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WEEKEND EDITION

City libraries' renovation plan on faster track

Rising construction costs force acceleration See Page 4



AROUND CITY HALL

Mayor to address state of programs for homeless

Mayor Gavin Newsom, who has made homelessness the top priority of his administration, will give his second annual "State of the Homeless" address on Tuesday to outline the administration's progress on solving the issue as well as discuss future directions for The City's homelessness programs. Newsom will give the address at the Department of Public Health.

Fire and police chiefs visit children's hospital

San Francisco's Fire and Police Chiefs will bring some holiday cheer today to the patients at UCSF's Children's Hospital. Chief Joanne Hayes-White and Chief Heather Fong will join firefighters, police officers, elves and Mrs. Santa to hand out gifts to patients at the annual event. The chiefs are honorary co-chairwomen of the Macy's holiday tree lighting. So far, the \$250,000 in donations for the hospital has been raised through the tree. Lights can still be purchased via the UCSF Children's Hospital Web site at: <https://www.ucsfhealth.org/secure/tree.html>.

New art display at supervisor's office

Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi will feature the artwork of children from District 5 on the walls of his office over the next month. The work includes watercolors, photographs, multimedia collages of poetry, graphic art, large canvases and garden-themed work. The pictures were created by children at the African American Culture Complex, Schools of the Sacred Heart, the Third Baptist Church, John Muir Elementary School and Rhema Word Church. Mirkarimi held a reception to kick off the display on Friday night.

Firefighters ask for help with toy drive

San Francisco firefighters' annual toy drive for underprivileged children is falling short, its organizers said this week in appealing for donations. Program director Salla Casazza said the donations this year are half of what they normally are. For more information, call (415) 777-0440 or drop off a toy at one of The City's firehouses.

— Compiled from staff reports

Rising costs put improvement plans on fast-forward

BY BONNIE ESLINGER
Staff Writer

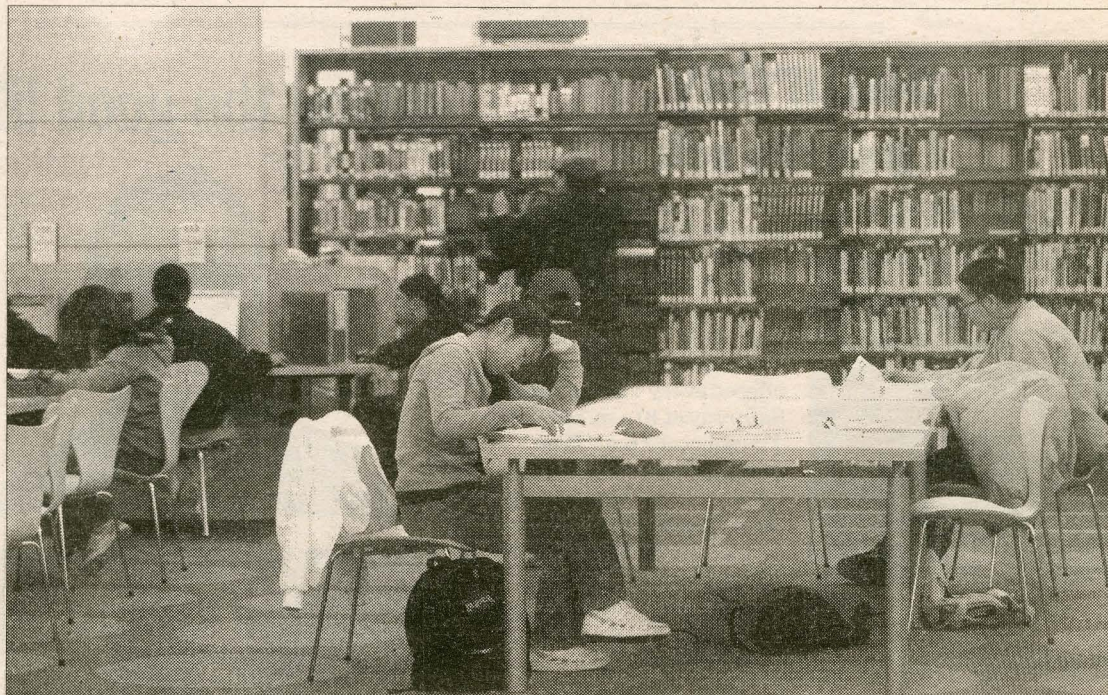
An ambitious facilities improvement plan for San Francisco's public libraries will result in at least one-third of The City's branch libraries being shut down for renovations next year.

