

Facilities Master Plan 2023

The 2014 Study

In 2014 the Flathead County Library System created a Facilities Master Plan based on a study conducted by Himmel & Wilson Library Consultants of Milton, Wisconsin.

The consultants concluded that Flathead County would be well served if it maintained its geographic distribution of facilities in Kalispell, Bigfork, Columbia Falls and Marion, and adopted 0.7 square feet per capita as its overall target for library facilities. Based on usage data, they recommended expanding facilities in Kalispell, Bigfork, and Columbia Falls, while keeping Marion as it then was.

After studying the expansion potential of the branch locations in Kalispell, Bigfork, and Columbia Falls, Himmel & Wilson concluded that remodeling and/or expanding was either cost-prohibitive (Kalispell) or downright impossible (Bigfork and Columbia Falls).

The Kalispell building at 247 First Ave. E, which is over 100 years old and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, requires extensive restoration, including Asbestos remediation and a complete overhaul of its antiquated electrical and plumbing systems, which is cost-prohibitive for the library and the county. The library branches in Bigfork and Columbia Falls operate out of rented rooms in fully occupied buildings.

The study concluded that the Flathead County Library System should develop new libraries in Kalispell, Bigfork and Columbia Falls.

After updating demographic data to reflect current conditions, the Facilities Committee believes this recommendation is still valid today.

Our Situation in 2023

Some progress towards better facilities has been made, and the new space for the Bigfork branch is nearing completion. Time is running out for the Kalispell facility, with a lease that ends in 2033 and is highly unlikely to be renewed. The Columbia Falls Branch is operating out of a room rented from the city. The Marion facility has lost its space at the local school due to remodeling.

(The library system has signed a new Interlocal Agreement with Marion School and is actively looking for alternative ways to bring service to Marion.)

Per the 2020 census, Flathead County had a population of 104,357 residents. After deducting the population of Whitefish, which continues to be served by the Whitefish Community Library, the Flathead County Library System serves approximately 100,000 people and should function well with a total of 70,000 square feet of space.

The Kalispell branch occupies 29,000 square feet, the Bigfork Ark building will provide 6,000 square feet, Columbia Falls operates in a 4,700 square-foot room, and Marion currently has zero square feet available.

To calculate the service area for each branch, the County GIS office generated a map that shows the number of residents living within a 15-minute drive of our library branches (including the currently non-existent Marion branch). The map shows that 90% of the county's population has access to a library branch within 15 minutes of where they live.

The service areas overlap. In order to get a better picture of potential users at each branch, we halved the overlapping population, assigned each half to one or the other of the branches, and rounded the figures for ease of use. This gives us the following approximate service area populations:

Bigfork:	9,000 residents
Columbia Falls:	27,000 residents
Kalispell:	55,000 residents
Marion:	2,000 residents
Total service area:	93,000 residents

Applying the 0.7 square-foot/person standard for space, each branch calculates out to the following sizes:

Bigfork:	$9,000 \times 0.7 = 6,300$ square feet
Columbia Falls:	$27,000 \times 0.7 = 18,900$ square feet
Kalispell:	$55,000 \times 0.7 = 38,500$ square feet
Marion:	$2,000 \times 0.7 = 1,400$ square feet
Total service area:	$93,000 \times 0.7 = 65,100$ square feet

Given that the Kalispell branch serves as the administrative hub of the entire system, processes all new materials, and handles every item sent to and received from Partner Libraries, it should be a minimum of 40,000 square feet to allow proper processing space. Furthermore, the smaller a library, the larger the proportionate impact of bathrooms, hallways, staircases etc. on its usable space.

Recommendations

Taking into account the above numbers and factors, the Facilities Committee makes the following recommendations:

- Keep facilities in the general area they are currently in.
- Move the Kalispell branch to a 40,000 square foot space within the city's core area.
- Move the Columbia Falls branch to a 15,000 to 20,000 square foot space.
- Find a way to serve the Marion area.

Priority should be given to finding a location for the Kalispell branch, which will lose its space by 2033, and to restoring service to Marion.

The Facilities Committee is aware that the Flathead Valley Real Estate Market is tough, construction costs are high, and library finances are tight. Finding ideal locations and creating ideally sized branches will be challenging. Nevertheless, we are confident that with support from our County, generous philanthropists, and a vigorous public fundraising campaign we can provide great library facilities for Flathead County residents.

Carmen Cuthbertson & Jane Wheeler, Facilities Committee

ImagineIF Flathead County Library Board

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