

FAQ 6 Branch Library:

Should the City consider a branch library rather than a larger facility in Downtown?

Community Preference and Economic Impact

The [2016 Middleton Public Library Space Needs & Building Study](#) found that public input overwhelmingly favored a downtown location, with citizens universally believing the library's downtown location is ideal. This preference was so strong that it became one of the main reasons the Library Board eliminated both the branch and Greenfield site options from consideration.

Importantly, this preference for a single downtown facility has been consistent for decades. As far back as 2007, focus group discussions led by Ethel Himmel of Himmel & Wilson found that focus groups preferred one full-service facility rather than opening a branch. This long-standing community preference demonstrates that the downtown location isn't just a current trend, but a deeply held community value.

The downtown library serves as an economic driver, with a Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction study showing libraries provide a \$4.06 return on investment for each taxpayer dollar, and the downtown location helps explicitly drive economic development in the area.

A Branch Won't Solve the Core Problem

Most importantly, a branch library would not solve the space needs of the existing main library. The current library is severely overcrowded—it ranks 9th nationally for circulation per capita but second-to-last in its peer group for total square footage. The study determined that even with a branch, the main library would still need to nearly triple in size to meet 20-year projections.

Multiple studies over nearly two decades have consistently identified the need for substantial expansion of the main facility:

- 2009: A Library Facilities Needs Assessment projected that "a substantial increase in square footage would be required for the library to serve the projected 2030 population."
- 2011: A study by Municipal Economics & Planning recommended that "the existing 32,000 square foot library be substantially expanded to meet the 2030 projected population service needs"

The Board explicitly recognized that a branch library wouldn't fully resolve the programmatic and spatial shortcomings of the current library and would only be a short-term solution for long-term problems.

Evidence of Sustained Growth and Demand

The historical data show the library's growth has been consistent and substantial:

- 27% increase in book holdings between 2007 and 2009
- 32% increase in public access computer stations over the same period
- 27% projected growth in service population by 2030

This sustained growth pattern demonstrates that the space problem isn't temporary—it's an ongoing challenge that requires a comprehensive solution, not the band-aid approach a branch would provide.

Cost-Effectiveness and Resource Allocation

The financial analysis reveals why a downtown expansion makes more sense than a branch:

- Branch cost: \$4.5 million for 19,200 square feet (plus land acquisition costs)
- Downtown expansion options: \$18-18.5 million for 90,000-92,800 square feet

While the branch appears cheaper upfront, it would still leave the main library severely undersized and require eventual expansion anyway. The downtown options provide 4-5 times more space for only about 4 times the cost, making them far more cost-effective in the long run.

Operational Efficiency vs. Duplication

A branch would create operational inefficiencies by:

- Duplicating services that the main library already provides
- Requiring additional collection materials and separate staffing
- Splitting resources rather than consolidating them where they're most needed
- Creating additional ongoing operational costs for staffing, utilities, and maintenance across two facilities

The Library as Downtown Centerpiece

The study emphasizes that the library should remain "a centerpiece for downtown Middleton, providing a strong sense of civic pride and community." Public libraries generate foot traffic, increase quality of life, improve public safety, and help diversify communities—benefits that are maximized when the library remains centrally located rather than dispersed across multiple smaller facilities.

Board's Final Decision

After a comprehensive analysis, the Library Board determined that the branch option was not viable and chose to focus only on downtown expansion alternatives. The Board recognized that while a Greenfield site might be optimal programmatically, the increased building cost and loss of downtown location meant it didn't merit further study.

In essence, the community gets more value from one robust, adequately-sized downtown library than from splitting resources between a cramped main library and a separate branch that would only provide temporary relief to a long-term space crisis that has been building for over two decades.