

Shhh! New library opening in Walnut Creek

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The city of Neiman Marcus and Tiffany now has a library to match.

Walnut Creek, long a hub of upscale shopping, today opens its long-awaited, new \$40 million library, which is as elegant, clean and refined as the stores that surround it.

"It doesn't have to be ostentatious, but I like that it's representable," said Giok Sie, 79, who's lived in Walnut Creek 37 years and was admiring the sleek light-filled library last week. "They got it up pretty quick, too. I thought it wouldn't happen in my lifetime."

"Quick" is a relative term. The city started the project 12 years ago, when the old library, built in 1961, became so cramped that staff had to remove one book every time a new book arrived.

But funding snafus and debate over the scope of the project led to long delays, ultimately forcing the city to scale back the project.

The proposed above-ground parking garage was never built, and much of the furniture and shelving was paid for by private donations.

Nonetheless, other libraries pale in comparison to Walnut Creek's version of "scaled back."

The Walnut Creek library includes a cafe, three expansive areas for children, stunning public art, 94 public computers, self-serve check-out, a career center, a video game center for teenagers and an underground 120-space parking garage.

'A good investment'

The library, designed by Group 4 Architects, also arrived \$6 million under budget, a welcome surprise for a city that in June laid off 30 employees due to a \$20 million general fund shortfall.

"The community wanted a new library, so we decided to do everything we could to make that happen," said assistant city manager Lorie Tinfow. "We think it's a good investment."

The city hopes the library will buoy the surrounding businesses, which officials said are suffering in the recession. Ironically, it is the recession that has been driving the popularity of libraries not just in Walnut Creek but everywhere, library officials said. Job-seekers in need of a free computer, kids whose after-



school programs have been slashed and people saving money on books, CDs and DVDs are holing up in libraries.

In Contra Costa County, the number of items checked out has gone up 42 percent over the past four years and the number of folks with new library cards has increased 33 percent. In Walnut Creek, 73 percent of the 66,000 residents have a library card, another reason city staff felt confident moving ahead during hard economic times, Tinfow said.

"Libraries have become a destination," said Anne Cain, the county librarian. "They're not just grab-a-book-and-go any more."

Gathering place

The library contains 140,000 books, CDs and other items, double the number in the old library. Most of the additional items were purchased by the library foundation, Friends of Walnut Creek Library and the Contra Costa library system.

"It's great to have a place where people can gather, where you're not bombarded by media or consumerism," said Shannon Herrick, who was outside the new library last week with her 5-year-old, Oliver. "There's fewer and fewer places like that."

The new library could even replace those upscale malls as the preferred hangout for teenagers and young adults.

"So many of the things to do around here are expensive and pointless," said Noelle Boucher, a sophomore at Chico State who grew up in Orinda. "The library is something that's open to everyone."

Library facts

140,000 books, CDs, DVDs

42,000 square feet of space

150 parking spaces above and below ground

94 public computers

15 pieces of public art

Location: 1644 N. Broadway in Civic Park, across from City Hall.

Hours: Mon.-Thurs., 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Fri.-Sat. 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

More information: www.wclibrary.org, (925) 935-5395.

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