Guelph Library Project
Does Guelph Need a New Downtown Public Library?

Final Report: The Guelph Library Project

“A library in the middle of a community is a cross between an emergency exit, a life raft and a festival. They are cathedrals of the mind; hospitals of the soul; theme parks of the imagination. On a cold, rainy island, they are the only sheltered public spaces where you are not a consumer, but a citizen, instead.”

Caitlin Moran, British author and journalist.

Table of Contents

Introduction and Context
1. Libraries and Community Development

http://guelphlibraryproject.ca/final-report/ 15/01/2016
Introduction and Context

(Michael Ridley, Instructor, Guelph Library Project)

The Guelph Library Project is part of a First Year Seminar course held at the University of Guelph during the Fall 2015 semester. The objective of the course is to examine the question:

Does Guelph need a new downtown public library?

Through a variety research techniques (key documents and reports, presentations from experts, interviews with opinion leaders and citizens, surveys, focus groups, and class discussions) the students (all in their 1st year) developed an understanding of the issues and prepared a set of observations and recommendations. This report is the result of their work.

Guelph has been talking about a new downtown public library for nearly 20 years. Sometimes it seems imminent and at other times it seems very unlikely.

Why the long debate?
Why the uncertainty about a decision?
Do we really need a new library?

The Guelph Public Library’s Mission, Vision, Values, and Customer Service Pledge describe how the Library understands its role and the value it brings to the community. In part, the Project wanted to test these statements and assumptions against the views and opinions of those in Guelph and those leading libraries in other jurisdictions.

Perhaps the most significant impetus for the course and the project was the statement by Mayor Cam Guthrie on February 16 of this year:
“You already have five different [branch library] locations in the city, you have a huge library at the University of Guelph, pretty much every public school in town has libraries. I just think that before the city commits to any huge costs associated with a new library, this really heartfelt discussion needs to happen about what is the future of libraries and how is it going to best fit into that future.”

Guelph Mayor Cam Guthrie on the existing downtown library and re-thinking the nature and role of libraries.

The *Guelph Library Project* agrees with the Mayor. Libraries are expensive, there are other libraries in the city, and libraries are changing, dramatically. The *Project* wanted to nurture that “heartfelt discussion” the Mayor called for so that the members of the Guelph community can identify “the best fit” whatever that might be.

What the *Project* discovered tells us a lot about libraries and about the Guelph community.

**Disclaimer:** As the instructor for the course, and a librarian, I have an obvious bias. It is a testament to the critical perspectives and independence of the students that they recognized this bias and attempted to minimize it throughout the course proceedings.

**The Guelph Library Project Final Report**

[Link to Final Report]
Benjamin Field, Emily Goldberg, Emma MacDonald, Emma Snow, Gillian Conley, Hamid Dwyer, Jesse Wiemer, Jessica Kool, Kyle Hayes, Mohit Sekhon, Peter Andreakos, Raphaela Simoes, Rohan Verma, Ryan Medwid, Sarah Ruest, Tejal Patel, Yilin Yao and Zakaria Ali.

1. Libraries and Community Development

For as long as anyone can recall, libraries have always been indispensable resources which have served the many needs and demands of all members of society. In today’s steadily evolving world, the role of libraries within a community is constantly being challenged and adjusted in order to better comply with the ways in which individuals consume literature and other content. However, despite their anticipated extinction in this increasingly digital age, one thing has remained the same – the library plays an essential role in communities of all sizes.

Helen Kelly, Idea Exchange CEO, on the value proposition of libraries.

http://guelphlibraryproject.ca/final-report/
Over time, libraries have played an extremely important role in the shaping of a community. Exactly what this role assumes is the reason for a great deal of argument and many conflicting opinions. While providing books has been the main purpose of libraries during the last few centuries, their contributions have expanded to satisfy the growing requests of their patrons. Libraries serve the whole community, regardless of economics status, age, or race, and connect those in need with the knowledge, services and assistance they require, making it an inclusive space for everyone to use and further encouraging society to come together and unite as one.

They directly support education, economic prosperity, cultural evolution, and various community networks. Today, libraries allow the public the opportunity to borrow DVD’s, CD’s, and video games, as well as equip them with a spot to study, rooms to hold meetings, access to computers and wireless internet, along with many other services that are all free of charge.

The library is important to many groups, especially young children and new immigrants to Canada who often attend the library as a way to get situated with their new city and to develop their intellect and opinions. It is evident that libraries have always been and will always be integral aspects of a community. This is still a relevant argument in the twenty-first century as libraries act as means to bring individuals together, providing them with a space to create and generate new ideas.

