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Developer proposes library for Barkley Village shopping area

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Barkley Village developer Jim Talbot wants to build a Bellingham Public Library branch in his commercial district.

Library officials are talking with Talbot, but some worry about extra operating costs and say the city might not be big enough to warrant another branch in addition to the one in Fairhaven.

Library officials already are pushing to build a bigger, more accessible main library downtown to replace the current one at 210 Central Ave. Officials hoped to propose a \$15 million bond this year, but city officials want to focus on other issues, particularly the future of emergency medical services, and to find a replacement for library director Julie Carterson, who is leaving by the end of this month.

Library officials also have resisted wrapping a new library into the larger project to build new cultural facilities downtown.

Barkley officials have looked into public facilities that could be part of the mixed-use district, said Jeff Kochman, president of Barkley Co.

"A library would be, in our mind, a great component," he said. "Obviously, there's a lot of people who have to think it's a good idea before we could do anything."

Under a possible deal, Barkley would erect a building for a branch library, then lease it to the city, Kochman said. He said that's what the company does for commercial tenants, although it would consider incentives like reduced rent to make a library deal more attractive.

Bellingham Mayor Mark Asmundson said a new branch near where people live might be a way to address library needs, rather than build a bigger main library.

"There's a lot of people who live near Barkley, so it could be very convenient," he said.

City Council member Grant Deger, who also serves on the library board, was less interested.

"I think we've got to get the main library looked at first," he said.

Operating costs

Carterson said cities generally start looking at branches when the population reaches 90,000 to 100,000 people, because that typically affects how long people have to drive to get to a library.

"We find that people don't like to have to travel more than 15 or 20 minutes to a library," she said.

Bellingham is not too small to consider branches, but branches should be part of a comprehensive library plan, she said.

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"I think the facilities that the city operates are not well supported, and so I would hate to stretch it too thin," she said.

Branches typically cost \$250,000 to \$350,000 a year to operate, Carterson said. The Fairhaven branch costs about \$120,000, but is small and is open only five hours a day, six days a week, she said.

Barkley District and library officials plan to discuss the idea later this month. Library board Chairman Tim Douglas said he wants to get a better sense of what Talbot has in mind. He and library board Vice Chairman Alan Kemble said they also worry about operating costs.

"If the city would say 'We'll pay for it,' I'd be delighted," Kemble said, "but you know I'm perhaps a bit more of a realist than that."

He said the library also would have to do some research to determine demand for a library in the Barkley area.

"Obviously a library would attract people, some of whom would, I'd like to think, be additional users," Kemble said. "But I don't know that."

LIBRARY USE: Bellingham Public Library serves 1,200 people a day - a number expected to reach 2,000 a day by 2020.

COST: A new full-service branch would cost \$250,000 to \$350,000 a year to operate.

Sources: Bellingham Public Library; National Center for Education Statistics

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