

Sunday, Sep 17, 2006

We need branch libraries - not a new main library.

This coming Tuesday, our Bellingham Library Board of Trustees may make a decision on where to locate a new, huge, downtown library building. The plan is to ask voters to pass a bond issue of several tens of millions of dollars next spring to build this. I think there is a better solution to our library needs.

Lets start at the beginning. When an organization - our city - makes a capital decision involving tens of millions of dollars and a commitment to an infrastructure that will serve for 20 or more years, then we should first look at all viable options. The Trustees of the Bellingham Library have refused to consider the option of several branch libraries. I have talked to them and have followed this process for years - and I have urged them to investigate branches and keep the current library building downtown. They have refused and have told me that they have been told by the city administration that branch libraries are not to be discussed and that Bellingham is not big enough to have branches. Each time a citizen brings this up at a meeting, the board dismisses the idea as too expensive and not realistic. But no actual objective study has ever been done.

Now - I have some experience here. Just a few of us started the Friends of the Fairhaven Library in October 1992 when then Mayor Tim Douglas - and now Library Board Chair - decided to close the Fairhaven branch library for cost saving reasons. We did our own research and found the city numbers were skewed and false - and rather than risk our publishing those numbers, the city reversed itself and kept the library open. Over the next 10 years, the city tried at least three more times to close our branch. Our organization - and the Fairhaven community - stopped them each time. We owe much to then city council representative Bruce Ayers for keeping this branch library open.

Over these years, I have looked further into branch libraries and the future of libraries. The future is with **computer access for library searches** for books and the **delivery to a branch library** of the desired book - and the return of the book to the branch. Computer access can be from a terminal at the branch library or from our homes - and that is already a full reality. If you use the library then you know that what you look at from home is exactly what you see from a terminal at the library. You can even view the cover as a if you were browsing the shelf. There are no longer card catalogs at any libraries.

Try it yourself at <http://www.bellinghampubliclibrary.org/> and click on the "Library Catalog" link in the top left corner. Then click on the upper link to the "Library Catalog - full images ..." and then click on the "Keywords" - centered on the blue stripe - and type in Sailing as a keyword. Whala. Now, you can select a book and have it delivered to the Fairhaven Library where you can pick it up the next day - without having to waste gas driving downtown, finding a parking spot and paying for it and then driving home. Notice you can even see the book covers. More and more people are doing this every month - and Bellingham Library statistics show this. They know change is on the way.

The **Fairhaven branch** serves five neighborhoods - South Hill, Happy Valley, South, Edgemoor and Fairhaven - plus many people from the Samish neighborhood across I-5. Indeed, the Friends of the Fairhaven Library draw support, members and officers from all six neighborhoods. The children of south Bellingham are so lucky to have their library and all the programs it has for them. They can pick up requested books and return them - even though the books came from the downtown main library or even from the county library. Very convenient - very fuel efficient - time saving - environmentally wise.

We need branch libraries in the following sections of town. Note these are not exact, but are best near middle or high schools - where parents and kids travel. Neighborhood involvement would provide the best exact locations.

Whatcom Falls Park area - about as far as Fairhaven from the main library. This would serve the neighborhoods of Silver Beach, Whatcom Falls, Alabama Hill plus many from the Puget and Roosevelt and Mt. Baker neighborhoods and the Urban Growth Area of Geneva and north of Lake Whatcom.

Birchwood - almost as far away as Fairhaven. This would also serve the Meridian neighborhoods to an extent and the large Urban Growth Area around the airport. Branches at these two locations would provide huge relief to the crowding at the main library downtown. Additional locations will become viable and cost effective in future years - especially north of I-5 in the fast growing Meridian area, Yew Street, and the Squalicum growth area. Experience will be our guide for new branches. Our Fairhaven branch has three meeting rooms of small, medium and large sizes. Any groups can reserve the rooms and dancing and music events regularly take place in the large third story room. We only wish other neighborhoods had the fine facility we have on the Southside. Oh - and it is cost effective in comparison with the main library for services. Regardless of the dismissive comments from the trustees.

