

Facilities Master Plan 2025

Background

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 study concluded that the Flathead County Library System should develop new libraries at its branch locations in Kalispell, Bigfork and Columbia Falls, while maintaining its limited service in Marion.

After recalculating demographic data to account for the 2020 census, the Facilities Committee upheld these recommendations in its 2023 Master Plan.

The Facilities committee is updating this plan in 2025 to reflect the work that has been accomplished over the past two years.

Our Situation in 2025

The new Bigfork branch library opened in August 2024. An existing building in this unincorporated community was extensively remodeled to meet the physical and operating requirement of a modern facility.

The 4,700 square foot Columbia Falls branch has been reconfigured to better serve patron needs in a rapidly growing community. It still has serious space limitations for defined children's areas, quiet study, and staff administrative functions.

The main branch in Kalispell is the primary challenge facing Flathead County Library. The lease at 247 1st Ave. E ends in 2033 and is highly unlikely to be renewed. Even without this deadline, the building is inefficient, inadequate, and unsafe for serving on-site patrons, staff and visitors. It cannot be adapted to the efficient processing and distribution needs of the other FCL branches and Northwest Montana partner libraries.

Per 2025 Montana Demographic statistics, Flathead County has a population of almost 115,000 residents. Using the standard calculation of population served times 0.7 square feet, the total library space in Flathead County should be around 80,000 square feet.

The Kalispell branch occupies 29,000 square feet, the Bigfork branch has 6,000 square feet, and the Columbia Falls branch operates in a 4,700 square-foot room.

Whitefish has its own library (9,500 sq. ft.) The West Shore Community Library in unincorporated Lakeside owns its nonprofit, all volunteer public library. The FVCC library (12,000 sq. ft.) also serves residents of Flathead and Lincoln counties with limited collections and services.

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. The map shows that 90% of the county's population has access to library services within 15 minutes of where they live.

The Kalispell branch serves as the administrative hub of the entire county system, processes new materials, conducts transfers of materials between branches, and handles every item sent to and received from Partner Libraries. It should be a minimum of 40,000 square feet to function efficiently and allow for sufficient processing and distribution space.

Recommendations

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

- Maintain facilities in the three communities where they are currently located.
- Build a new Kalispell main branch of at least 40,000 square feet within the city's core area.
- Relocate or build a Columbia Falls branch of 15,000 to 20,000 square feet.
- Find a way to serve the Marion and Evergreen areas.

Finding a site for and building a new Kalispell main branch must be given priority. Working with the county, the Library Board is negotiating for the purchase of a site, staff are working on a building program to determine space allocation within a new building, and The Flathead Library Foundation is gearing up for a large fundraising effort.

Collaboration between these public and private entities is the key to building an outstanding library for Flathead County.

Carmen Cuthbertson & Jane Wheeler, Facilities Committee

Adopted by the Flathead County Library Board

3/27/25