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The locations proposed for library consideration; the former United Church (far left) and the former Sears building (left).

Photo Brandy Fredrickson and Graham Long

Mixed reaction for library proposal

Graham Long
Drayton Valley Free Press

A proposal to combine two libraries and move them into a new location in Drayton Valley was met with a mixed reaction from Town and County councils last week.

The idea is to combine the Rotary Children's Library along with the main library in order to reduce overheads and operating costs while maintaining service levels for the community.

The proposal to see the two libraries merged and moved into a single larger facility was first brought forward several months ago. Since then the library board has examined two potential new locations. Board Chair Lyndara Cowper-Smith and library director Doug Whistance-Smith attended both the town council meeting last Wednesday and a joint council meeting the following day to present their findings. The board's preferred location is the old Sears building. However, the board is unable to purchase any property itself. That would have to be done through one or both of the municipal councils.

The estimated purchase price of the Sears building is \$2 million. The building's current

owner, Hamdon Developments, is offering to reduce that amount by \$500,000 in exchange for naming rights to the new library. The estimated price tag for necessary renovations is \$350,000 leaving the final estimated cost of making the move \$1.85 million. At current interest rates that money could be borrowed on a 30-year debenture at a monthly cost of a little under \$7,000. The owners of Anytime Fitness, which is also located in the same building, have offered to sign a ten year lease for the area the gym uses. That lease would be valued at \$6,667 a month, bringing the monthly cost of owning the building down to \$325. There is also the possibility of generating extra revenue by leasing some of the additional space in the building either to appropriate businesses such as an art gallery or a coffee shop, or to agencies such as Family and Community Support Services.

The other proposal the library board considered was to move into the old United Church building. The church has been offered for sale to Brazeau County and would be available for a dollar if it was to be used for the library.

The library board evaluated the proposals on a number of criteria including operational

costs, location, accessibility and parking along with the cost of renovations and upgrades needed to make either building suitable for its new use.

"Our final score showed that the old Sears was the better location," said Whistance-Smith.

That evaluation was based in part on the fact that the church is on three levels, so would require additional staffing to properly monitor what was going on in the library. At the Sears location Whistance-Smith said things could be run with current staffing levels or possibly with fewer staff. The other stumbling block as far as the church was concerned was the anticipated renovation costs needed to repurpose the building to serve as a library.

The idea was met with interest at town council, however, there were a number of concerns raised about the practicality of the proposal.

"We have some heavy thinking ahead of us with the budget coming up," said Coun. Nancy Dodds, adding that there were other potential locations for the library within the community. "We have to look at all of those options and weigh the costs," she said.

When the proposal went to joint council the following day

there appeared to be little appetite for taking on the amount of debt needed to purchase the Sears building. County Coun. Marc Gressler said he had grave concerns about the idea especially since the guaranteed lease by Anytime Fitness would expire after 10 years. If the lease wasn't renewed at that point it would leave whichever municipality owned the building facing the full costs of the debenture until it was finally paid off 20 years later.

Coun. Anthony Heinrich had a similar view and suggested it might be best to continue to operate the library out of its current location downtown.

"How much debt can we take on as a community when we're looking at tough economic times," he said.

Joint council

meetings are held for discussion purposes only, so no decision on how to proceed was taken at the time. The request of the library board was for the Town's treasury department to determine the true costs and feasibility of the Sears proposal prior to any move to purchase the building.

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