

Saving Branch Libraries in San Bernardino

The financial crisis of the city of San Bernardino not only impacts safety services like police and fire. Far more vulnerable are the “soft” services like parks and libraries. These services may not respond to emergencies, but instead serve to offer the community hope in a bleak landscape by providing safe spaces for children and support for education – the ticket to a better life.

In September, that hope dimmed with a recommendation proposed by Library Staff during a Council budget session that would immediately close all city library branches—the Howard Rowe Branch, the Paul Villaseñor Branch and the Dorothy Inghram Branch locations. While this proposal was rejected by City Council, it was replaced with a proposal to keep the libraries open until March 17th, 2013 to allow library staff time to create a plan which would make the branches “sustainable” and able to continue to serve their communities after city funding is withdrawn.

“Our first move was to identify just what “sustainable” meant to each community,” commented Deborah Clark, Interim Library Director for the struggling library system. “Basically, we have to find a way to pay for utilities or rent—the most basic necessity. After that, we can look at changing our services to reduce our costs. Thanks to our recent strategic planning process, the hard work has already been done. We know what services we need to retain at each location—and what services we simply can no longer afford to offer.”

The Library’s recent planning process, a series of public meetings, surveys and focus groups hosted during Spring and Summer of 2012, gave Clark the data that she needed to define a working program for each branch library—each unique to the community it services.

“Different populations valued different library services,” Clark said. “We know we can’t afford to operate three branch libraries while the city goes through bankruptcy. But we think we will be able to create and maintain three community service points that will offer support to our residents—support that they specifically asked the library to provide.” To do that, Clark is looking for partnership opportunities in the community and volunteers to step up to help keep the centers open.

The Library is hoping that community service agencies offering children’s services, job search and support services and even general neighborhood services might want to partner with the libraries to help keep the branch locations open.

“For instance,” said Clark, “we have wonderful resources available for children at each of our branches. Maybe a local pre-school child care provider might like to rent one of our facilities in the morning hours 7 a.m. to

Noon, to provide services to their clients. If they pay rent to the city for that use, the library could provide library services during the afternoon hours.”

Library Administration understands that if partnerships are going to work, each potential partner must receive some value from the arrangement. “The libraries have been recently renovated. They look great and they offer space, computers, books and furniture—in return for rent or staff support.”

In explaining what kind of partnerships the library is looking for, Clark explained that the requested services for each community varied slightly, calling for different partners. In response to the question, the Library has outlined a proposed plan of service for each of the branch libraries threatened with closure.

The Paul Villaseñor Branch Library, located 525 N. Mt. Vernon Avenue in the heart of the Hispanic community emphasizes support for children services. This includes providing afterschool tutoring programs and story times for families. Because Villaseñor Branch also offers a 1,000 sq. ft. community room, partners are looked for to provide community programming and meeting room support. The 11 computers available at the branch are used for job searching and technology skills training. Partners that offer services of that nature are sought.

The Inghram Branch Library, located at 1505 W. Highland, is named after the late Dorothy Inghram, long time educator and pillar of the African American community. Inghram Branch will be transformed to offer more computer services, the most requested change at that location. Children’s Services afterschool will include homework tutoring programs. Of special interest at this Branch are emerging literacy services, or literacy for very young children. Preschool specialists will be sought as partners at this location.

The Howard Rowe Branch Library, at 108 E. Marshall, offers the Library staff the greatest challenge in finding a partner. While Rowe customers value support in technology through computer access and computer classes, they still agree that new book materials for readers is a prime need for them. However, Library Administration stated that partners who can support afterschool tutoring or early morning day care services would still be a good fit.

“A sustainable branch library in “the new normal” ” says Clark “is a community center where various services can be obtained to meet combined interests, where volunteers and staff work together to offer support to customers and where partnerships can be formed to pay the overhead costs of heating, air conditioning and lighting.”

Potential partners, both non-profit and for profit, can contact the library to discuss possibilities by calling Deborah Clark at (909) 381-8210 or Paula Miller, Partnership Coordinator, at (909) 381-8207, daytimes, Monday through Thursday.