

Community members, architects discuss renovation plans for Elkton Library

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Cecil Whig Photo by Lilly Howard

ELKTON — Community members filled the Elkton Branch Library's meeting room on Wednesday evening to discuss the upcoming renovation project on the 40 year old building, with architects prioritizing community input and aiming to ensure group spaces, implement history and preserving the library's book collection.

Attendees were encouraged to vote on different spaces based on how they would feel about them: comfortable, collaborative, productive, family-friendly and overall favorite.

Libraries used to be only a place for books, where upon entering you were meant to stay quiet throughout your time there. Today, they have become more of a community space for people to hang out, create, and collaborate together while still having access to an extensive library of resources — digital and print.

"We see the entire community coming out to use the library, and we want to make sure that our spaces are ready to meet the needs of the community that we serve. And so it's really important that as we have these conversations, we involve all of you to hear from you," CCPL Executive Director Rachel Wright said.

There was also an activity where community members could write down what they love and want to preserve in the Elkton library, what the transformed library should include, and what will make this a successful project. The architects, Chuck and Shannon Wray with Quinn Evans architecture firm, and CCPL team are determined to take community input heavily into consideration when designing this space.

"We've met people who've been coming here since they were children. It is very much a loved asset in this community. And so how do we transform it without losing what's special and precious about it?" Shannon Wray, who specializes in interior design, said.

They have met with students, local elected officials, local businesses, and soon will

meet with local educators to ensure they take everyone's wants and needs into consideration for the project.

"We don't know how to do our jobs if we don't get input from the community," Shannon said.

Chuck and Shannon, via Quinn Evans, also designed the North East Library and the recent Perryville Library renovations, and aim to take what they learned from those projects to make the Elkton Library a success.

"We think it's really important to study past projects and understand what worked and maybe what could be improved upon...we will take that information to heart and it will certainly influence the design of Elkton," Chuck said.

The Wray's firm, Quinn Evans, was recognized by the American Institute of Architects for the 2024 Architecture Firm Award, and is ranked as the top public library design firm. They are experts at ensuring spaces provide an open environment that fuels creativity, productivity, and community.

"The built environment affects health and well being, and the library is so well poised as a place that's open and welcoming to all, where a lot of people spend a good portion of their time," Shannon said.

To accomplish this, the designers prioritize natural light and open spaces, bringing a natural palette inside.

They also plan to incorporate spaces for everyone to enjoy including teens, young adults, parents, children, and families.

Members in the crowd voiced their hopes and dreams for the renovation project, or as the Wray's call it a 'transformation,' and some even came with 'wishlists.'

With limited space at the Elkton library, people are concerned about how they are going to best utilize it without getting rid of the books, since it is the branch with the largest collection. Adaptable spaces and innovative bookshelves could solve this problem.

"I feel like it's safe to say that it will continue to be the library that has the largest collection...the first thing in our mission is to champion reading," Wright said, adding that they also want to have a balance of collaborative group spaces.

The community also wants to ensure the history of the town and surrounding areas are preserved in the library by incorporating some kind of mural or interactive display of where we came from to get inspired for where we are going.

Architects are still in the concept design phase, meeting with many community groups to come up with a strategic plan going forward to best meet the needs of the people. They estimate their 'transformation' to be finished in 15 months or more, however are awaiting to see how funding will impact their abilities.

“Right now, we’re in the programming, concept design phase. There’s this will help inform the funding is necessary for the project to see how those funds can be best allocated...We have to help folks be aware of what things cost and how we can best manage those, funds,” Chuck said.

With federal funding cuts still up in the air, Wright is not sure how the library system will be impacted at this time.

At a public budget input meeting held by the county government earlier this month, Elkton Alliance Executive Director Alicia Calhoun advocated for Cecil County Public Libraries, pointing out that it is much more than just a place for books, but a place for community growth.

Calhoun emphasized the importance of the Business Information Center inside the library, which offers free assistance and support to entrepreneurs and innovators looking to start their own business.

Shirley McCray-Simmons, Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees for the CCPL, echoed Calhoun’s thoughts on supporting the libraries in the county and emphasized that it is one of the few institutions with services accessible to everyone.

“CCPL is not just a repository of books, it is a dynamic community hub that evolves alongside the needs of its residents. The library’s mission to champion reading, build knowledge, inspire curiosity and connect community reflects its deep commitment to outreach and engagement,” McCray-Simmons said.

She shared a story about a local veteran, Mr. Simpson, who needed help applying for disability benefits on a computer, who admittedly wasn’t great with technology. The library employee helped Mr. Simpson apply and ensured he received all the back pay he was owed.

“Mr. Simpson shared how that money didn’t just change his life, it changed his entire family’s future,” McCray-Simmons said. “Stories like this remind us of the profound difference the library makes in people’s lives every day...As we look ahead, it’s essential that CCPL has the resources it needs to continue serving and advancing for our community.”

If the library does have to close for a period of time during renovations, Wright said that they will ensure the community remains connected to the library through partnerships, outreach, and utilizing the bookmobile.

Those with input on the renovation process are encouraged to reach out to Wright, CCPL, or Shannon and Chuck Wray directly.