

MEMORANDUM

September 10, 2003

TO: Members of the Palo Alto City Council

FROM: Library Advisory Commission Member Tom Wyman

RE: "Palo Alto Library Plan" -- A Minority Report

INTRODUCTION

On July 24th the LAC adopted its "Palo Alto Library Plan" which I endorse except for the recommendations to close the Downtown Library and shift various technical functions to that location. This is unacceptable as there is a growing need for the library and broad public support to keep it open. Also, it would be more costly to close the library than to keep it open. Since it will not be possible for me to join the Council-LAC discussion on September 29, the following observations may be helpful in assessing the LAC proposal to close the Downtown Library.

As an overview, the City's current challenge is to operate within a reduced budget with minimum negative impact on library and other City services. Consistent with this objective are the steps being taken to employ a new Library Director and the priority effort, with broad public and private sector support, to raise funds to repair and expand Children's Library. Longer term, it is essential that we prepare a bond measure or provide funds in another way to modernize and expand Main and especially the Mitchell Park library as resource libraries.

THE DILEMMA

There are two basic and mutually exclusive philosophies regarding libraries and library services:

Resource Libraries Only: Some library users, including library professionals, see libraries primarily as resource centers and place a high priority on superior collections and service to patrons in a technologically up-to-date environment. These goals can be best realized by having fewer libraries among which to spread finite resources. Adoption of this concept would result ultimately in closing or converting to other uses the City's neighborhood libraries and retaining only the Main, Mitchell Park and Children's as Palo Alto's resource libraries.

Neighborhood Libraries Plus Resource Libraries: Other library users place a high priority on having libraries conveniently located. They support the branch library concept and see those libraries as an essential neighborhood element. Branch libraries are considered generally adequate by many users, especially children and seniors. When additional information or services are required, the City's resource libraries can be accessed. Thus, these library users want to retain our neighborhood library system in addition to expanding Main, Mitchell Park and Children's as the City's resource libraries.

The dilemma is: do we retain our branch library system and continue serve our neighborhoods even though, system-wide, collections may be less comprehensive and library hours shorter, or do we close branch libraries and reassign staff so that available resources can be focused on enhancing collections and serving the public at three resource libraries?

It is incumbent on the LAC to represent library users and to advise the City Council on library-related issues. This requires that the LAC make fiscally prudent recommendations that are, at the same time, politically viable. The attachment, "Historic Background -- Neighborhood Libraries in Palo Alto," provides a historical perspective on library issues.

THE CHALLENGE

Beginning in the late 1980s, Palo Alto's library system has been underfunded and financially deprived. In 1992-93 libraries were allocated 5.5% of the City's general fund. Today that number is 4.4%, a loss of 20% or \$1.3 million over ten years. Consequently, staffing levels remain far below what they should be; our libraries are now open fewer hours, and library collections have deteriorated as funds to buy new books and other library resources have been reduced.

The single word that best reflects the condition of Palo Alto's libraries is "neglect"—neglect of staff, collections and facilities. Library consultant Beverley Simmons' staffing report dated January 2002 showed that Palo Alto was dead last in having 3.93 FTEs per 1,000 hours its libraries are open as compared with an average of 10.47 FTEs for 10 other comparable libraries that were surveyed. The report went on to observe:

It is apparent that the Palo Alto City Library is providing some incredible services with minimal resources. Palo Alto has a service demand that is much higher than the average (116%) and hours nearly double the average (190%), and provides this service with 86% of the operating funds of the other [ten] cities.

Library collections have deteriorated as a result of budget restrictions, rising material costs and limited library shelf space. Palo Alto's library system has been inadequately

funded for years with the result that services have been curtailed and library facilities are outdated and need of modernization and expansion.

In view of this deplorable situation, I would ask my LAC colleagues and others to join in urging City Council members to make libraries a City Priority. This would help assure that our library system, arguably the most important City service after police, fire and utilities, is accorded the level of support that it has had in the past. The objective should be to restore library services and collections to levels that residents of our academically-oriented community deserve and have every reason to expect.

THE ALTERNATIVES

At this juncture, however, and with little immediate prospect of additional library funding, there are basically two alternatives:

Alternative 1: The majority of LAC members favor closing and redefining the use of the Downtown Library to allow available resources to be spread over fewer libraries. It is estimated that closure of the Downtown Library would allow Main, Mitchell Park and Children’s libraries to remain open an additional two, six and two hours a week respectively.

Alternative 2: With all respect for my colleagues, I firmly favor retaining our present five-library system and reducing hours as required “across the board.”. As shown below, present library hours compared with those of a year ago have been reduced by 47 hours per week.

LIBRARY	HOURS/WEEK (7/1/2002)	HOURS/WEEK (7/1/2003)	CHANGE (Hours)
Main	67	62	Minus 5
Mitchell Park	56	58	Plus 2
Children’s	48	48	No change
College Terrace	42	35	Minus 7
Downtown	42	28	Minus 14
Terman Park	23	0	Minus 23
TOTAL	278	231	Minus 47

Clearly, any further cuts in library funding will force a reduction in the library hours shown here as well as negatively impacting services and library collections. At this point, however, there is strong public support and compelling reasons to keep the Downtown Library open.

1. Closure of the Downtown Library conflicts with at least two fundamental principles of City’s Comprehensive Plan: to encourage the development of walkable

neighborhoods and to reduce automobile trips and traffic. Closing the Downtown Library would generate more traffic trips as people are forced to drive to other libraries.