Library officials say rising construction costs are driving the accelerated building program, predominantly funded by a \$106 million improvement bond approved by San Francisco voters in 2000. In addition, library backers are planning on going back to voters in 2009 in hopes of extending a current city budget line that funds library operations, and they said having the improvements completed by that time will boost the goodwill of those going to the ballot box.

"Without the preservation funding we'd probably be suffering like a lot of other libraries," said the president of San Francisco's library commission, Charles Higuera, adding that due to budget restraints, many cities were cutting library hours. He noted that the city of Salinas recently considered closing its library. "When monies are tight, libraries often don't get the play that is given to other essential services like police and fire."

Although it is uncertain if all San Franciscans would consider libraries essential, data shows that residents use libraries to check out books and media, research databases, browse the Internet, attend special programs or just as quiet space. San Franciscans visit the library about nine times a year, almost double the national average.

With 19 branch renovations and four full construction projects scheduled to be completed within the next four years, library lovers will be forced to deal with the inconvenience of having numerous branches closed simultaneously — up to 10 projected in 2006 — in order to stay within budget and make improvements at all the libraries possible. Since construction



ALL: CINDY CHEW/THE EXAMINER

The newly renovated Excelsior Library is the first to be completed using \$106 million in bond funding.

Where your tax dollars are going



the Library Foundation for new furniture for all renovated libraries; and \$9.7 million in state bond money.

- The first project to be completed was the new Excelsior branch, which opened in June 2005
- All projects are scheduled to be completed by the end of 2009

Source: Branch Library Improvement Bond — second quarter report 2005

- City voters approved Proposition A, San Francisco's \$106 million Branch Library Improvement Bond, in November 2000
- Branch Library Improvement projects include renovation of 19 libraries and construction of five new libraries — four of which will replace existing branches, and one new branch in the Mission Bay neighborhood.
- Improvement goals include seismic strengthening, increasing disability access, improving interior spaces and increasing technology options.
- The improvement program budget is \$135 million. Major funding sources include \$105 million in city Prop. A bonds; \$16 million from The Friends of

tion prices are expected to keep escalating, library officials said they hope to save money by doing as much of the construction work now as possible.

"We hope people will roll with the punches," Higuera said.

Budget restraints also dashed

a plan for replacement facilities while libraries were undergoing renovations. Consequently, when a branch closes for improvements, which take about 18 months, the local library patrons will have to visit other branches. To compensate for the neighboring closures,

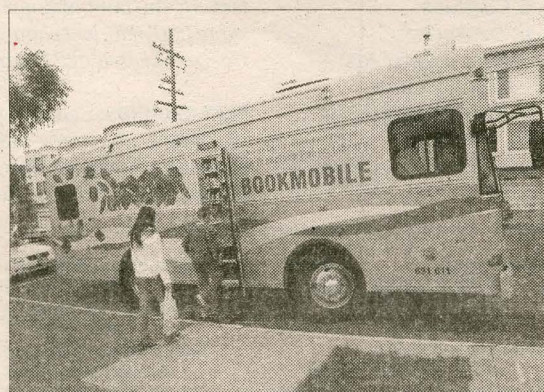
the open branches will have longer hours, Higuera said. In addition, several new bookmobiles purchased specifically to ease the pain of the closed branches will park near the affected sites on a part-time basis.

The temporary loss of a local branch is not easy, but patrons seem to be making the adjustment, said West Portal librarian Christine Gerber, who spends her Tuesdays on the bookmobile parked a few blocks away from the library's construction site.

