

Calgary's new Central Library

IN THE NEWS

New library a surprise;

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An alderman who sits on the library board says she never heard of a plan for a new downtown building until the mayor pledged \$40 million toward its construction.

Mayor Dave Bronconnier set in motion a plan last week to divvy up the \$100 million in GST rebates the city will get from Ottawa over the next five years on building a new library and improving tourist attractions. City council voted 13-2 in favour of the proposal. But even some of those council members supporting the plan in principle said the commitment for a downtown library came out of the blue.

"It immediately brought to mind: What was the issue? Was it where it is located? Was it the looks of it? Because the looks of it, I know, have been discussed in the past," said Ald. Diane Danielson, who sits on the city's library board. "But to me it's an absolutely phenomenal location -- right on the LRT lines -- and it is extremely well-used. Is it large enough? I think that's the issue."

Both the mayor and the director of the Calgary Public Library say the plans were only conceptual. "I don't know if they ever believed anyone would ever pick up their case, their cause or their story," Bronconnier said Friday. "And I think it is important to our city that we reinvest back into our downtown."

Danielson agreed that the idea is a positive one for the library system. "They have been in a bind money-wise," she said, noting the library board has been focused on building facilities in the suburbs. "There are still a couple we need to do, both in the deep southeast and quite far northeast. Those two are next in line and that's been in our papers."

Officials with the Calgary Public Library agree plans have been centred around the suburbs. But director Gerry Meek said the idea to build a new downtown library has been discussed informally as far back as the late 1980s. "It's a tight fiscal environment," he said. Meek said the mayor's plan presents a key opportunity for the library to look at the heart of the system. The redevelopment of the East Village, plans for a downtown cultural district and ongoing work on renewing the downtown plan present unique opportunities for building a new downtown library, he added.

Estimated costs for a new library start at \$80 million. The library board would be required to leverage the \$40 million proposed by the mayor to get money from senior levels of government and private donors.

Meek said there are many details to work out, among them the cost, what programs would be offered and where the library would be located. Suggestions from the mayor include the redeveloped East Village or on the west side of downtown on city-owned land near Louise Crossing.