

*The best of both worlds - “Preserve the past, build for the future”*

## Library plans are met with enthusiasm

Excitement about the future of the Skaneateles Library has as much to do with the historical building on Genesee Street as it does with a new site on Fennell Street, community members learned at a recent Zoom meeting.

The goal is “to build a right-sized library for our community ... *and* to bring new life to our current building,” Library Board Vice President Susanne Guske said during a presentation for the Skaneateles Rotary Club and others.

Many have expressed relief and enthusiasm over the dual plan, which is described as a “win-win.”

Guske shared a map showing the first-choice location (announced in October 2020) at 75 Fennell Street between Skaneateles Town Square (Ace) and SAVES, with a circle around the area that is within a five-minute walk.

It meets the top criteria, including being close to downtown, neighborhoods, parks and schools; allowing for parking, drop offs, a drive-through window; and giving access to outdoor space. The goal is for the new building to “have good things happening in every nook and cranny,” Guske said. “It will be cozy, practical and welcoming.”

While providing better access, more opportunity, and much more needed flexibility, the space should also be “... as well-loved as the current building,” Guske said, quoting a former board member.

The library board went back to the drawing board in early 2018, after Bookends plans were set aside. “We took a fresh approach, but also built on the many prior years of research and design iterations, challenging ourselves to consider all options before deciding [in September 2019] that preserving the past at 49 East Genesee is just as important as building a new library,” she said.

The board and the architects had once again taken a serious look at what could be done to expand and renovate the existing structure, which has been essentially unchanged for 130 years. Library Director Nickie Marquis said that even with using every possible inch of land – expanding the library toward all sides of the corner lot – there wasn’t enough space to meet the minimum goals in terms of community need. “There was no way you could do that and not impact the character of the building,” she said.

“I was always an advocate for not moving the site,” said David Lee, Rotary Club president who has served for years on the Library Board. “It took me quite a while to come around.”

Lee realized what previous library boards and members have also concluded: expanding on the current site, at a busy intersection of two state roads, would fundamentally change the building and still would not meet current, let alone future, needs. The decision to build and preserve was a leap that was described as “exhilarating.”

Gard McLean, a long-time former board member, said his board came to the same conclusions, despite repeated attempts to make the Genesee site work.

Guske called Lee the “ace up our sleeve” in terms of doing what is best for the existing building, which has needed improvements for some time. “He knows the library backward and forward” and will be instrumental in future plans, she said.

The goal is to preserve and showcase the 130-year-old building with its period architecture and art, with the Barrow Gallery expanding into the back of the library to get the much sought-after space it needs. The Chamber of Commerce will likely be another “anchor” of the building, which will include a gathering space and become a used book sale venue. This will allow maintaining the current ambiance as well as revenue from rent and from used books. Guske said Cazenovia Library recently renovated a nearby barn to bring in \$3,000 a month in used book sales. “Our analyses support how viable this is,” she said.

Having a pandemic strike during this big effort has been a bit overwhelming. But rather than discouraging plans, Guske said the pandemic has highlighted the need for a new site and helped guide decisions that must be made.

The Fennell Street building will include state-of-the-art HVAC with windows that can open and air that can be constantly filtered. The importance of having a drive-through window has also been accentuated in the pandemic, Guske said.

“We really hope to make an environmental statement,” with the building, inside and out, said Library Board President Dave Hempson, who has led the diverse and experienced board through the intensive research and decision-making period.

“We see this as an investment to meet our community needs,” in both the new and the old, for many years to come, Hempson said.

The pandemic has made it more difficult to share plans. A special effort is being made to provide updates at [Skanlibrary.org](http://Skanlibrary.org) (specifically under building project) and on Facebook at [SkaneatelesLibrary](https://www.facebook.com/SkaneatelesLibrary). In addition, Marquis and board members are eager to meet with families, groups, neighborhoods and organizations over Zoom, as they did recently for the Skaneateles Rotary Club. Please contact the library, or any board member, to make arrangements.