



San Rafael's Pickleweed Park Community Center and Library Offer Diverse Services

The City of San Rafael won the Grand Prize for this project in the Community Service and Economic Development category of the 2007 Helen Putnam Award for Excellence program. For more information about the award program, visit www.cacities.org/helenputnam.

Opened in July 2006, the Pickleweed Park Community Center and Library project serves 12,000 residents in a 1.5-square-mile radius. This 25,000-square-foot facility, which houses multiple social, government, literacy, recreational and cultural services, is the product of seven years of planning and construction. The community center and library are the hub of community life in San Rafael's multi-ethnic, lower-income Canal neighborhood.

Getting the Project Started

In 1999, the San Rafael City Council asked the Pickleweed Park Advisory Board, a group of neighborhood residents, to ask the community about what people wanted in a new or expanded community center. The board conducted a survey, visited neighborhood groups, met with individuals and businesses and spread the word — in three languages. Through this effort, the board made more than 600 contacts over the course of a year, and from this work, a striking theme emerged: the need to create opportunities for economic self-sufficiency. The community wanted youth tutoring and mentoring, English courses, college-level classes, access to technology, job training, and arts programs and instruction. In addition, residents asked for gathering space, indoor sports facilities, entertainment and live music venues.

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Based on this community input, the conceptual design was approved in 2000. The board, Parks and Recreation Commission and city council hosted numerous public meetings to review options. Priorities were translated into spaces, including an expanded library, technology lab, study center, multi-use classrooms, community room, kitchen, lobby/lounge, art room, teen lounge and gymnasium.

Financing the Dream

Cost analysis and fundraising were an ongoing effort. The advisory board and interested residents participated in the fundraising strategy for the \$8.5 million project. They testified at grant funding hearings, wrote letters and met with government officials, held fundraisers in their homes, set out coin collection boxes and made impassioned proposals to foundations and businesses. Funds were secured from every level of government, 11 foundations, and scores of local businesses and private donors. The project broke ground in April 2005 and reached completion 13 months later.

The community center and library are located in Pickleweed Park. The park comprises a children's playground, two soccer fields, a baseball field, a child care center and preschool, and a group picnic area surrounded on three sides by walking trails and stunning views of San Francisco Bay.



Meeting Community Needs

Because the community center and library were designed based on community needs, they are now bustling centers filled with people engaged in many different activities. For example, only 14 percent of families in the Canal neighborhood have computers compared to 86 percent of families in other San Rafael neighborhoods. The Technology Lab is filled 30 hours a week with students doing homework, adults using the Internet and families communicating with members in their native countries. During the balance of the week, literacy, language and training programs are under way in the lab.

The Homework Center hosts children after school and provides morning and evening classroom space for English as a Second Language and citizenship programs six days a week. Although the library is relatively small — 1,800 square feet with a 6,000 volume collection — it allows patrons to order books from any library in the county and have the materials delivered in two to three days.

The spacious Community Room hosts social events, large meetings, movie showings, performances and private rentals several times each day. In a neighborhood of apartments and small living spaces, the luxury of large tables, natural light and storage for individual and group art projects is highly valued in the Art Room. In the Teen Lounge, study tables and computers complement café tables and comfortable chairs, welcoming young people. Floor-to-ceiling glass walls in portions of the gym enable visitors in the lobby to see gym activities and provide views of the park and bay.

Offices are provided for staff and cosponsored program staff, and a special office houses a community-policing program. The lobby lounge area welcomes visitors and features a colorful reception desk, lounge-type furnishings and Wi-Fi service.

Security cameras allow staff to monitor the adjacent park, parking lot and sports fields, which helps them track activities and user patterns without physically patrolling the areas. The Community Policing Office provides a space for officers to meet with residents, answer questions and file reports. The policy of collaborative community programming supplements staff resources with 43 collaborative partnerships.

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The facility hosts 200,000 individual visits per year. The volume of use and the center's diverse activities are a testimony to the

safe, welcoming environment. The community process promoted residents' self-determination and leadership development and empowered the neighborhood and city.

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The community wanted to create opportunities for economic self-sufficiency.

