

Calgary's new Central Library

IN THE NEWS

Mayor sticks up for library funding

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Calgary's mayor is defending a plan to spend up to \$40 million on a new downtown library, arguing the library board has had a vision for years that deserves support. But the initiative -- that would see council provide the money for a downtown library without a specific idea of how much it will cost, where it will go or when it would be built -- was still being questioned Thursday.

"We really need to know the specifics of what a new library would include before we approve the money," said Ald. Ric McIver, stressing that council has never been presented with any documentation concerning library plans. "If you're going to spend a large amount of money, you need to know where it's going."

But Mayor Dave Bronconnier argued "there is a plan, there always has been. "And if we want to support education, the importance of learning to read, and serving the whole city with a central branch, we need to make this new library a priority."

The city's so-called community investment fund, which will use money from a federal GST rebate given to cities, could provide up to \$40 million for a new library, a portion of the \$102.1 million that Bronconnier wants to put toward city attractions. The proposal, approved this week by a council committee, will go before the full council later this month.

Ald. Dale Hodges, a former library board member, said the new facility should be built -- eventually -- but right now there are still question marks. "This is seed money and it will happen in the foreseeable future. But the location: unknown. The size: unknown. The start date: unknown."

Gerry Meek, director of the Calgary Public Library, admitted the plan is in the early stages and thoughts for locations and building uses are just being blue-skied. A new central library could be built at the existing W.R. Castell site, just north of City Hall, Meek said. Or it could go to East Village, downtown's West End or become part of the new Stampede expansion. Because construction costs could total up to \$100 million, Meek said corporate funding sponsors, which will be sought out, may also have a say in the new site.

A series of new wings may include areas for technology, families and business, as well as a larger open area, meeting rooms, coffee shops and a public art exhibit.

Meek has looked at several North American cities that have built new downtown libraries in the past few years, including Vancouver, Montreal, Seattle, Salt Lake City and San Diego. Many have seen library attendance double as a result, he said. "This could be a real opportunity for Calgary to create a true heart, and hub, for the city," Meek said, noting that a library provides knowledge to citizens from all income levels for only a few dollars.