

Chatham-Kent Public Library Board

The following is in response to the Municipality's request for input from the library related to the options contained in the Imagine Chatham-Kent proposal.

The Chatham-Kent Public Library system enjoys a well-earned, enviable reputation for delivering a high level of well-curated information, services, and programming to patrons of all ages across the wide-spread Chatham-Kent community. The main Chatham branch anchors this success, providing oversight and support to all 11 branches within the system. Located in downtown Chatham, the main branch facility opened in 1967 – a Centennial Project – and has served the community well.

It is the largest branch, containing a comprehensive collection of resources including the Local History special collection. It also houses the majority of staff including management and administration; five librarians with a system-wide focus; the ITT staff, and the technical services team who order, process, and distribute more than 20,000 items each year.

Patron traffic is strong with 102,536 individuals through the door annually. This translates to nearly 2,000 people each week or 329 daily. Program numbers are equally impressive; in 2022 the Chatham branch presented 250 children's programs reaching 9,965 attendees and 250 adult programs with 7,757 attendees.

The Chatham branch is an important, recognizable part of the Downtown landscape and loved by many. It achieves success despite being smaller than the 35,000 sq. ft. recommended for a community of our size by the Ontario Library Association guidelines and in the Council-approved Library Master Plan. Although the Library Team has creatively managed within this limited space, the present facility configuration allows no room for expansion as our community grows.

Chatham needs and deserves a modern, revitalized main branch facility that will meet the current need while allowing the library team to grow and expand its range of services to the citizens of Chatham-Kent. This inarguable fact is highlighted by the year-long discussion related to the proposed relocation of the Branch to the old Sears building, co-located with the Civic Centre, and other cultural organizations.

The CKPL Board has been asked to consider the options associated with the possible redevelopment of the Civic Centre and outlined in the CAO's memorandum to Council of August 2nd 2023. However, the Board is concerned that the decision-making process appears flawed and that the information provided is insufficient for the Board to make a well-informed, substantive response.

The three options which pertain to the CKPL are:

- Option 1. Do nothing and fix issues as they arise.
- Option 3. Renovate the existing Civic Centre, Library and Cultural Centre.
- Option 5. Relocate the Civic Centre and Library along with Museum and Art Gallery exhibition space to the Old Sears building.

From the library's perspective, **Option 3** is clearly the best for the more than 31,000 library patrons located in more than two-thirds of Chatham-Kent's households, especially since the cost of Option 3 could be less or likely little more than Option 5.

This recommendation is based upon the board's examination of the potential strengths and weaknesses of the three options. Again, the board is concerned about the limited information and detailed planning so associated.

Within the context of the CKPL Strategic Plan, both **Option 3** and **Option 5** offer similar strengths and opportunities providing the recommended 35,000 sq. ft of space is provided:

- **Goal: CKPL will offer access**
 - Lower shelving heights making materials accessible to all and improving security of the branch with better sight lines for staff.
 - Create dedicated Teen Space to highlight resources and programs of specific interest to young adults.
 - Incorporate bookable group study spaces giving the community much-needed areas to congregate, hold meetings, and work on projects.
 - Provide our partners, the Community Navigators, appropriate space to meet privately with clients when discussing confidential matters.
- **Goal: CKPL will connect and involve**
 - The addition of a dedicated Teen Space will ensure that the library is welcoming to young adults.
 - Dedicated programming spaces for children, teens, and adults, will ensure programming can be offered to connect our patrons to both library resources, and services, as well as community resources.
 - Spaces to provide meetings and training for our highly skilled library staff. With constant improvement and changes to library services, regular and ongoing training is essential.
 - There will be more opportunity to provide space for programs offered by other municipal departments (i.e.: Public Health and related community service providers that connect and support the community with additional resources and information)
- **Goal: CKPL will engage and inspire**
 - Increased square footage will enable the library to engage patrons of all ages in diverse programming.

- CKPL can showcase more displays within the library space to promote themed collections and community resources.
- Increased space will allow for special collections such as “The Library of Things” and storykits for all ages – could be stored in a visible way to promote these collections.
- **Goal: CKPL will demonstrate social value**
 - Increased square footage will allow CKPL to cultivate and grow partnerships with agencies outside the library to provide topical programs, services, and resources to CK residents.

A closer examination of both options reveals significant differences in weaknesses.

Option 5 - Relocate to the old Sears Building

This option’s strengths are far outweighed by its related weaknesses – as outlined in our attached memorandum of April 5, 2023, to the previous consultant. Specifically:

1. This proposed relocation concept was developed without input from anyone associated with CKPL nor by anyone having specific library expertise. The plan lacks specificity and does not demonstrate that the old Sears building can deliver the modern, functional library deserved by the residents of Chatham-Kent today and in the future.
2. The plan allocates about 30,000 sq. ft., which is less than the recommended and approved 35,000 sq. footage. This offers little or no potential for improvement to service, support, and program delivery or future growth.
3. Programming space conflicts are inevitable. CKPL, the Museum, and Art Gallery all present programming on weekends, holidays and in the summer. Each would be limited in the range and number of programs they could deliver at these prime times. Residents of Chatham-Kent would have a significantly reduced level and range of programs available to them.
4. Structural limitations - Much of the second-floor space does not appear to have load-bearing capability. Shelving would need to be located on the ground floor with most of the programming space on the second floor, which is not desirable.
5. Limited accessibility –Most of the proposed space is on the second floor. This presents accessibility challenges for patrons of all ages and abilities including families, people with disabilities, and seniors.
6. Modern public libraries are hubs for a large cohort of the community requiring warming or cooling during extreme weather, access to washroom facilities and access to many library programs and services including social support. There is valid concern that for these patrons sharing a facility with the Civic Centre and other groups would create an unwelcoming environment.
7. The plan as presented does not include dedicated washrooms in the library space. This is a necessity for staff and patrons of all ages and abilities – especially parents and children using the children's spaces.

8. Parking, especially accessible, drop-off and short term, appears problematic with long term not as convenient as in the current location.

Option 3 - Renovate the existing Chatham Branch in its current location

This avoids the many weaknesses outlined for Option 5. It allows the main branch to remain in its current location, and expand by about 8 – 10,000 sq. ft. This would give the Chatham branch all the significant strengths earlier mentioned and the following benefits:

1. No decline in usage - It has been demonstrated by other library relocations that there is an associated patron decline in usage which takes some time to redevelop; staying in the same location avoids this potential challenge.
2. Parking - The current parking is very good with a large long-term parking lot less than a half block away and short term, accessible and drop-off parking conveniently available.
3. Exclusive program space - Not being required to share programming facilities as in Option 5 will allow program delivery at all times of the year.
4. Specificity - The plan would be developed by library professionals with the needs of library patrons at the forefront. This precludes many of the challenges associated with attempting to adapt a building designed for other purposes into one that can only deliver compromised services.
5. Accessibility - The current location easily permits access and welcome for all patrons.

Option 1 – Do nothing and fix issues as they arise.

As noted, the CKPL main Chatham branch deserves significant upgrading. Doing nothing merely postpones necessary revitalization. The only potential 'strength' is short-term financial savings.

Financial Considerations

Per the CAO's Memorandum, the net financial investment of Option 3 could likely be less or the same as Option 5, which increases the attractiveness of Option 3. However, this conclusion would benefit from a more detailed and inclusive financial plan.

Conclusion

The Board's review of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats presented by the three options presented in the CAO's Memorandum of August 2, 2023, reveals that Option 3 – Revitalizing the main Chatham branch of the CKPL in its current location, is the clear choice for the Library. This direction will deliver the highest and most efficient level of service library patrons deserve both today and in the future.