Although the RV-sized library has all new books and media materials, they're mostly popular offerings, nothing too specialized, she said. In the afternoons, the vehicle is easily filled with a dozen parents and children. A book club she leads — this month they're reading "The Secret Life of Bees," by Sue Monk Kidd — tried to relocate to a local coffee shop, but it was too noisy, so now they meet at the Ingleside branch, about two miles away, where she now sees many of the former West Portal regulars. She is often asked when the library will be reopened.

"We have so few places where people can find community in our culture," she said. "Libraries still do that."

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How do San Franciscans feel about their libraries?

Among results of a recent survey of visitors to San Francisco's libraries citywide:

Overall satisfaction with library services
very good 53% good 41% fair 5%

What do you think of the library's fiction collection?
very good 31%, good 49%, fair 18%

What do you think of the selection of videos and DVDs?
very good 27%, good 40%, fair 27%

How do you rate the overall assistance from library staff?
very good 56%, good 36%, fair 7%

89% use the library to borrow books, videos and other materials, without help from the library staff

38% use the library to get help from library staff in finding library materials

37% use the library to use computers

46% use the library to look for the answer to a question or get help from library staff in answering a question

Source: David Binder Research, March 2005

charging ahead

Role changing for '21st century library'

The San Francisco Public Library is experiencing a renaissance. In the last decade, the library and its 26 branches has received public support for increased operations funding, experienced an almost 100 percent increase in circulation, and is making progress on a \$134 million improvement plan to make libraries more safe and disability accessible, with new meeting spaces, furniture and free wireless Internet access.

City residents are using the libraries not just to check out books, but also to rent movies and music CDs, browse the Internet, read newspapers and magazines, attend meetings and author readings, take classes and bring their children in for weekly story times.

"You still have more traditional folks that go to the library as a quiet place for contemplation and reading, but the 21st-century library is also about having a sense of community and common space," The City's Librarian Luis Herrera said.

A review of public events at The City's main library as well as its branches shows a wide range of opportunities: homework help at the new Excelsior branch, children's films at the Chinatown library, one class in basic mouse skills and another in basic Internet skills at the main library, a family storytime in Russian at the Merced branch, crafts in Bernal Heights, a Kwanzaa event in the Bayview and an opera performance at the Presidio branch.

Still, libraries can do more to reach out to those populations not using the system as much as others, Herrera said.

"We're building our international languages collection," he said. "It's critical in San Francisco to have books and materials that reflect our many communities."

In recent years, libraries have also made an effort to reach out to The City's teen population, who are often reluctant library users. A



By the numbers

The San Francisco Public Library system

4 bookmobiles	76,726 audio materials
26 branch libraries	5,405,770 books and other print materials
205 librarians	\$6,695,372 total annual collection budget
345 public Internet terminals	6,765,089 library visits annually
11,575 newspapers, magazine and other print subscriptions	\$52,989,391 total annual operating budget
75,988 videos	

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, San Francisco Public Library 2003

youth advisory council was formed to get opinions on what teens want from libraries, many of the renovated libraries are being rebuilt to include a space that would be dedicated to teenagers, and events such as poetry slams have been hosted to draw them into the library buildings.

"It's a very tough target group," Herrera said. "Even if they're avid

library uses when they're young, as they get older there's a lot of entertainment and other activities that compete with reading."

Which, at the end of the day, is still the most popular use for a library.

"Checking out books is still the bread and butter," Herrera said.

— Bonnie Eslinger

Status report on neighborhood libraries

The library improvement program moves forward:

2006

Completed: Excelsior

Currently under new construction:

Mission Bay, Glen Park (existing branch that will get new building on new site)

Branches currently closed/under renovation:

West Portal, Marina, Sunset

Branches scheduled to close for renovation:

Western Addition, Noe Valley, Richmond, Bernal Heights, Potrero, Ortega, Eureka Valley

Construction beginning for new buildings on new sites for existing branches:

Ingleside, Portola, Visitacion Valley



SAN FRANCISCO BUREAU OF ARCHITECTURE

A digital rendering of the new Richmond branch.

