

MAIN STREET IS THE PLACE

WHERE THE KILTON LIBRARY BELONGS



ON THE OPPOSITE PAGE TODAY, Curt Jacques, a West Lebanon business owner, urges the City Council to consider “all the options” before committing any funds to help build the \$5.2 million Kilton Public Library, a project that’s been slated for a site on Main Street since 2002. Jacques is not alone. The Greater Lebanon Chamber of Commerce is also expressing doubts about the suitability of the 1.2-acre lot, which was purchased six years ago by Lebanon Public Libraries using part of a \$1.3 million bequest from James and Willena Kilton.

This is an odd juncture to voice concerns about the location of an important civic project that is well under way. The Campaign for the Kilton Public Library has already raised \$2.8 million, half the total estimated necessary to complete construction of a 15,000-square-foot library designed expressly for the Main Street site. Most donors gave with the understanding that it would be used specifically for the library as described in fundraising brochures, which included architectural drawings of the project. Those plans include a beautifully articulated building in clapboard, stone and glass, flanked by outdoor gathering spaces and a playground.

But, according to a story by Erin Hanrahan that appeared in the *Valley News* on Wednesday, Jacques and the director of the local Chamber of Commerce, Paul Boucher, would prefer to reserve the Main Street location for commercial and residential purposes. They propose building the new library on nearby Maple Street, on the site of the former Church of the Holy Redeemer, property they regard as quieter and greener. The owner of that property says she would be interested in helping the city develop the property for such a purpose, though the two acres available at the site are not officially on the market.

The Maple Street idea didn’t sit well with library officials back in 2005, when it was first raised, and it doesn’t sit well with them now — for good reason. Main Street, current home to the West Lebanon library, continues to be the right place for the Kilton Public Library, a project the neighborhood enthusiastically supports, according to the results of a 2001 survey. At any rate, if the Chamber of Commerce and others are concerned about the suitability of a new library for the Main Street lot long vacated by a car dealership, then they should have spoken up before the City Council unanimously approved the purchase of the land for the Kilton library back in 2002. And, according to library director Lou Ungarelli, the Chamber raised no concerns about the Kilton library site at a meeting with library officials when they met in January.

So why the grumbling now and why are a few people, including Matt Brown, chairman of the Lebanon Planning Board, second-guessing decisions made long ago by library and elected officials? Perhaps it has something to do with the library’s recent request for \$1.5 million from the City Council to help meet its fundraising goals. While it’s not unreasonable for business owners and residents to want to ensure that taxpayers’ money is well spent, it’s hard to think of a better use of public funds in this case. The doubters should consider that libraries are not just repositories for books; if well designed, they often prove to be popular public gathering places, attracting people of all ages for a variety of pursuits. They also tend to attract economic development and thus commerce. What better place for an expanded West Lebanon library than Main Street? And what better use of Main Street than as a place for cultural enrichment and civic engagement?