In order to truly support public libraries in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to separate from the belief that a library is simply a building filled with books, and instead regard it as a community-led institution that focuses more on people and forming connections. Libraries nowadays should be cultural hubs which seek to improve the lives of everyone within a community by encouraging people through books and learning, as well as by providing public space accessible to anyone, in which individuals can unite, use technology,
share values, and truly understand what it means to be member of an evolving, lively community.

Asa Kachan, CEO Halifax Public Library, on impacts not transactions.

Through the interviews held with the CEO’s of various public libraries as well as with numerous political figures across Guelph, the question of the evolving nature of libraries in our advanced society has come up often. The CEO of the Idea Exchange (the public library and art gallery in Cambridge), Helen Kelly, described a library as an “interactive community hub”, comparing it to a community living room. Libraries can contribute creative sparks to communities, making these spaces more about creating and less about books.

The CEO from the Halifax Public Library, Asa Kachan, had a similar description. According to her, libraries are a place to relax after a day of work, a place where children can come to learn and play, and where seniors can enjoy some repose, stipulating that it really has something to offer to everyone. Cam Guthrie, the Mayor of Guelph, agrees, adding that the library is more a community space where people can “create”.

Overall, through these descriptions, it is increasingly apparent that public libraries are evolving in their roles as community focal points and abandoning the misconception that their sole function is that of supplying books.

2. Observations and Themes

A number of observations and themes highlight some of the key issues faced by the Library and the city of Guelph.
a) State of the Building

The current downtown Guelph Public Library building is in horrible condition. The building itself is extremely dirty and there are many leaks that could pose a possible threat. There are maintenance issues and structural concerns. Some library users even state that the inside of the library feels depressing because of the lack of natural light and feel of the inside décor. With the ceilings being ruined as a result of many leaks and the sewage pipes requiring frequent attention, the state of the building is horrendous.

The real question is: can the building can be renovated or is it beyond repair?

Renovation costs are not cheap; a lot of money and effort will have to go towards the repair of the library. However, if the building is beyond repair then now would be the perfect time to start looking for a better solution. Some might say that an obvious solution would be to build another library and others might say that a solution would be to simply move locations. Numerous problems can arise with each of these solutions.

If the library were to move locations or anticipate a new facility, that would mean that the current building concerns would have to be put on hold. This is something that the library simply cannot afford. The state of the building is potentially dangerous and not up to current standards. Not only is it inconvenient for the library remain like this, but it also compromises the functionality of the library and the wellbeing of its users. Therefore, the state of the building is something that needs to be dealt with and should be one of the library’s top priorities in order to ensure functionality and wellbeing of the public.

b) Community Space

Another prominent concern is the lack of community space. The current facility lacks effective space for community gatherings, studying, collaboration, and other social space typically provided by public libraries.

Asa Kachan, CEO Halifax Public Library, on the library as experience.

http://guelphlibraryproject.ca/final-report/
Space is something that is essential to all libraries in order for them to satisfy their users. Therefore, the current library building does not satisfy the needs of a 21st century library. The Guelph Public Library needs to make some serious changes, this being a top priority.

**c) Cost of New Library**

The estimated cost to build a new downtown library may surprise many: ~$90M (i.e. ~$45M for the library itself and other plus costs for related buildings and infrastructure). Is it worth the cost? Will it be affordable?

The cost of the new building may not be worth it in the eyes of some members of the community. However, if the library is not seen as only a library but as a place for additional resources that both users and non-users of the Library benefit from, it could attract more of the community and help justify the cost.

In the long run, rather than constantly putting money into renovating or fixing parts of the old library, having a new library would be beneficial to a larger share of the community and worth the investment in the project.

**d) Other City Priorities**

Though a new downtown public library may be needed or wanted, other city priorities could be more important. While library users and library workers may see a new library as a top priority, others in the community will need to be convinced. Asking the community and acknowledging their understanding of the benefits could allow for a reconsideration of priorities.

However, it is always possible that unexpected events or new issues may adjust city priorities. This might result in the new library being pushed back yet again.
e) Services and Resources

Since the plan to build a new main public library has been put off many times, the city of Guelph should take time to educate the citizens of Guelph about what a library is and why they are still relevant today. A library is much more than just books and reading, and if more people understood this, the plan to build a new downtown library would be more widely accepted.

The average non-user of libraries hasn't stepped inside the library for several years. They misunderstand the concept that a library is now a community space above anything else. The library provides certain public services like group reading, yoga, services for young children, and much more. The possibilities for services and resources are endless with the engaging space that a library offers.

