

## **Submission to Guelph City Council**

**October 1, 2020**

I understand that some of our elected representatives want to change the terms of the resolution regarding the new main library that was passed in September 2019. Despite authoritative studies that established the minimum requirements for a library, and a business case that established a costing structure, they are making a last-ditch case for a re-do.

Neither the mayor nor our city councillors should have to be reminded of the tortured history of proposals for the new main library. They and their predecessors over too many years surely have heard more delegations on this topic than any other. Successive teams of consultants – at the cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars (those taxpayer dollars over which some councillors claim to be such faithful guardians) – have caused more eyes than theirs to glaze over from weariness. No other capital project in this city has been so often proposed, envisioned, costed, consulted upon and decided to so little effect.

Back in the 1990s, the CEO of the Guelph Public Library reported that the 1960s-era building was inadequate to deal with the volume of traffic it was getting. Guelph's population at the time was less than 100,000. It's more than a third bigger now, and growing.

In the years since then site searches have led to proposals for installing the new library in the Eaton Centre, the Wyndham Street post office and, at a time of retrenchment, at its present location on Norfolk Street. Mayor Quarrie, perhaps smarting from the backlash that followed the failure to purchase the post office, promised in 2006 to see the new library built by 2009. Didn't happen. She was out of office a year later when the Baker Street parking lot was identified as ideal. Staff then estimated the cost of the new building at \$33 million, half the estimate today. The recession and a change in budgeting procedures led to the project being shelved, but council agreed in 2010 to hire yet more consultants to develop a yet another plan.

A timeline on the city's website describes the period from 2012 to 2017 as a time of "exploring and prioritizing." Neither the library board nor city staff were idle. Public pressure was mounting. A February 2014 council meeting made the decision to move forward (again) with the Baker Street plan. The partnership with Windmill lent weight to the proposal. The path ahead seemed unobstructed. And then came Covid-19.

Some political wiseacres have suggested that a crisis should never be wasted. The pandemic has affected everything. But it hasn't changed the need for a new library. In the short term – right now – the demand for reading material, knowledge resources and wifi access, remains acute, and the library is striving to meet it. In the long term, the pandemic will fade, and the city - unlike the present library building - keeps getting bigger. Along with the cost of building a new one.

Funding the library was never dependent on a grant from another order of government. City staff has assured us that it's well within the city's means. Of course, it would be helpful to find outside sources of funding, and that funding may yet materialize, but a failure to follow through on the commitments we've made, to Windmill among others, makes outside funding less rather than more likely. Deals collapse in the absence of good faith.

We've been making, unmaking, and remaking decisions about the library for more than twenty years.  
Now is the time to get on with it.

Jonathan Webb