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# Proposed Central Library in downtown Arlington could open in two years

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ARLINGTON — City leaders now envision a new library for downtown that could be built more quickly and for less money than originally proposed.

Since 2009, Arlington has been working with consultants and community members to decide whether to rebuild or renovate the 40-year-old George W. Hawkes Library — or Central Library — east of City Hall. While structurally sound, the 63,000-square-foot concrete and steel building needs an estimated \$7.5 million in repairs and is no longer large enough to meet the public's demands, officials said.

The city had been considered renovating the library, adding a fourth floor and a parking garage for \$30 million, or demolishing the structure and building a new 100,000-square-foot library and parking garage on the same site for nearly \$40 million. But neither of those plans was expected to be implemented for at least five to 10 years.

Earlier this month, the city staff pitched a new proposal to the Arlington City Council that could result in construction of a new three-story Central Library in as soon as two years. The proposed 80,000-square-foot library would be on city-owned land, including Main Street, between City Hall and the railroad tracks.

The project, with an estimated cost of \$26.6 million, would also include a pedestrian plaza between the library and City Hall, reconfigured parking and a separate 6,500-square-foot building that would serve as the new City Council chambers and library meeting space, Deputy City Manager Theron Bowman said.

"The city plaza concept may have many benefits, including reducing the required expenditures. We understand that the longer we delay, the more the construction costs would be for a new facility," said Bowman, adding that construction costs increase by about \$1 million a year. "We believe that this concept would allow for the construction of a new Central Library facility that is efficient, that is attractive and one that has the potential to serve as a catalyst or maybe even as an anchor to future public or private downtown development."

### What about the current building?

If the council approves the plan, which is still in early discussion, the city would eventually close Main Street between Pecan and Center streets for the new library location, which would also take up some of the existing City Hall parking. The existing council chambers, which is attached to City Hall and has handicap accessibility issues, would be demolished and replaced with the shared meeting space.

The city would have the option to sell the existing library location for private development, Bowman said.

Erin Hawkes Chaney, the daughter of the Central Library's namesake, has been involved in discussions about the future of the library for the past few years. She said her primary concern about the new plan is that the city's main library, which can now be seen prominently from Abram Street, will be hidden from view if it is rebuilt behind City Hall.

"It's really still a pretty building. It could use some updating for sure," Chaney said of the library. "But if they are going to tear it down and build another one, I don't see why we don't consider tearing it down and rebuilding it right there," in its current location.



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## An outdated facility

The Central Library is plagued with maintenance issues, including elevators that are out-of-service for days, Libraries Director Cary Siegfried said. A water main break recently resulted in a three-day emergency closure of the city's busiest branch.

Problems also include a leaking roof; handicap accessibility issues; out-dated electrical and plumbing and a shortage of public restrooms, according to consultants.

"Of great concern is our plumbing, which is primarily composed of galvanized steel pipes, which are very much past their useful lifespan and are in the process of corroding," Library Director Cary Siegfried said. "In addition, our electrical capacity has been reached. Back in 1973 I don't think anyone could have predicted that we would have close to 200 computers plugged into our central library."

The walls and flooring materials and fire-proofing spray in the ceilings in the older building also contain asbestos.

"While the asbestos poses absolutely no risk to everyday users of our building, when it comes to solving many of our maintenance issues it makes it that much more problematic and expensive than it would be otherwise," Siegfried said. "A significant event could easily lead to long-term building closure, especially if the problem to be solved is complicated by asbestos-containing materials."

## Funding options

Arlington has several sources of funding to complete the project, including issuing bond debt and tapping city gas well revenue and property taxes collected in the downtown tax increment reinvestment zone, Budget Manager Mike Finley said. The library design and construction costs are estimated at \$20.5 million, the shared meeting space and pedestrian plaza are estimated at \$3 million and furniture, fixtures and equipment for the new library are estimated at \$3.1 million, according to a city staff report.

Because Arlington's property tax value has increased more than expected from 2008 estimates, the city can issue an additional \$20 million in debt through certificates of obligation, which don't require voter approval, Finley said. Or the council could wait to seek the funding in the anticipated November 2014 bond election.

Private fundraising is also an option, Finley said.

"We have a lot of it identified as possibilities but there is still more work to do to put the whole picture together," he said.

**This report includes material from the Star-Telegram archives.**

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