

## BEYOND BOOKS

Have you visited a public library lately? If you do, you'll be amazed by the transformation of some libraries. Beautifully refurbished or innovatively redesigned, libraries are returning to their role as community centers, as they were a century ago when steel baron Andrew Carnegie built the first "free" libraries across America. In January, The Club held a program at the Richard Riordan Downtown Public Library in Los Angeles, recently restored to its art deco majesty. Its wood-paneled Mark Taper Auditorium, with state-of-the-art lighting, acoustics and multimedia equipment, was the perfect location for our panel on whether public campaign financing can work in California.

Another of my other favorites is the Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library in downtown San Jose. A unique partnership between San Jose State University and the city of San Jose, the library consolidates the campus and city libraries, with one door opening onto the university campus and the other onto a downtown city street. An ultra-modern building with soaring atriums, it is high-tech, befitting its Silicon Valley location. Books, CDs and DVDs are bar-coded, as is one's library card. Swiping the two codes at bar-code readers in the lobby is all it takes to check out materials. The ground-floor cafe serves delicious food, which patrons are allowed to take into the library. The library is home to the university's Steinbeck and Beethoven Centers, featuring exhibits of Steinbeck memorabilia and Beethoven scores. The Commonwealth Club holds many of its Silicon Valley programs in the King library – with its plush, high-tech meeting rooms and high-rise parking – including an upcoming panel on ethics in San Jose city government.

The most exciting library project underway is a smaller effort in the Bay Area. When I was a grade-school student in the 1960s, the Lafayette Public Library

was a new cinderblock wonder. I visited the library every week with my mom to check out a stack of books. Those were the days before the Internet and *amazon.com*, when the library was the main source for reading material. In junior high and high school, we headed to the public library to research class papers and study.

My hometown library is 42 years old, and has the same Formica tables, metal shelving and brown carpet – now threadbare and dingy – as when I studied there. Fluorescent lights flicker behind plastic panels in the ceiling. Cobwebs and dust coat the surface of the windows. The one good thing about this tattered scene is that it creates a great tableau for the fundraising meetings I've attended over the past year. The need for a new library is obvious.

The Lafayette Library project takes a step beyond all the other rehabilitated libraries. It will not only produce a handsome new building full of books and computer terminals for Internet access, but its organizers are not waiting for community groups to discover the facility as a place to meet. The Lafayette Library project has already brought together 12 organizations to use the facility as a center for education. Called the Glenn Seaborg Learning Consortium, after the Nobel Laureate who lived in Lafayette, the group includes the Oakland Zoo, Oakland Museum, Chabot Space and Science Center, the John Muir Medical Center and Lindsey Wildlife Museum in Walnut Creek, the Lawrence Hall of Science in Berkeley and The Commonwealth Club. When the library and its auditorium are completed in 2008, we will all use it for lectures, films, workshops, exhibits and meetings. Consortium members have been partners in the project from the beginning, helping to raise funds and shape the facility. And we will be there April 17 for a fair in Lafayette to demonstrate how we will use the facility, kicking off the public campaign to raise the remaining funds for the project.



Architect's drawing of Lafayette Public Library.

The building and rebuilding of California's public libraries is funded by \$338 million in library bond funds, approved by voters in 2000. The California Public Library Construction and Renovation Bond Board, composed of state legislators, the state librarian, the treasurer and other appointees, dispenses the funds. As part of the Lafayette team, I attended the bond hearing in November in Sacramento, where cities from around the state came to beg for funds for their libraries, from the last \$80 million to be allocated. Communities pleaded that they were from counties without a single public library, from counties with no school libraries, from cities where the library buildings had been condemned. They stressed that libraries help to equalize the information playing field for the economically disadvantaged, since without access to the Internet or the ability to purchase books, their only available resource is public libraries. As they spoke for their projects, delegations wore funny hats, played music – anything to make their city stand out in front of the board. A little bit sheepishly, but getting into the spirit, I donned a sash, reading "Lafayette: Local Idea, National Model" as part of the Lafayette delegation. And then there was the irony of sour-grapes groups from San Francisco that actually testified against funding for two neighborhood branches of the San Francisco Public Library!

When all the clamor was over, the Lafayette project received a grant of \$11.9 million, based on the innovative concept of a learning consortium built into the facility, the first in the nation to use this model. It is an idea truly beyond books – where the active education taking place in the library is as important as the archived materials. See you in '08 – in Lafayette! Ω