. "We cover everything from the print to the electronic media. We are expected - - required, really -- to bridge all of those technologies."

Some of the ideas being discussed include performance and public art spaces, a spirituality area, ability centre, study area, conversation spaces, restaurant and retail shop. "The children's area will be interactive, he says -- designed to draw them into a love of books and literacy. "Story hour would happen in a space where the child is projected into the story," Meek says. "As the story is read, segments of it might be projected onto the ceiling -- dragons or stars lit up over their heads." An "exploratorium" would hold different hands-on opportunities, highlighting themes appealing to kids. And at the other end of the spectrum, Meek says there will be quiet spaces for seniors, and -- as a balance to the high-tech spaces throughout the library -- there will be "no-tech" zones. "You need to have places of quiet and contemplation, too," Meek says. "We don't always want to be wired."

The new facility could be about 400,000 square feet (more than double the current 167,500 square feet), with the capacity to hold two million books and other materials -- about four times the present capacity. It would hold more than five times the number of computers and have four times the seating.

The planning and construction will likely take between five and seven years, Meek says. The ideas, space needs, program considerations and other concepts will be brought together and turned over to designers. "Their job will be to figure out: What could a new central library look like?" Meek says. It should be a place that is instantly recognizable as representing the community, he says -- a flagship piece of architecture. "We want to capture and express the dynamic nature of Calgary -- the volunteer spirit, the blue skies, the mountains . . . that's what we want to achieve."