

Clean slate gives city options

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LARGO - Uncertainty about the future of the old Largo library ended this week as city commissioners voted 5 to 1 to demolish the building.

Commissioner Gay Gentry cast the dissenting vote, saying the old building should not be replaced with one that might be bigger.

"I would be reluctant to have a footprint in that area that is larger than it already is," Gentry said.

But in the end, commissioners decided it was best to move forward with a clean slate.

"It's our job to look into the future, see the vision, take a deep breath and go for it," Mayor Patricia Gerard said.

The discussion over what to do with the empty building began almost two years ago when the new library nearby was taking shape.

The old library was built in 1977 with an addition constructed in 1986. Located in Largo's Central Park, the building is about 36,000 square feet.

City officials previously discussed renovating the old structure into an arts and community center. But the project's estimated cost of \$5.28-million was more than the city hoped to spend. Utilities, including an alarm system, cost about \$35,000 a year at the old building.

City Manager Steven Stanton suggested that the city demolish the building. On Tuesday night, commissioners voted to award a \$112,930 contract to Sonny Glasbrenner, a demolition company in Clearwater.

The building should be torn down in the next month, assistant city manager Henry Schubert said. Afterward, the city will plant grass and use the area as an extension to the park.

The long-range hope is to build a community center that would house arts programs and activities currently taking place at the downtown community center, Schubert said. Once that's done, the current community center, located at 65 Fourth St., would be demolished and sold to a private developer.

Gerard has suggested starting a capital campaign to pay for the new arts center, similar to the way the city petitioned the community for funds to finish the new library.

"People think because we tapped the community for the library that there may not be anyone left," Gerard said. "But I don't think that's true. I think we can do it."

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