Now to address those two issues or reasons given for needing a new huge main library downtown.

They say they have too many books and cannot display them. Well, yes, the administrators have given me tours over the years of the basement and the many books down there. But the very real world rule of 80-20 applies here - those books are hardly ever requested and this is mainly because they are so old. Or so narrow in scope. 80 percent of requests are for 20 % of the books - and those are the only ones needed for display on open shelves for browsing. They are not a reason to spend tens of millions of dollars just to store them.

Instead what we need is an **inexpensive warehouse** located in an inexpensive industrial zone that can house all the books and materials not needed for display. When books are requested that are in the warehouse, then courier trucks can bring the books directly to the library of choice of the patron - main, Fairhaven, or other. If on any given day, 100 people request 200 books that are in the warehouse, then one truck can deliver them close to where these people live - instead of 100 car trips to downtown with all the gas usage, traffic on streets, parking problems and over crowding of the main library.

Think about it - banks use branches for customer convenience. Grocery stores are all over town. The library provides a service and it should locate facilities where the people are.

Second, Bellingham Library should **merge** with the Whatcom Library System. The two libraries now share many services - the online catalog is common and they loan books back and forth. One administration would save tax dollars. The time is long past when this should have been done and the improvement of service will be considerable. Our current Bellingham library director, Pam Kiesner, came here from my home town of Green Bay where she oversaw a combined city and county library system. She is well experienced to provide us with the same service.

These three things - branch libraries, an inexpensive warehouse for old and little used materials, and merging with the county system - will provide the path to efficiency and better service for all in Bellingham and the county. This option should be seriously evaluated in an open process by the Bellingham Library Board of Trustees. Instead of spending 20 or 40 or more millions of dollars on a new library and parking facilities, we will probably learn that for half that amount we can build branches and a warehouse and be providing better service to everyone - and doing that more cost effectively every year.

A little story is in order here. In 1994, the Bellingham Library spent tens of thousands of dollars on a dialup process for accessing the catalog. It involved 500 disks for 500 patrons only and was very confusing to use. As it was being planned, I protested that this was folly and the library should spend that money to go on the Internet. I was actually asked by city administrators what the Internet was. Finally I brought together three other computer consultants and we met with the library director and mayor Tim's assistant. We four tried to explain to them the advantages of going on the Internet and the waste of setting up their little program. They thanked us and went ahead with their program. I am willing to bet that not one reader in 100 of this story ever knew of that program. It was a total flop. We citizens do have a right and need to provide guidance to our city administrators. And they would do better by listening to us occasionally.

Internet computer access is becoming more awesome each year - and we will soon be able to 'browse' a shelf of books, including those checked out and not on the real shelf. We will even be able to read the title pages and abstracts. Of course we can still visit our branch or main library and browse the shelves and flip through books - a most enjoyable endeavor. With Internet research, the need for a huge reference library is diminishing fast. There is no reason for a monolithic library any more than there is for a huge train station. The Internet is supplementing the one and the airplane almost replaced the trains.

Indeed the joy of our Fairhaven branch library is we can conveniently drop in and read, browse or pick up a reserved book. The branch especially serves school age kids and retirees for reading. Back in 1992, my son was 7 years old and I fought to keep our neighborhood library open for him and his friends and other school kids. Today, all residents should insist that our city evaluate this viable option before committing to a single huge monument of a library downtown that will not provide service to our growing community and will soon be as outdated as the foolish dialup system of 1994.

I hope other citizens will speak out to our library board and our city council and request a serious, fair, objective and professional evaluation of what will serve us best in the future. Even if it costs a couple hundred thousand, it may save us 20 million. Branch libraries will take pressure off the main library, will serve residents better, and will cost less.

- John Servais

See city map on next page with rough placement of branch libraries.

