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Ingleside is getting a library building

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The northeast corner of the intersection of Ocean and Plymouth avenues in San Francisco's Ingleside district is a dirt and cement lot, surrounded by a chain link fence.

By the end of next year, however, this former home to a gas station will be reincarnated as the site of Ingleside's first permanent library, a 6,100-square-foot facility that will offer more books, albums, movies, computers and meeting space than this neighborhood has ever seen.

On Friday, about 200 neighbors, city officials and students - including the Aptos Middle School Jazz Band - celebrated the groundbreaking for the new building, which will house areas for children and teens, Wi-Fi Internet access, a 24-hour book return and a much-anticipated community room.

Ingleside has had a library since 1925, City Librarian Luis Herrera said before the ceremony, but the locations have always been rented or leased - and the library has had to move four times.

"Today is special because this is the first time you will have your own building," Herrera said. "No more having to worry about rent and lease agreements, going place to place. ... The entire diverse community is going to be well served by this library."

The new building will contain twice the meeting and browsing room of the current library location, an old Bank of America building just down the street that will remain open during construction. The new building also will offer three times the number of computers, express self-checkout machines and a large reading area - the last a special attraction to longtime Ingleside resident Joseph Witcher.

Witcher, who has watched the neighborhood become more gentrified in his three decades there, said the facility is sorely needed. He has been traveling to the Western Addition for his once-a-week book club since 1999 because there isn't a community meeting area at the current Ingleside branch.

"It will enhance the whole neighborhood," said Witcher, who teaches Sunday school at the Ingleside Presbyterian Church across the street. "I'm looking forward to a reading room where we can meet with 12 or 15 people, and have a book club."

City officials hope the new library also will boost revitalization efforts on Ocean Avenue, Ingleside's main thoroughfare.

The district in the southwestern portion of the city borders the Merced, Ocean View and Excelsior neighborhoods. It is an unusually diverse area - even by San Francisco standards - and still has remnants of the city's working-class past. Many homeowners have lived in the district for decades, but there are rough areas not far from the sleepy residential streets around Ocean Avenue.

Ingleside's \$6.9 million library project is being funded by the Branch Library Improvement Program, approved by voters in 2000, which authorized \$106 million in bonds to rebuild and renovate the city's 26 branch libraries, and to build a new facility in Mission Bay, which was opened last month.

The Ingleside project's improvement bond funding is being supplemented by \$3.7 million in state bond money, as well as about \$500,000 for furnishings and fixtures that is being raised by the Friends of the San Francisco Public Library.

The branch library improvement program intends to tailor each neighborhood library to local needs; library officials held meetings and outreach efforts to determine what would best serve the Ingleside neighborhood.

Some of the most important aspects, said Lise Braden, children's librarian for the Ingleside branch, are the children's and teen areas. There are two high schools and a middle school within walking distance of the library, which partners with the schools to offer storytelling, early literacy programs and other outreach to students and parents.

"I've been there since September, and we've seen the number of people at storytelling time grow dramatically," Braden said. "We're going to outgrow our current space very quickly - this new library is sorely needed."

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