

Planning for the future

A message from the director:

You may have heard that the library is putting the final touches on an approximate \$35 million building proposal that has been years in the making.

Many thoughtful hours have been dedicated to this process, beginning with the library's Master Planning Report, which was based on community feedback from surveys and focus groups before and after the pandemic.

We heard you say that you valued the library's physical collection and desired more meeting and private study spaces of various sizes. Also high on the list of priorities was a desire for imaginative children's and teen spaces. The plan that will come before you in a public vote balances all of these goals without sacrificing shelf space.

The details of the building proposal are currently being finalized by architects from Ashley McGraw, a firm with extensive experience in school and library design, including the renovated library at Bethlehem Central High School. The library board interviewed multiple architects for the project and chose Ashley McGraw based on this experience.

The proposal will also include updates to the space based on real-world data that shows how the library is actually being used. The current library building is more than 50 years old and hasn't had any changes to its footprint in that time, despite seeing more than double the circulation since it opened in the early 1970s. Our physical collection has also grown as much as it can within the confines of a set footprint, with our digital holdings almost doubling the number of materials we can offer to borrowers. A busy library requires adequate staff to provide services, and our 70-plus employees are making the best of a space that was intended for approximately 20.

A lack of space has also affected the programming we are able to offer. In recent years, we've had to turn families away from our story times and popular children's events due to exceeding the capacity of our large meeting room. Our programs in partnership with the Bethlehem Historical Association frequently reach the maximum reservation long before the actual event. We have even shied away from offering larger author events because we can't accommodate all of those who would be interested in attending.

This is why our building plan includes a space that would more than double our capacity for large events. The largest configuration of the community room would be available primarily for library programs, but the adjustable nature of the space would allow more access for community groups requesting rooms that hold 30-35 people, which are currently in high demand and booked many months out.

Other structural changes would improve accessibility by bringing the entrance closer to the parking lot and adding a dedicated curbside pickup and drop off service, a need that became apparent during the pandemic and remains relevant to this day. The board has also chosen to invest in the sustainability of this community by pursuing a geothermal heating and cooling system. This would benefit the neighborhood by cutting down on mechanical noise and removing the need for unsightly rooftop units. Any building updates will be made while the library remains open to the public.

Through all of this, we plan to continue expanding our collection based on our increasing circulation numbers, 30% of which is in digital materials. We know the physical collection is our bread and butter, even as we add new ways to borrow library items by making multiple copies available through Libby, Hoopla and Kanopy.

We realize that the scope of this building proposal is large – it is a once-in-50-years ask – and we have carefully considered what this community is looking for in order to put this plan together. Ultimately, you, as voters, will decide whether this proposal meets your expectations. Rest assured, the one thing that won't change in the next 50 years is our dedication to providing library services in all its forms to the people of this community. You will always be at the heart of what we do today and decades into the future.

Geoff Kirkpatrick, director, Bethlehem Public Library