Many people rely on the services and resources that the library provides. A new library in Guelph would certainly attract even more people who would in turn take advantage of these services. The sense of community nurtured by the library brings a city like Guelph closer together and provides a stronger fabric to knit the community together.

f) Accessibility

The library is a community place that brings together people from all backgrounds, social classes, and ethnicities. It is a place for people of all ages to come and use resources that are not easily accessible to them. However, when a specific group is unable to use the library this can cause serious problems.

The library is not accessible to people who are disabled. A tour of the library highlighted many of the issues that come with the limited accessibility. There is no functioning elevator that is wheelchair accessible; the current elevator is not big enough for a wheelchair or scooter to maneuver in or out. This restricts wheelchair accessibility to only the main floor of the Library. In addition, having the children’s section on the top floor limits a child with physical disabilities to use the resources and books that are for their target audience.
Not only are people with physical disabilities unable to get to the lower floor because of the elevator, this also prevents their access to the washrooms (which themselves are not wheelchair accessible).

Safety in the case of an emergency is also at risk. The fire exit door must stay closed in the case of an emergency however the platform that the door opens to is also the platform on which someone who is in a wheelchair must stay until fire fighters arrive to help. This is a significant risk for people with disabilities as well as other members of the community.

The library is meant to be a community space and be accessible by all people.

g) Commercialization

Commercialization of the Guelph Public Library is an issue that should be considered. The Library has plans to increase profits though their new main downtown library as indicated by Steve Kraft. The new library will have services adjacent to public space that can be rented out. Some interesting ones include a lecture hall and public meeting rooms. These services, although new and unique, don’t seem to fit the “cost-free” philosophy that most would expect from a library. Other than these renting services, housing services, apartments, on the upper floors of the library building will also be offered.

Will the library change their business model to facilitate or provide benefits to those using their housing? For instance, would late fees for items loaned by those living in the apartments offered by the GPL be reduced? Would residents receive longer loan periods, would they gain reservation priorities?

Another possible change would be advertising. If the library were to advertise third party featured products or services, a steady income would become possible. The fact that the library has already taken steps to offer their property as means to produce revenue through third partnerships – as mentioned earlier – does not leave this idea out of question.

Since the Library is already challenged to reduce the huge gap between the estimated cost of the new library – approximately $45 million, versus the estimated worth of the previous branch, $12 million – the need for money is considera-
ble. The need for income along with the library's proposed partnerships are all possible means for the commercialization of the Library.

**h) Success**

Is it worth changing something that is already so successful.

Guelph Mayor Cam Guthrie on needs and opportunities.

Each year the library loans millions of books to the community. The current library has been able to serve the community of Guelph for many years and continues to do so. Why change something that is satisfying the needs of Guelph citizens? There is concern that changing the library would cause a deterioration in community involvement. If it is currently successful and serves the community well, perhaps changing it would render it less successful.

A new library would be very expensive; if the current library is serving its purpose then there is no need for change or to incur the cost.

### 3. Four Scenarios for the Library

**a) Status Quo**

*Stay in the current facility but make some critical repairs and renovations. The limitations of the current facility will preclude many new services and capabilities. However, while it will still require financial investments, it will avoid the ~$90M investment of a new library. The implications of this scenario assume citizens...*
are happy with the current services and want to avoid expenditures on a new facility.

The Guelph Public Library is in this position because the residents of Guelph feel it is satisfying their needs. The Library has remained effective for the last 12 years, as stated in the 2015-2017 Strategic Plan. Unfortunately, results from a number of different studies show that ‘status quo’ isn’t in fact meeting the needs of Guelph Citizens. The data collected demonstrated that:

- the book and periodical collection fall under recommended guidelines
- reader seating is 50% less of what it should be
- there’s an insufficient number of computers, and
- the overall building is not large enough.

As CEO Steve Kraft has indicated, there are serious safety hazards that need more than a “band-aid”.

It is possible to argue that the library is functioning perfectly fine because it’s the most used recreational facility in Guelph. However, experts in this area have stated that the current situation will not be able to provide effective services for much longer. The future is unpredictable, but it’s known that changes need to be made to the current structure of the library. Remaining as it is could have major implications to public safety and community education. Doing so will further define Guelph as a city that doesn’t value public libraries.

More needs to be done than a few repairs and renovations. The status quo scenario will simply will not work based on the evidence gathered for this report. The downtown library is desperately in need of major change.

b) Downtown Branch

Stay in the current facility but make some critical repairs and renovations. Relocate some departments (e.g. cataloguing, acquisitions, systems, administration, and other support units) to a leased facility elsewhere in the city. This scenario will make this site a “downtown branch” with support departments housed in

http://guelphlibraryproject.ca/final-report/
less expensive space. Space in the branch freed up by this can be used for new services and capabilities. New investments are still required by considerably less than a new library.

