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JAMAICA PLAIN

## Design process to begin on project to renovate, expand Jamaica Plain branch library

Posted by Matt Rocheleau July 2, 2013 03:00 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

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Boston's newly approved city budget includes \$200,000 for the design and early construction costs of a long-delayed project to renovate and expand the Jamaica Plain branch library.

Boston Public Library officials hope that full construction will start by fall 2014, library spokeswoman Rosemary Lavery said. But, the city will need to approve more funding for the multi-million dollar project to become a reality.

Toward the end of summer, a request for proposals to select an architect and designer for the project will be issued. Then a formal design process will take between 9 months and one year to complete, said Christine Schonhart, director of library services for Boston's library branches.

That design process, and perhaps some early construction costs, will be funded by the \$200,000 allocation that was included in the fiscal year 2014 budget, which was approved last week by the City Council and Mayor Thomas M. Menino. Fiscal year 2014 began on Monday, July 1.

Once that money is spent, however, the project will not be able to move

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forward without more funding.

When planning begins for the next city budget, fiscal year 2015, library officials plan to request that the city include the rest of the funding needed to complete the project, Schonhart said.

She said city officials have not made any promises for the project to be fully funded in the next budget, but library officials are optimistic.

“We’re dedicated to this project, we know it’s been on hold for a longtime, and we want to get it moving,” said Schonhart.

She said neighborhood advocacy for the project, which has been strong in the past, remains essential for future funding approval.

The project’s estimated cost will not be determined until the design process moves further along. For now, library officials expect the project cost will be around \$8.5-million, a figure based on the cost estimate of a similar, several-year-old plan to renovate and expand the JP branch.

After a grassroots push, library officials in 2006 completed a renovation and expansion study for the branch near the corner of Sedgwick and South streets.

An \$8.5-million plan to repair the building, make the facility compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act; improve the front of the library and expand some services was selected as was an architect to lead the project.

But, due to a lack of funding, the effort stalled until late last year when city officials held a series of public meetings to discuss revised versions of the 2006 plan.

Schonhart said the latest proposal calls for complete interior renovations, including new furniture, paint, flooring, a larger circulation desk and technological improvements. There would be elevator access, accessibility upgrades to entrances and an expansion off the main floor that could become a space for computers, reading and other uses.

The main floor of the branch would house the adult and children’s areas. A loft space overlooking the main floor would be for teenagers. Officials have proposed reducing the amount of storage space in the basement to allow for an

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additional room or rooms that would be publicly accessible.

"We want to upgrade the infrastructure so it has modern library services while still maintaining its current charm," Schonhart said.

She said the branch would likely be shut down for construction, which would likely take one year to 18 months. During the closure, library users would be directed to the Connolly branch in JP.

Schonhart said a key factor that could affect the project's scope, cost and timing is that part of the exterior of the building, the side facing South Street, is designated as a historical landmark and any alterations there would require approval from the state's historical commission.

In a recent e-mail to constituents and supporters, City Councilor Matt O'Malley, whose district includes Jamaica Plain, said he strongly backs the renovation and expansion plan.

"This is a project that I have been working on since my first day in office," O'Malley wrote. "Over breakfast at Sorella's in Hyde Square last spring, I convened a meeting between Mayor Menino, his team, the Friends of the Library board and other stakeholders where we talked about the need and necessity to upgrade [the Jamaica Plain branch]. I am enormously grateful and proud that we will soon, [pending further funding approval], have a dazzling renovated branch on Sedgwick Street."

Some smaller projects have been done recently at the branch, including a \$27,000 effort last year to update the building's electrical wiring.

The 9,600 square-foot Jamaica Plain branch houses more than 40,000 items in its collection, Schonhart said. The branch typically ranks as one of the top five busiest branches of the 25 total branches citywide.

The building will turn 103 years old this July, making it the third-oldest neighborhood branch library in Boston. It was the first independent building, apart from the Copley Square Central Library, built by the city exclusively for library use.

The facility, which features large schoolhouse windows and two fireplaces, cost \$33,000, including furnishings, to build on city-owned land.

It opened on July 24, 1911 after a fire three years prior at the library's former space in the adjacent Curtis Hall, where the branch began in June 1876.

A small addition was constructed in 1936 and the interior remodeled in 1963.

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