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COVER STORY

Floating idea of a library on waterfront

Councillor says it's time for a bigger library with input from residents about location, services



HALEY
RYAN
STARMETRO HALIFAX

After years spent calling for a larger library, Bedford residents are being asked to weigh in with ideas that the area councillor hopes will lead to a new chapter for the "overdue" project.

The Bedford Public Library branch first opened in 1968 and has been in its current location on the main floor of an office building on Dartmouth Rd. since 1990.

While Councillor Tim Outhit says the library has "wonderful" staff who do the best they can to run programs and events, they're impeded by a space of roughly 6,000 square feet. Compare that to branches like Keshen Goodman in Clayton Park (25,000 square feet) or the popular Central Library (about 129,000 square feet).

"It's overdue, because the library is literally bursting at the seams for a community that has tripled in population for what it was originally used," Outhit said on Monday. "The library outgrew its space."

The councillor said he's been hearing from residents for years that they want a larger library with more services, meeting rooms and hopefully a more accessible walking location with nicer surroundings. There has even been a budget-line item with money in reserve for a new Bedford facility in the Halifax Public Libraries (HPL) long-term capital strategy, Outhit said.

But it has taken until now to organize a consultation process, which kicks off with two public engagement sessions in-branch this Wednesday.

Outhit said the old Town of Bedford (prior to amalgamation in 1996) and many residents envisioned the infill area on the waterfront as the ideal place for a new town hall, library and



Halifax Public Libraries is asking for public feedback on the future of the Bedford Library. ZANE WOODFORD/STARMETRO HALIFAX

community space.

"There's a lot of people who I believe still want to see — in addition to hopefully a train station of some sort — something on the waterfront," Outhit said, referring to his long-held desire to see a commuter rail project connect Bedford to downtown Halifax.

But, Outhit said, just because many residents in the past have preferred the waterfront doesn't mean HPL can simply set up a new branch there right away. That's where public consultation comes in.

Residents will be asked what they'd like to see offered in their library, which Outhit said will help HPL decide on the size of the building. That in turn will help it with options for the location.

"IT'S OVERDUE, BECAUSE THE LIBRARY IS LITERALLY BURSTING AT THE SEAMS."

Bedford councillor Tim Outhit

"We would want it with good parking, good bus access, walkability. And do people want some performing arts in it? Do they want some meeting space? Do they want ... kids programming area?" Outhit said. "My preference has always been the vision that's been held by a lot of residents, that it would be nice to see it on something ... that allows us to see the beauty of our water."

Outhit said that is another

aspect to consider: If someone comes forward with an existing building that checks all the boxes, a leasing option could work, while on the other hand building a new facility that's HRM-owned might be best.

Asa Kachan, CEO and chief librarian for Halifax Public Libraries, said in an email on Monday they have "known for a long time that the needs of our Bedford community are changing as it

grows and evolves."

Although the Bedford Public Library has been identified by regional council as a capital funding project over the next 10 years, Kachan said they are in the "very early stages" of consulting with the community, so it's too soon to determine or discuss budget and timeline for construction.

Interested Bedford residents are welcome to sessions at the branch on 15 Dartmouth Rd. Wednesday at 1 p.m. and 6 p.m., or at a pop-up library booth at the Ice Patch Hollow in Sunnyside Mall Sunday from 11 a.m.- 3 p.m., as well as Sept. 18 at the BMO Centre from 6-8 p.m. There's an online survey at letstalklibraries.ca or people can email letstalklibraries@halifax.ca.