The possibility of a downtown branch was a second scenario. This provides the Library with the opportunity of staying in the current facility but establishing a new location for departments such as administration or cataloguing. Having limited space is a key issue in the current library, creating conflicts regarding community space, access to resources, and security of the archives.

The lease of a different property for the administrative services or other supports units would free up space for other services and capabilities in the downtown location. An upside to creating a downtown branch would mean more access to the archives, possibly replacing the fifty-year-old elevator and moving the children’s section downstairs for more convenience.

That being said, the possible implications of this scenario would mean that staff or certain departments would not be in close proximity to the library and users. This in turn would create the likelihood of long distance working conditions and separating the library from the main departments that are responsible for maintaining the library.

Essentially the main goal of this scenario is to provide more space for users, but also to preclude spending significant amounts of money to create a whole new library.

c) New Library

Continue to pursue the new library as documented and planned. To be successful the Library needs to build support for this vision and to respond to the barriers that exist within the community and with the politicians. This scenario assumes the current plans is the right plan for Guelph and it will be supported despite various types of opposition (cost, other priorities, another vision of a library, happy with existing library).
A new library is what the members of the Guelph Public Library Board have already planned; to re-establish the public library in a larger facility downtown. As stated in the library strategic plan, the goal is to “enhancing the user experience and focusing on metrics, marketing and reaching customers at their point of need.” This may be helpful especially regarding accessibility and space constraints.

Guelph Mayor Cam Guthrie on whether people are talking about a new library.

While the facility may be larger and improved on the outside, the inside should not be ignored. There should be more computers available for people to use and more community services present so people get that sense of community libraries are supposed to give. In the Library's strategic plan there are many special events described such as Canada’s 150 birthday. While these events are a step towards a better library there are many more things to be added onto this list to gain a sense of belonging for the community.

To improve the library and make it worth the cost, it would be beneficial to ask the users and non-users of the library what they would like to see improved. The priority of the library shouldn’t be so much about the location and appearance but more about the services and sense of community it provides. Changing the location of the library may have many benefits because the library is located in a more central area downtown or just that the overall look of the library is attracting younger users, but there will still be many evident problems inside the library that require change.

d) New Vision for a New Library
Rework the vision for a new library to reflect and emphasize different aspects. This scenario assumes that the citizens of Guelph want a new library but not the library identified in the current vision. The Library will have to refocus its efforts on understanding the gap between the current vision and the expectations of the community. It is a “back to the drawing board” scenario that should result in a new or renewed vision and plan.

It is clear that the city of Guelph is in need of a new downtown public library, but perhaps the vision that is currently on the drawing board is not ideal. Perhaps what would attract more support is the integration of a recreational centre with the new library. This way, citizens will likely be more willing to use the library as it would be more accessible, bring in new users, and the cost would be reduced.

The plan for the new Guelph Public Library has an estimated at ~ $45M. However, the city of Guelph likely has more pressing issues and priorities that preempt the need of a new library. Adding a library to an existing building would be more cost effective. If the library was integrated with the recreational centre, a combination of facilities would be readily available. For example, you would be able to get a coffee from the café while you read a book or use a computer, or you could drop your kids off at swimming lessons then have them join the teen library group afterwards; the possibilities are endless.

With this vision, children and teens would much more likely be involved with library programs as they are in the same facility as other services. In order to attract more interest and support, perhaps the current vision for the new library needs to be rethought.

4. General Recommendations

a) More Citizen Engagement

As Mayor Cam Guthrie stated in his interview, there have been few calls to the city regarding the state of the library. Calls from citizens about the problems
they have seen regarding the current library would inform the city about the severity of the situation. Whether the calls are about the appearance of the library, safety concerns or any general complaint they have about the current library, it was clear from the Mayor’s interview that politicians react public complaints.

The problem is that many citizens are not aware of the many problems of the library.

An option is to educate the users (and even non-users) about the state of the library and encourage them to contact the city about those problems. Calls from citizens may give the city the impetus it needs to accelerate the plan for a new library. It will make the city realize that if the users aren’t happy with the current library, it is time to build a new and improved one.

b) Building for Diversity: Community Centre, Pools, Gallery, and More

Building the library next to other non-profit public services and resources is a good idea for the Guelph Public Library. Users (and potential users) of the library (children, teens, adults, parents, seniors, etc.) engage in many activities and use many services (programming, gyms, art galleries, retail, etc.). The library will draw users to other services just as the other services will draw users to the library.

