

Maybe it's time for a Plan B for the library development on Baker Street

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

At some point, likely once the budget is out of the way, our new council will be turning its attention to the downtown again. Me, too.

There are some pretty grandiose plans for our city's heart, but there are a lot of dominoes supporting each other and if one falls down, the overall picture is placed in doubt.

So while I would like nothing better than see a major partnership involving the Y, the university and Conestoga College coming together on Baker Street so we can get a new library, I can't help noting all of these rely on government dollars, one way or another.

Should a thumbs down come because of the ideological stance of those in power or the lack of available dollars, the result is the same. No big development on Baker Street. And no new library.

So maybe it would be prudent to have a Plan B.

I recall when a new location for the library was being looked at seriously, one of the suggested locations was what is now the Old Quebec Street Mall. Setting aside the ownership question for now, one argument for not moving the library there was the weight of the books and the need for structural reinforcement. As I recall, the same argument was used when the old city hall was ruled out.

I do not pretend to know anything about structural engineering but I think I am in the library often enough to conclude that there is a big difference between the place today and back then.

Books seem to be a much smaller part of the equation that in the old days. The library's role seems to be more of a community resource than just a warehouse to store books.

I wonder if those structural arguments are still sound (so to speak). Something tells me that e-books, paperbacks, DVDs, music CDs, easy chairs and computer stations place a lot less stress per square foot than the shelves and shelves of hard cover tomes we used to have. Add to the mix some meeting rooms, maybe a gallery, a performance

space perhaps and even a coffee shop, and I really think the engineers should take a second look at the numbers.

We have lost the old post office building, unless someone could persuade the county to move those offices to the current library site. Again, I do not pretend to know the technical requirements, but there is no obvious reason I can see that the social services offered in the old federal building could not as easily be offered from the library location. And given that the city, as joint funder of those services, paid a very large chunk of the work to fix up the old post office to meet modern day standards, surely it has the right to ask the question. (Maybe you even keep a desk in the building to handle social services inquiries.)

And let's take a second look at other sites, including the mall. Maybe the "retail" parts of the library could be there and we could leave the archives and other parts in the existing location. No one said we have to buy the building. How about a long-term lease? So far the major draws the mall owners have had to bring people in are the court (now in the old city hall) and a lot of doctors' offices. Both places require appointments and that tends to rule out discretionary shopping. With the liquor store now gone, that's even more traffic rerouted.

The giant Bell building on Cork Street appears to be half empty. If it still houses all the old-style telephone equipment, then it's really wasted space. How long will it be before some smart developer makes an offer? Maybe we should make an offer.

Another site that perhaps might be an option is the old Imico property in the Ward.

I fully realize this is pretty out-of-the-box thinking but I think this is what we need to move things ahead. (I imagine the Y, university and Conestoga plans could still happen without the library.)

Given his past comments on the topic, the mayor doesn't likely have too many library patrons in his fan club. This might be a way to acknowledge that constituency and show some fiscal prudence at the same time.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)