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Walnut Creek soon to begin next chapter in library development

East Bay Business Times - by [Gina Gotsill](#) East Bay Business Times contributor

It's Veteran's Day - a holiday - but Walnut Creek library manager Cindy Brittain is working. There's plenty to do, and as the downtown library's last day of operation on Nov. 30 draws near, there isn't much time left.

"It's a lot of work to close down a building that has been open since 1961," said Brittain, who has worked at the downtown branch for the past three years. "It's sad to see it close, but it's a relief because it's really falling apart."

After more than a decade of community input and assessments punctuated by city and statewide elections, Walnut Creek will demolish its aging, 9,240-square-foot downtown library in February and break ground on a new facility in mid-April.

The library project, which includes a new 42,000-square-foot, two-story library, underground parking garage and improvements to Civic Park, will cost an estimated \$46 million, according to city records. City leaders expect the project to be completed in 2010.

At the Nov. 20 City Council meeting, Assistant City Manager Lorie Tinfow reported that library construction estimates have come in at about half a million dollars higher than initially planned. Estimated construction costs are now at \$31.5 million, she says. To bring them back to \$31 million, the council could opt to deduct various project elements that could be added later as funding is available. "Deduct alternatives" might include reducing the number of LCD screens, removing cabinetry in the café, and omitting the meeting room partition, Tinfow said.

At this time, construction costs are estimates. "We won't know the actual amount until we go out for bid in early 2008," she said. "In the meantime, we're being very conservative in how we plan."

More than 3,000 residents, business owners and community groups contributed their ideas for the new library, said City Councilmember Cindy Silva. One area of the building will resemble a contemporary retail bookstore with new books, media materials and a café, according to a design narrative by the library architect, **Group 4** Architecture, Research and Planning Inc. The library will also provide a community meeting room, a technology lab and a conference room for public use during or after library hours. A business center will give local businesses a place to research, meet and gather information.

As the public's needs change, libraries have evolved into community centers that offer more than just library services, said Dawn Merkes, Group 4 principal and library project team member.

"With this project, we are trying to provide a facility that meets as many of the community's needs as



possible," Merkes said.

Using community input, the city and Group 4 designed the building so that sections of the library could be closed off while other areas are in use. For example, a community group could use the conference center for an evening event after the library was closed. Or the library could offer expanded hours in one section, close off the other areas, and staff just the section in use, Merkes said.

"It's exciting," Silva said. "I think the community at large is excited to see how close we are. It's finally going to happen."

Walnut Creek's downtown and Ygnacio Valley facilities are part of the Contra Costa County Library system, and library staff members are county employees. About 10 years ago, the city formally began the needs assessment and community input process for a new library, Silva said. While residents and community groups were commenting on what they wanted and needed in a new library, the city started putting aside surplus money for a new facility.

From 2001 to 2004, the city applied three times for a state grant, seeking up to \$18 million in matching funds, according to Silva. Two other Contra Costa cities - Hercules and Lafayette - received grants to develop their libraries, according to state records. Walnut Creek's requests were denied.

In 2005, Walnut Creek's Measure R, a bond measure that would have provided \$21 million for the construction of the new library, failed at the polls. The bond required a two-thirds majority. It received 62 percent, according to Silva. Opponents of Measure R thought the proposed library project, which at the time included a five-story parking garage, was too large for Civic Park and too expensive, according to election documents.

"People didn't want another parking garage in Walnut Creek, so it went underground," said Kristin Anderson, director of operations for the Walnut Creek Library Foundation. "Going underground added to the cost of the library project."

A year later, California voters defeated Proposition 81, a bond measure that would have provided money for construction and renovation of public libraries.

Despite bond and grant failures, the city forged ahead. Today, Walnut Creek's new library construction budget has grown to nearly \$26 million, Silva said.

In June, the city approved a recommendation to bump the project costs from \$43.5 million to \$46 million to incorporate added technology, opening-day collections and costs related to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, according to a city report.

The Walnut Creek Library Foundation, founded in 1998 to support programs and collections at the city's two libraries, has pledged to raise \$10 million: \$5 million for the new library project and \$5 million for an endowment for new programs and ongoing operations at both libraries, Silva said. Additional money will come from an internal loan, parking funds and fees, and other sources that include budget savings, according to city documents.

The city and county share the cost of operating Walnut Creek's two libraries, according to a Nov. 20 report from the city manager's office to the council. In 2002, city voters passed Measure Q, a parcel tax that keeps both libraries open 56 hours a week. Measure Q expires in 2010, the year the new library is expected to open.

Currently, the money generated by Measure Q is more than enough to fund 56 hours a week, according to the report. However, when the new library opens in 2010 the city will need approximately \$1.5 million to continue to provide the same number of open hours.

"With the new Walnut Creek Library scheduled to open downtown in spring of 2010, the community's demand for library services is expected to continue to grow," the report states. "Reauthorization of a parcel tax for library operations and maintenance is crucial to meet the community's needs for library access and programs."

The Walnut Creek City Council will consider the kind and amount of tax to propose to voters, and if they will only ask voters within the city limits, or if they will broaden the area to include unincorporated areas around the city, said Tinfow. If they decide to include the unincorporated areas, they must consider the best way to do this, since it will involve working with the county.

If the council does not pursue new funding sources, hours at the libraries will likely be reduced, the report says. Or the council could face "difficult trade-offs between library services and other city programs and services."

As planned, the new library will be the right size to serve Walnut Creek, which has grown seven-fold since 1961, according to the Walnut Creek Library Foundation.

"It's time for a new library," Anderson said. "The study rooms, conference room and business center are really going to make this library a destination."

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