2007

Branches scheduled to close for renovation:

Parkside, Bayview, Merced, Anza, Golden Gate, Park, Presidio, North Beach

Source: Branch Library Improvement Board — second quarter report 2005

Ken Garcia



When it's time to take a stand on new ground

You know the writing is on the wall about the time you start brushing up the third goodbye column. Readers tend to take notice of such things, wondering why and how a column starts moving all over the newspaper without rhyme or reason. I'm happy to report that this will not be a problem now that I've landed at The San Francisco Examiner with a firm slot on this page three days a week. I didn't exactly jump from the Chronicle's teetering ship, as it's been portrayed in various media outlets, as much as booking passage on a sleeker liner.

How did I get here? The beginning of the end could probably be traced to a point not long after the New York-based Hearst Corp. took over the San Francisco Chronicle about five years back, ending the paper's run as one of the country's oldest family-owned newspapers. A dysfunctional family, yes — whose isn't? — but one that showed great loyalty to its employees and seemed to have an understanding of the paper's role in The City and surrounding community.

At first the signs were subtle — less local news, veteran editors quietly disappearing overnight — and then the readers started complaining. What happened to all the San Francisco coverage? One of my regular readers complained to a high-level Chronicle editor and the response she got was like a slap to anyone who understood the paper's colorful history and long-held traditions. Why was there less San Francisco news? "The Chronicle is not a San Francisco newspaper," she was told. "It's a regional newspaper based in San Francisco."

For someone who grew up reading the Chronicle, let alone working there, this was like the Anaheim Angels suddenly announcing that they actually played in Los Angeles. But when you're the San Francisco columnist for a San Francisco paper, such euphemistic shifts echo more like a dreaded proclamation. By the time the paper's editors decided that they didn't really like opinions in their news page columns, it was like wiping clean a long legacy of celebrated columnists by which the paper made its name. A paper known for offering unbridled opinions now only had a high one for itself.

Yet instead of wondering why so many readers were leaving, the new owners insisted that everything was actually improved, better — change, after all, is never easy. The old traditions and style that made the Chronicle the eighth largest newspaper in the country when I arrived there were considered outmoded and expendable. They redesigned and retrenched and remodeled, but the results were all the same.

This point was brought home with some head-shaking clarity recently with the announcement that the Chronicle had lost more circulation than any newspaper in the United States in the last year — by a whopping margin. Then the publisher decreed that the steep circulation decline was actually welcome, because they wanted higher quality readers, not those shabby subscribers who were apparently picking it up on the cheap. And they were willing to offer buyouts to some of their best people, because sometimes when you're losing that much money, you have to pay more to help balance the bottom line. It was not an easy decision for me to leave — I forged strong relationships with some very talented journalists there during the past 13 years — but it was clear that the dear, old, quirky Chronicle, which I loved, has disappeared forever.

The Examiner, which has been steadily boosting its circulation, suffers from no such complications. It wants opinionated columnists, objective news AND readers. I'm here to do the best I can to help get them. The paper wants to become an indispensable part of the political and cultural landscape. It wants to be a model for new, urban newspapers. It wants to be part of The City's future, which I find particularly appealing, since I'm not going anywhere. It wants to be the primary source of local news, and with the Chronicle's recent announcement to its staff that it was killing its local Friday sections at the end of the year, The Examiner's coverage will be more needed than ever.

Being a columnist in the Bay Area is one of the best jobs in journalism, and not just because it's such a target-rich environment. The readers here care dearly about their newspapers, their community and their cultural diversity. They're smart and sophisticated and worldly. And judging by my e-mails and letters and phone calls over the years, they're funny and know a good joke when they see one — even when it ends up holding public office. So I've learned to take them seriously over the years and let them know exactly where I stand. That's never changed. Only the location is new.

Ken Garcia's column appears Tuesdays, Thursdays and weekends in The Examiner. E-mail him at kgarcia@examiner.com or call him at (415) 359-2663.