2. A library in the downtown area is an essential part of the fabric of any city's downtown area. There has been a library in downtown Palo Alto since 1893, and it would be a disservice to patrons to close the Downtown Library when so many depend on it. Many patrons, especially seniors, must necessarily walk to their destinations and could not use another library. They would be summarily deprived of an important City service.
3. The demographics and population of the neighborhood which the Downtown Library serves are changing. Hundreds of new residents will be attracted to the neighborhood with the completion of the 93 unit SummerHill Homes development. Palo Alto Housing Corporation's yet-to-be-built Oak Court Apartments and the projected 800 High facility (once current issues are resolved) will attract hundreds of additional residents to the area. These factors were inadequately considered in recommending closure of the Downtown Library. Over time, the need and use of the Downtown Library will substantially increase.
4. Some of the new residents moving into the downtown area will be young people. There is a strong correlation between readily available books and reading programs to academic achievement among kindergarten through high school age groups. These young people should not be deprived of convenient access to a neighborhood library.
5. The least costly alternative would be to keep the Downtown Library open. The LAC report recognizes that there would be costs to plan and modify each location to accommodate its new use, to purchase necessary fixtures, furniture and equipment and to make the move itself including lost time. (Inevitably, residents of South Palo Alto will question the equity of such expenditures, which are in addition to renovating and expanding Children's Library, when their library needs are even more pressing than those of North Palo Alto.)
6. Closure of the Downtown Library would severely impact a single neighborhood. To the extent there must be reductions in hours and services, budget cuts should be made throughout the system so as to equitably spread the "pain." Not only is this a more democratic way to handle budget cuts, but it would become more apparent that all of our libraries are in critical need of additional financial support.
7. It is estimated that closure of the Downtown Library would allow Main, Mitchell Park and Children's libraries to remain open collectively an additional ten hours a week. This is thin solace and a poor tradeoff for residents losing their Downtown neighborhood library.

8. Although circulation is 40% greater at College Terrace than at the Downtown Library, visitor count data show that the Downtown Library with some 101,400 visitors for the fiscal year 2002/2003 has 62% more visitors than College Terrace with only 62,500 visitors for the same period. These figures alone dictate keeping Downtown open.
9. It is unlikely that visitors and circulation will increase sufficiently at other Palo Alto libraries to offset losses in visitors and circulation that would result from closing the Downtown Library. Consequently, where service is a major City objective, closing Downtown would result in the City cutting services and serving fewer residents.
10. Palo Alto does not have a single resource library to match those of comparable communities elsewhere, but it does have a neighborhood library system that most other communities do not have. Closure of the Downtown Library would reduce by 50% our remaining neighborhood libraries with only marginal improvement in our resource libraries. We would still have seriously inadequate resource libraries. Thus we need to retain our neighborhood libraries since they're all Palo Alto really has at this point that is distinctive in the realm of libraries. Moreover, focus groups and polls clearly show there is strong community support for our neighborhood libraries. (See Attachment)

In conclusion, the recommendation to close our Downtown Library to the public would prove costly. Moreover, it would be a public disservice and a political mistake. In fact, a strong case can be made to increase library hours at Downtown and to restore Saturday hours.

Looking to the future, let's make the improvement of our public library system a City-wide Priority.

ATTACHMENT

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND -- NEIGHBORHOOD LIBRARIES IN PALO ALTO

In considering the future of the Palo Alto library system, it is important to recognize what actions there have been over the last 25 years to modify the City's library organization.

- In June 1978 in response to passage of Proposition 13, City Manager June Fleming proposed closing the College Terrace and Children's libraries. Some 3000 residents signed petitions and hundreds mobilized to fight the closures. Mayor Scott Carey opposed the plan saying, "If you don't read you don't learn, and if you don't learn the world goes to hell."

- Focus Group meetings were convened in 1996 “to formulate a vision that would carry Palo Alto libraries into the next decade.” The report of these meetings contained the statement, “Throughout the process and among all groups, strong community support for the Palo Alto branch system was expressed.”
- Staff’s Draft Library Master Plan was based on numerous Focus Group meetings and submitted to the City Council in March 1998. Despite Focus Group comments to the contrary, the plan proposed closing three branch libraries, College Terrace, Downtown and Terman. It was vigorously opposed by the public, and was a factor in the creation of the LAC.
- In May 2000, the LAC issued its “New Library Plan” which recommended retaining all neighborhood libraries. City Council adopted it in principle in October 2000.
- Although Measure D failed to pass last November; 61.4% of those casting ballots voted to approve the \$49 million bond measure to improve and expand our library facilities. Clearly the libraries are providing a much needed and appreciated service. A majority of voters also recognized that present library facilities and services are inadequate and need to be expanded.
- The City of Palo Alto Budget Survey completed in February 2003 with a rating scale of 1 as low importance and 5 as high importance showed that:
 - 55% thought that neighborhood branch libraries were “more important or essential” (4 or 5)
 - 25% thought that neighborhood branch libraries were essential (5)
- Even as this is being written, there is an active campaign underway to mobilize opposition to the current LAC proposal to close the Downtown Library.

In summary, the City’s neighborhood-oriented branch library system, with all of its shortcomings, has strong support among Palo Altans. The passion of our community for libraries and the history of failed attempts to close neighborhood libraries cannot be disregarded when considering the future of the City’s library system.