

Project Grace Information

Purpose of the Project

The New Hanover County-owned downtown block, bordered by Grace, Third, Chestnut, and Second streets is an underutilized public asset. The county's Main Public Library is housed on this property but, due to structural limitations, it cannot be expanded. The Project Grace study was developed to realize the full potential of this downtown property, understand the constraints of the site, and to develop a recommendation that provides maximum value of the block for New Hanover County citizens – both in terms of services and taxable property.

Library Services

The library was originally designed as a Belk Department Store and does not maximize the efficiencies of a modern library. It is an aging structure that will need significant capital investments to ensure functionality and to accommodate the growing needs of the community. Libraries of the future are changing their model, and New Hanover County is committed to remaining at the forefront of innovative library services and providing quality resources to our citizens.

There have been concerns that the library size would shrink if the site was redeveloped. However, the actual space for library services would **increase** by approximately 25 percent. While 32,400 square feet is needed for the downtown library's current services, the county would recommend 40-45,000 square feet to accommodate future growth.

- Current size: 101,000 square feet
- Usable Space: 67,400 square feet
- Basement storage of infrequently used books: -20,000 square feet (would be moved elsewhere)
- Executive staff: -15,000 square feet (would be moved elsewhere)

Total: 32,400 square feet (estimated downtown library space needs)

Each county library offers unique and important environments for citizens. The downtown library offers the North Carolina Room, Law Library, community meeting rooms, and children's room. These important elements will be maintained at the downtown library.

If a modern library is built, downtown office space will be temporarily leased to ensure library services continue during construction.

Co-Location of Cape Fear Museum and Main Library

Cape Fear Museum and the Public Library innovatively collaborate on programs to enhance learning experiences throughout the year. Library and museum staff conduct preschool learning activities at both facilities and many programs, such as *Tarheels Go Walking*, travel to both locations in order to complete their experience. Co-locating the downtown library and the museum eliminates this travel and provides synergy that is not possible with separate locations.

Cape Fear Museum recently completed a strategic plan which outlines the goals of: engaging the community, creating new and creative ways to experience exhibits, developing a new entry experience, and reallocating space. Additionally, the museum and library have explored sharing meeting rooms, classrooms, a lobby, and restrooms.

Facts about Cape Fear Museum Services

Cape Fear Museum's building was originally designed as an armory. It has been repurposed into a museum, but lacks the ability to accommodate many traveling exhibits due to ceiling heights and room sizes. It is also an aging structure and will need capital investments to ensure functionality.

- Current size: 38,420 square feet
- Proposed size: 40,000 square feet

Current Cape Fear Museum Building

If it is determined that Cape Fear Museum will be relocated downtown, a study for the desired use of the current building could be conducted. This study was not part of the current Project Grace study. Staff would recommend expediting engagement from the community to reach a decision on the future of this site.

Historic Significance

The library and the old Register of Deeds building, located on the county-owned downtown block, are not on the National Register of Historical Places and are not located in the local Historic District. While the old Register of Deeds building is considered a “contributing structure,” there have been significant alterations to the structure that compromise any historical integrity. City of Wilmington permission would still be needed to demolish the structure.

Green Space

County staff envision green space to be an important element of this proposal. Many of the investments within the Library’s Story Park are mobile and could be repurposed at another on-site location. Staff will recommend that redevelopment proposals be evaluated based on how a developer creatively accomplishes green space and components of Story Park in their design.

Should the Cape Fear Museum be relocated downtown, staff recommends the community also be engaged in a decision regarding the Cape Fear Museum Park.