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At new library, business is brisk

SUPPORT FOR VINELAND BRANCH AMID S.J. SYSTEM'S SHAKY FINANCES

By Janice Rombeck
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Just minutes after the doors opened this weekend at San Jose's first new branch library in two decades, all 24,000 square feet was in full use.

Most of the 200 or so Vineland Library visitors didn't wait for a scheduled tour or take time to get a piece of celebration cake. They fanned out into the dozen rooms and special areas and went right to work.

Kids logged on to computers, parents settled into comfortable chairs to read stories to small children, adults sifted through stacks of CDs and grade-schoolers piled books into green plastic baskets.

An hour after opening, the line to use the self-serve checkout machines was 80 deep.

"I've been waiting for it to open," said 11-year-old Tarun Dalal of San Jose, who seemed to be speaking for everyone in the building.

Yet, lurking behind the enthusiasm for the first completed project of a \$212 million bond measure passed four years ago is an uncertain financial future -- for Vineland, and the 19 other new or expanded San Jose branch libraries.

Vineland opened Saturday at a time when the city must cut an estimated \$85 million in the next year, which could result in the loss of up to 70 of the 350 jobs in the city's library system, Library Director Jane Light told council members last week at a budget workshop.

A special 10-year library tax that pulls in \$6 million annually for books and materials will sunset this year. And fundraising is tough, acknowledged Marie Bernardy, executive director of the Library Foundation, which hopes to raise \$10 million to help furnish and equip the new branches.

"It's a challenging time for all of us," Light said. "Opening a new facility at this very moment crystallizes this challenge."

Vineland is only the beginning. The one-story building at 1450 Blossom Hill Road cost \$9.1 million, and has a staff of 14 1/2 full-time positions. A 26,000-square-foot Berryessa library is under construction and expected to open in the fall; a Tully branch library also is under construction and will open next year. The Rosegarden expansion will break ground Jan. 31; a two-story Alum Rock Library will break ground in February; and Almaden, Evergreen, Hillview and Edenvale library projects are or soon will be in the design phase.

The bond measure approved in 2000 pays for only the construction; furnishing and staffing must come from other sources. When money is tight, officials face tough choices -- including delaying the opening of projects, limiting the operating hours or cutting services.

"We certainly don't want to build a new library and then not be able to open it because we can't afford the staffing," said San Jose Vice Mayor Pat Dando, who was on hand to welcome the crowd Saturday.

She said she would like to see the city council adopt a policy to include money to operate and maintain a building at the same time it approves construction costs. "Voters approved this bond measure to build libraries and assumed that the city would have the funds to provide adequate staffing," she said.

``These things are going to become big issues" in the not- too-distant future, said Edna Sewill, a former library commissioner involved in community planning meetings for Vineland. But she and others were encouraged by the enthusiasm at Saturday's opening.

``This shows how much the community values this," she said.

Library officials and supporters are hoping the excitement translates into donations as new libraries open in the coming years.

Vineland's staffing is secure for now, but still stretched thin, Light said. The four machines that allow patrons to check out books will free employees to answer questions, stock shelves and provide other services. Staff members from the Almaden branch that closed last month for construction are being shifted to operate Vineland.

But money woes were not on patrons' minds Saturday. They raved as they took in the new library's features -- beautiful artwork, an Internet cafe, a family room with a fireplace, special children's and teens' areas, a community room and a quiet study room. The library has a collection of at least 125,000 books and materials and 37 computers.

``It's spacious," said Melanie Bournival, 12. ``Even though there's a ton of people, there's still room to move around."

And perhaps the best review of all: ``This is one of the best libraries I've ever seen," said 11-year-old Katrina Stewart. ``This makes me want to read."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The Branch Library Bond Measure, approved in November 2000, provides \$212 million over 10 years to build six new San Jose library branches and expand 14. For more information about what is in the works, log on to www.sjlibrary.org.

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