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Tuesday Aug 28

City boards back library proposals

Designs of new buildings praised

By **Kristina Peterson / Daily News Staff Writer**

Early plans for a new library and community center in Palo Alto quickly won the approval of two local boards over the past several days, despite the city's reputation for a stringent review process.

On Monday night the Palo Alto Library Advisory Commission enthusiastically embraced conceptual plans for a new Mitchell Park library and community center, as well as an addition to the main library branch and interior renovations to the downtown library location.

"I think it looks terrific," said commissioner Lenore Jones.

Late last week the city's Architectural Review Board contributed rare comprehensive praise at a study session on the Mitchell Park designs from Group 4 Architecture, the firm hired to design the library.

"It was unanimously positive," said Chair David Solnick. "The word used often was exuberant."

The new conceptual plans for Mitchell Park still leave open several large design questions, including the timeline of when the library and community center will be built. In one option the two buildings would be built together; in another, only the library would initially be rebuilt with a new community center further down the road.

Solnick said that while his board preferred the idea of building the two facilities all at once, the two-phase building produced more interesting architecture and a wider variety of roof styles.

"The constraints imposed by the two-phase scheme actually inspired them to do something better," he said.

In either option, the new Mitchell Park library will occupy 36,000 square feet with the community center adding 15,000 square feet.

Group 4 Senior Designer Paul Jamtgaard said the buildings will aim to be simple, in a contemporary style and with a feeling of transparency.

One courtyard will wrap around a large Valley Oak presently in the middle of the site and the designers plan to use varying kinds of light and a natural palate of materials to complement the site's park setting.

"We reserve the right to use a splash of color to keep things interesting," Jamtgaard said.

And in the interest of creating a "showcase building," he proposed adding solar panels and a "green roof" supporting a community garden to visually state the city's commitment to sustainability.

Library commissioners weighed in with functional questions to ascertain that the new library would have plenty of bike parking, an adequately large drop-off area, welcoming signage and wireless Internet access for patrons using laptop computers.

Project Manager Dawn Merkes assured Commissioner Susie Thom that radio frequency identification technology could be incorporated into any design further down the road, after the library's technology plan has been revised.

"It's really coming together," said Sandra Hirsh, chair of the library commission. "This will be huge," she said.

Voters will still need to approve funding for the \$45 million library and community center construction through a bond measure that will appear on a ballot no earlier than June 2008. The design firm plans to finish the buildings' schematic designs by February.

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