

September 30, 2020

To Mayor Guthrie and Guelph City Councillors:

You have a well researched business case for a new 88,000 square foot main library located downtown. The COVID-19 crisis has not changed the need for a modern library. The pandemic has not impacted everyone in the same manner. While many people lost jobs, many others maintained their employment. In fact Guelph has fared better than other cities. Real estate values in our city have increased, the stock market is doing well and many families are spending less on discretionary items and saving more. The cost to finance infrastructure has never been lower, and the need for jobs never higher. Governments can and should help those most directly impacted by the pandemic. However that support should be specific to those most in need. Our federal government has done an excellent job in supporting the unemployed and providing subsidies to businesses. Tax freezes and tax cuts spread broadly to all only deprive governments of revenue needed to deliver the programs and services that benefit all of us.

Sociologist Eric Klinenberg in his book *Palaces for the People* talks about how the future of democratic societies lies in shared values and shared spaces such as libraries, child care centres, bookstores, churches and parks. When this social infrastructure is strong communities flourish, when it is neglected families and individuals must fend for themselves. His research shows how social infrastructure enhances education, improves health, and reduces isolation, polarization and crime.

In Thunder Bay systemic racism was exposed after media reports about a series of unexplained deaths of native youth. The Public Library has emerged as an unlikely hero in a city in crisis by helping to promote healing and reconciliation. *“The city’s library system offers the community much more than rows of books, microfiches and the Dewey Decimal System. It has become a leader in a city whose racial struggles are openly displayed for the world to see.”* Tanya Talaga, The Toronto Star, March 27, 2019

This is what modern libraries do. They are staffed by professionals who know their community and welcome everyone. They do so much more than lend books. As an example the Guelph Public Library is helping people attend their virtual court hearings by providing tablets to individuals to use in the library. There is so much more our library could do for the community with adequate programming space as proposed in the design for the new library.

I urge you to support the alternative location for the library as presented in the staff report dated October 5, 2020 maintaining the 88,000 square foot size with a budget of \$62 million. Guelph’s population is growing in size and diversity. The failure to address the deficiencies in our main library or to account for future needs will not only leave us with a social infrastructure deficit for decades to come but will also pass those costs to future citizens. Please don’t make this your legacy.

Sincerely,

Teresa McKeeman
Guelph, ON