

Dilemma facing Lewes Library could be an opportunity

By Chris Beakey | Feb 21, 2012

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I've followed the deliberations about the future of the Lewes library pretty closely. And after reading all the back and forth about who's going to win the battle between keeping it downtown or moving it out to Five Points, I'm stuck on a pretty simple question: Why does there have to be a singular winner or loser at all?

I say this as someone who lives in downtown Lewes because I treasure the sense of community here, and as a baby boomer who loved to browse the shelves of libraries that were always accessible to the military bases and suburban communities where I grew up. I'm also a writer whose first novel, published in hardcover, sold just fine at your typical Barnes & Noble but reached its largest audience because of the many librarians who chose to stock it on their own shelves. For personal and professional reasons I think libraries should be places of equal opportunity - I want to be able to stroll over to the branch in my neighborhood and want people in the larger Lewes community to have easy access to its books, magazines and digital offerings as well.

The current Lewes library – an airy, beautiful building on a perfectly landscaped lot - is one of the city's best-loved places. Unfortunately, folks on the library board are worried that it's too small and not adaptable to the space that Lewes' larger population will need in the future. One possibility presented in last week's Cape Gazette is to enlarge the current building, with or without expansion onto a new lot, which would have to be purchased. The other is to pluck it out of the heart of town and start over with a new building three miles away.

People who live out at Five Points (and probably a lot of other people who live in Lewes' western areas) understandably want the same things that those of us downtown have now – a library we can walk or easily drive to, with a rich array of material. It's good for our families, our community, and our property values. But the absolute worst "solution" for all of us would be to destroy what we have and try to recreate it somewhere else. It would be a terrible waste of an investment in a building (owned by the city, which makes me assume it's been financed by current and longtime downtown taxpayers) that's only a few years old, and a dispiriting event for the thousands of

people who value it just as it is.

And although I understand the land for the new location would be donated, does anyone think it's wise to turn our backs on what we've already invested in to spend millions to build something new from the ground up?

So why can't we consider another option? Keep the library that we have downtown as it is. Take the support for the Five Points location - and a mere portion of the money proposed to create it - and build an annex. This approach would mirror that taken in plenty of other communities that make responsible use of current libraries while also making their offerings accessible to a growing and increasingly far-flung population. I expect the current location - small and "quaint" as it is - could successfully continue serving those of us who live downtown, and the second building, constructed with more parking spaces and an expert appraisal of the technological needs of the future, would provide what's needed for thousands of other residents who also want a library close to home.

If that sounds like a magical thinking from someone who isn't considering the cost of running two libraries or aware of monetary constraints in general, consider the fact that books, magazines and newspapers in electronic formats are already selling and/or being read at a faster rate than print versions, and across the country, libraries are stocking fewer print materials in general than ever before. While there will always be plenty of readers who insist on being able to hold a book in their hands, libraries 10 years from now will have even fewer shelves and a greater focus on the exponentially expanding array of books, films, news and consumer-generated video available online.

With that in mind, I believe that fewer bookshelves means that the physical buildings will be smaller, not larger. I'd also be willing to bet that the overall cost to have two smaller libraries would be less than what it'll take to build a new mega-center from scratch (particularly given the money that would be saved by not having to purchase the property adjacent to the current library site). Like library systems in thousands of communities nationwide, each location of the greater Lewes library could have plenty of print materials in stock yet easily shuttle them from one branch to the other based on customer requests.

Meanwhile, the physical spaces of both the current building and the new one could be configured and built to offer state-of-the-art digital offerings as well.

Don't get me wrong - I'm a downtown boy who will do whatever it takes to protect my downtown library. I just don't see why my friends all over greater Lewes have to "lose" so I can "win."

Let's take advantage of a generous offer to donate land and the opportunity to build an additional, properly-scaled building to meet their needs without doing away with what we have. This would ensure that everyone in Lewes has a library that's easy to get to, a gathering place

where we can linger and learn, and a focal point for the larger community that we share.