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Designs for new Wichita central library nearly finished

By Shelby Reynolds, The Wichita Eagle

Wichita Public Library officials are expecting the new central library to be unlike other existing public libraries in the nation. In fact, the word “library” will no longer be in the name. Designs for the proposed Advanced Learning Center are nearing completion. “We’re really excited about that because we really think that we are on the front line of what’s happening with the evolution of public libraries and the roles that they play in their communities,” library director Cynthia Berner said. “There are things more like this happening in academic libraries, but not necessarily in public libraries.”

The center – which, if approved by the Wichita City Council, will sit on the southeast corner of Second and McLean – is designed to meet the education needs of every person in the community, Berner said, whether they prefer one-on-one interaction or group collaboration. Design plans for the two-story building are in the final stages of approval, and construction documents will be completed late this year or early next year, Berner said. At that point, City Council will decide whether to put the project out to bid, and if approved, construction could start next spring.

The building is slated to cost about \$30 million, with the city paying about \$27.5 million. The remaining cost is up to the library foundation, which hopes that about \$2.5 million – or more, depending on fundraising efforts – would go toward new technology in the building. The new library will be slightly larger than the current one near Century II; the plans call for an increase from 89,000 square feet to 95,000. Steve Roberts, who has been on the Wichita Library Board for eight years, said about 60 percent of the current library is not available to the public, while the new library will be about 60 percent open to the public.

First floor

The design plans include a circle drive off McLean that will allow public transit and school buses to enter the building’s east entrance, while the west entrance faces remaining parking. This is an improvement, Berner said, since visitors will no longer have to compete with Century II for parking spots. The two entrances convene into a commons area, which serves as a gateway to the rest of the building. The commons area can be open so people can attend meetings in conference rooms or Final Friday events when the rest of the building is closed.

The conference room can hold about 300 people or can be divided into small rooms. The space also will serve as a reinforced storm shelter when the library is open. The current central library houses its children’s space on the third floor, which Berner said makes it difficult for families to juggle strollers, toddlers and bags up the stairs or elevators. The design plan calls for a children’s pavilion on the first floor. It will include a children’s courtyard, storytelling rooms and a technology space for group instruction.

Between the conference rooms and the children’s pavilion is a maker space that is accessible from the commons area. Berner said the space will support STEAM learning – science, technology, engineering, art and math. “We don’t know exactly what we want that to look like right now,” she said. “It really just is a great, flexible room where we can bring in different types of activities,” such as touring galleries. The rest of the first floor includes technology classrooms and spaces – the new building will include 110 public computers, compared with 31 at the current library – and teen, film, music and new release collections. The fiction collection will resemble a bookstore, Berner said. The bookshelves will be shorter in length but taller in height, and small nooks of seating will be scattered throughout.

Within the fiction collection is a new high-density storage area, which is made up of mechanical shelves that can be collapsed and opened at the push of a button. This space will likely be accessed through a clerk at a service window. “If you were looking for something that would probably be on this first floor, it’s not out on the shelves, we can call back and pull it and bring it,” Berner said. “That let’s us keep these collections really mobile. We can adjust them based on demand and interest.” The storage area also will include additional copies of books – including sets for book clubs – or older works from prolific authors. “Rather than putting those out and taking up all that space on the shelf,” Berner said, “we would have this.” A drive-through pick-up window will be on the west side of the building, where readers can order a book ahead of time and check it out without ever entering the building.

Second floor

The second floor of the library is focused on learning and research space, Berner said. On the south side will be the research center, which will house the history, genealogy and other special collections. The space will include updated technology – with free access to ancestry.com – and another high-density storage area with appropriate climate control for archived items. Currently, this section has outgrown its space and is spread throughout the central library.

“It’s a room that’s behind a locked door,” Berner said of the current space. “It doesn’t have a ceiling. It’s just packed full of stuff. It doesn’t have really the climate control that we need to have. So that will be a great improvement.” The nonfiction collection also will be housed on the second floor, which will resemble the fiction collection downstairs with technology spaces and small arrangements of seating. A terrace overlooking the Arkansas River and downtown Wichita can be accessed from the second floor. Berner said she hopes it will be used not only by the city, but rented for other events after hours. By combining traditional library meeting tables with private rooms for small or larger groups, Berner said the library hopes to target each learning category, and not “one size fits all.”

The advanced learning center comes at a time of progress in Wichita, Steve Rogers said, with the completion of the new airport terminal and Wichita State University’s plans for innovation. “I think it’s going to be excellent for the city’s position in innovation and progress, particularly with cooperation with the university and other groups,” said Roberts, whose final day on the board was Wednesday. “It’s going to be quite satisfying to see the shovel go in the ground.”

The ideas for the building came from years of listening to the community, Berner said, to develop what would work best for library’s visitors. According to the American Library Association – the oldest and largest library association in the world – Wichita’s library is right on track with national trends. “Libraries today are less about what we have for people, but more about what we do for and with people,” said Sari Feldman, the association’s president. “I think it was really important to involve people who live in Wichita. This library will belong to them.”

Feldman said community libraries not only provide access to content, but also now provide opportunities for people to create by using 3-D printers or recording music in studios. “I think everything that people like and are still very fond of in terms of traditional library service will be here,” Berner said, “but it’s just so much more than that.”

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