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El Cerrito and other Contra Costa libraries could see upgrades and expanded hours

[Ananya Tiwari](#) on November 1, 2021

Claudia Vela studies at the El Cerrito Library every morning. The 38-year-old graphic design student at Berkeley City College has a 1-year-old son — the library gives her a quiet place to get her work done.

But Vela wishes the library, which opens at 10 a.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, opened earlier.

“I get a lot more done here,” she said.

Vela may get her wish under the Contra Costa County Library's plan to keep libraries open for 56 hours per week, which would be an additional 16 hours for some.

The El Cerrito Library and 25 others in the county are vying for more than \$22 million in Measure X funds to put toward improving libraries. Measure X, which passed last year, is a sales tax of 0.5% that will be applied for 20 years, generating an estimated \$81 million per year for essential services.

In February, a community advisory board formed to [oversee the fund's disbursal](#), focusing primarily on emergency response, health care, safety net services, preventive care, affordable housing, and support for early

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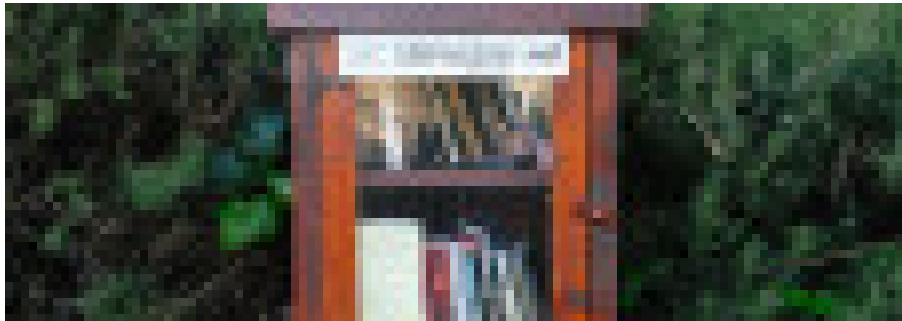
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childhood, youth, families, and seniors. The board did not recommend the library's proposal. The final decision will be up to the the Board of Supervisors, which is expected to act later this year.



Little Free Library movement begins to blossom in Richmond

The concept is simple: a handful of books in a wooden box, mounted in a public space. The books are free. Peruse the selection. Take a book if you'd like. Leave a book in its place if you can. Enjoy. Called the Little Free Library, these informal neighborhood lending libraries have popped up in front ... Continue reading



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The El Cerrito library needs more space, among other things, said Michael Fischer, El Cerrito Library commissioner and vice-chair of the county Library Commission, which advises the Contra Costa Library and the county librarian.

“The El Cerrito library was made post-World War II when the city was much smaller, and the building has other problems such as the lack of ventilation,” he said.

Contra Costa County Library wants to enhance the physical spaces and quality of its libraries by purchasing more books, improving and expanding Wi-Fi and online services, and offering more outreach programs, such as child care and literacy classes for adults. Over 390,000 residents across the county, 36% of the population, are library cardholders.

The county ranks 114 out of 183 [public library systems statewide](#) in funding per person. [As of fiscal year 2019-20](#), the Contra Costa County Library system’s total operating income was \$35.7 million, with the Oakland Public Library’s at \$42.6 million.

Disparities exist in how libraries are funded and the services they offer, Fischer said, with most in the county unable to stay open for more than 40 hours a week. City councils have to allocate funding from city budgets if a library wants to stay open longer.

Library funding comes from the cities as well as from the county. Cities with median annual incomes of about \$150,000 or more typically are able to fund more hours than cities that have lesser median incomes. That creates an equity issue, as well as a digital divide, that is severely felt in some communities of color.

For many people, especially children, improving community libraries could be life-changing.

During a September afternoon at the El Cerrito Library, children and parents filed in shortly after nearby Fairmont Elementary School let out for the day. Students worked at computers, while a steady stream of adults came in and out to return or borrow books.



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[Jonathan Hale](#) on January 9, 2023

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On average, the county system hosts about 5,600 children’s events, classes, and programs annually, serving about 225,000 kids. The libraries have a combined children’s collection of almost 500,000 items, with close to 2 million checkouts per year.

Other services include 200 lendable Wi-Fi hotspots for at-home use. The system’s computers were used 441,905 times in fiscal year 2018-19.

Conan Lee, 22, a graduate student at UC Davis likes to study at the El Cerrito Library.

“I came here to find a book for a specific class,” he said. “Maybe I will come here later if I need to focus, and I don’t want to stay at home.”

Before the summer, El Cerrito was funded for an extra six hours a week. However, in June, budget constraints prompted the City Council to reduce library hours from 46 to 40.

Fischer said the council added the six hours back after receiving more than 80 letters from people upset about the reduction.

The story was updated to correct information about the Contra Costa County Library Commission, which advises the Board of Supervisors and county librarian and has no control over budgets or staffing.

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