Helen Kelly, the CEO and Chief Librarian of Idea Exchange (a library which includes an art gallery), suggested that “the library is turning more into a community hub…”. Attaching the library to a community centre (or co-locating it with other in-demand services) will create an anchor for such a community hub.

A multifaceted set of services would also increase public support for a new library and could move it higher on the city’s capital funding priority list.

c) Disaster Planning

A tour of the downtown library revealed that its archives are vulnerable to flooding, an threat against which the library has little defense if the leak stains on the roofs are any indication. Sometimes it seems to take a disaster to gener-
ate any significant support from the public. If the Guelph Public Library archives, home to some of the most precious historical documents in the city, were to be struck by such a disaster, perhaps the community would be shocked into action.

A disaster suffered by the library does not actually need to happen in order to trigger a response from the community. A mock disaster might be what the Library needs.

In fact, effective risk mitigation and disaster preparedness suggests that the Library should have a clear disaster plan and that this plan should be tested through a simulation. Simulating a disaster would prepare the Library for such an event and highlight to the community the precarious state of the existing building.

d) Do Not Renovate the Building

The current downtown Guelph Library has many ongoing issues. Although one of the options for the community is to renovate the current building, this is a very poor idea. When you investigate the building in more depth, you realize that all of the small problems add up to one huge problem: renovating the old building might rival the cost of building a new one.

The problems with the current building aren’t just small issues, as many citizens might view them, they are actually very dangerous safety hazards. There is also the possibility of a major emergency or disaster.

When the citizens of Guelph hesitate at the costs to build a new building, they don’t realize the liabilities of the current building and the increasing costs to fix it.

e) Changing Ideas Over Time

There is a very good chance that the entire library project has been shelved for so long, because the idea of a library keeps changing. If a new library was built at the beginning of this project 20 years ago, there is a good chance it would already need updating, simply due to the fact that the idea of what a library is continuously evolves.
People need to look at what kind of library we need tomorrow, rather than today. Twenty years from now our ideas will be different than they were 20 years ago.

Guelph needs to fully understand exactly what it wants (or could have) from a library. Only after this is realized, will a new downtown library fully succeed.

5. Scenarios and Associated Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the scenarios and which scenarios are the best fit for certain situations.

**Scenario One: Status Quo** (less money; best option in terms of economic reasons)

Our first option was to keep the current downtown library branch as is. Rather than spending the money on a completely brand new building, invest that money into renovating and maintaining the current library. Overall, the citizens of Guelph have not exhibited much displeasure with the current library, so not many citizens agree with the proposition for a new building. By keeping to current library, you can keep the city of Guelph residents happy, and invest less of their money into building improvements.

**Scenario Two : Downtown Branch** (more space, more facilities and services; cheaper than a new library)
The second option suggested is that the library is renovated and refurbished, and the central administration is moved to another location – a commercial/office building for example. This option is recommended if, in the near future, there will not be a plan to build a new library and if the library needs more space for facilities and resources. Therefore, if money is limited and action needs to be taken, option number two is the recommended option to choose.

**Scenario Three: A New Library** (safer, more space, flexible)

The third option, building the new library as outlined by the Library's plans, is the recommended option is the public are not satisfied with the current downtown library.

This option means a much safer building with more space. These spaces can be used for many different uses such as program areas, study space or an open space for hands on experiences. With this new building, there will be better accessibility for everyone to all the services and resources. While the cost for this will be higher than the first two options but it will provide safer, larger, and more flexible space with an increases in resources and services.

**Scenario Four: A New Vision** (something is wrong, back to the drawing board, involving more community)

Option four is recommended if there is no opportunity, no funding or no public interest to invest in the new library. This means getting back to the drawing board and reevaluating the situation. If this option is chosen, we recommend that the Library involve the community in a renewed planning effort directed at what they want ‘their’ library to look like. Gaining community support will recharge the need for a new library. Taking a step back, collecting information and making new plans might just be the best option if the goal is to make the future library a success.

Former Guelph Mayor Karen Farbridge on where the leadership will come from if a new library is to be built.
Acknowledgements

The *Guelph Library Project* team want to thank those who were so generous with their time and ideas: Steve Kraft (CEO, Guelph Public Library), Guelph Public Library Board, Karen Farbridge (former Guelph Mayor), Cam Guthrie (Guelph Mayor), Dan Gibson (Ward 1 Counselor), Asa Kachan (CEO, Halifax Public Library), Helen Kelly (CEO, Idea Exchange), Wendy Newman (University of Toronto), Virginia Gillham (Friends of the Guelph Public Library) and Dan Atkins (Director of Operations, Guelph Public Library).

Proudly powered by WordPress