

Got a Leaky Pipe? Library Lends More Than Books

Borrow a tool along with that how-to manual

By Ray Delgado
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The cost of living in San Francisco can be so expensive that sometimes a new homeowner or renter can't even think of fixing up the new place until he or she saves enough money to afford the tools.

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But it doesn't have to be that way, thanks to

the new tool-lending program created by the San Francisco Public Library and the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners, which opened this week.

From hammers to hoes to submersible pumps, just about any item an ambitious taskmaster could need is available at the San Francisco Tool Lending Center, 2713 San Bruno Ave., in the Portola District.

"People shouldn't have to invest in a tool that they might only need once," said Amanda Thomas, the project manager. "We're hoping someone can come here and get a drain snake and unclog their toilet themselves."

Modeled after a successful 21-year-old program in Berkeley (Oakland began one a year ago), the center works in the same manner as the library does with its books. A patron who lives in or owns property in San Francisco fills out an application for a tool center card and checks out a tool for a specified number of days. There are modest late fees, but they are higher for the most expensive tools — as much as \$15 per day.

The Tool Lending Center bills itself as a one-stop supply shop for almost any home repair, remodeling or gardening project. And unlike some hardware stores, a novice can spend hours at the center surfing project-specific Web sites, watching how-to videos, perusing a wealth of reference books or getting advice from a home-repair specialist on-hand to answer questions.

The center also plans to hold a variety of "Home Improvement"-style classes and workshops in a small room next to the tool storage room.

Before the center opened, a steady stream of future patrons



Amanda Thomas (right) and Thomas Hobby load the shelves for the new San Francisco Tool Lending Center on San Bruno Avenue.

stopped in to inquire about the program, and a few experts even offered to help teach classes.

Portola District resident Ray Bozzini, 79, stopped at the center the week before it opened to inquire about the program and said he would probably use it for the electrical work, plumbing projects and gardening that he does at home.

"I wanted to see what they have available," Bozzini said. "I have a lot of tools of my own, but certain tools, I may need."

Building the tool center was a relative bargain, costing \$350,000 for one year of operation, which includes the cost to lease the building, remodel it, stock it with new tools and equipment and pay the salaries of the staff, said library spokeswoman Marcia Schneider.

The tough part will be getting the word out about its existence, but once people discover the center and word spreads, there should be a steady stream of visitors, Schneider said.

"We're seeing that this is going to fill a really big need, especially among apartment dwellers or people who don't have the space or resources to own a lot of home-repair equipment," she said. "Hopefully, in the long run, we'll have played a small part in making San Francisco a more beautiful place."

The inventory of more than 1,000 tools was built after carefully researching the Berkeley Tool Center's supplies and the popularity of the different tools. Thus, there might be a handful of hammers, saws and caulking guns, but only one, say, specialized wrench used for installing chain link fences. Before going to the center, borrowers can check the Web site to make sure the tool they need is available.

You're not likely to be stumped or lost if you have a difficult problem, either. The center's resident tool specialist, Thomas Wayne Hobby, has spent a lifetime as a handyman, doing roofing, plumbing, dry-wall installation and electrical work, among other projects.

"I've been around enough construction sites that I know a little bit of all that stuff," Hobby said. "All my life, I've been involved in construction. I like it."

More importantly, Hobby is ready to share his knowledge and hopes to create a city filled with handymen and women.

"It's going to be successful, definitely," Hobby said. "People are always going to need to repair their houses and do their gardens."

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Dine-In,
Take-Out



Amanda Thomas and Thomas Hobby, right, bring in tools for San Francisco's new lending library. Hobby sorts through the array of tools, below, available to help do-it-yourselfers to make home repairs.



Photos by ERIC LUSE / The Chronicle

