

Presentation of Michael A. Fischer in support of County Librarian Alison McKee's request for Measure X Funds

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I am the El Cerrito Designated Library Commissioner for Contra Costa County. This email is written in my personal capacity and does not represent the view of the Contra Costa County Library Commission. This letter is written in support of County Librarian Alison McKee's request for the the Measure X Advisory Board to include increased library hours in its list of recommended funding proposals using Measure X funds.

I also write this as one of the unofficial leaders of the El Cerrito area library community which includes patrons of our branch library from El Cerrito and surrounding areas including both incorporated and unincorporated areas of Richmond. It is my duty to obsess about library issues including such things as library hours.

I note that the El Cerrito City Council, which appointed me, passed a motion in June authorizing support of Measure X funding to support the Contra Costa County Community Crisis Initiative. I do not believe that these two requests are in conflict. Indeed, they both are worthy of funding. The fact that the mayor and members of the

City Council support both requests indicates that they agree.

The County Librarian's request is fully consistent with the purposes of Measure X. As the Advisory Board knows, the funding provided by that measure is to be used for the following:

- Keep Contra Costa's regional hospital open and staffed;
- Fund community health centers;
- Provide timely fire and emergency response;
- Support crucial safety-net services;
- Invest in early childhood services;
- Protect vulnerable populations; and
- Fund other essential services.

The request for additional library hours clearly falls within the last four items to be addressed by Measure X and which are underlined above.

The City of El Cerrito strongly believes that funding for robust library hours is a critically important equity issue. That's why they voted, last month, in the midst of a significant fiscal crisis, to provide city funding for library hours in addition to the county provided minimum hours. They took this action because under the present system that is the only way to have additional hours.

So, how are the hours a library is open an equity issue, providing crucial safety-net services to vulnerable populations and investing in early childhood services? Let's start by exploring the services our libraries offer and then examine the effect of library hours on these services.

## Important Library Services

### 1. Broadband Access and Usage

As United States Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer has noted on several occasions, broadband access to the internet today is what access to electricity was in the 1930s. It is essential for receiving many governmental services. We all remember earlier this year when the best way, indeed often the only real way, to get an appointment for a life-critical coronavirus vaccination was through internet access. This is only one of innumerable ways one needs the internet today. It is not a luxury. Broadband access to the internet has become a utility, a necessity to everyday life. David Lazarus, the business columnist for the Los Angeles Times has discussed this here: <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2020-10-23/coronavirus-internet-is-a-utility>.

Indeed, the State Budget this year contains several billion dollars to provide improved internet access and the Federal Jobs Act is expected to provide significant funds as well. But the reality is that some of our residents will not be able to afford this even if it is available, and even if it is subsidized. The costs of the equipment and the monthly access charge can be significant. And for some, our libraries also provide the information needed to allow them to access the internet. Without the means to afford the equipment, or without the knowledge of how to connect, a fiber cable means nothing. Our libraries provide internet access through their wifi signals, through the public access computers that are in each library, and by means of offering assistance to those who need it to connect.

One of the biggest issues that the global coronavirus pandemic has shown is the digital divide. People, especially the economically disadvantaged and underserved populations, need the internet to access services and get information about jobs and training. These needs have been exacerbated by the pandemic but they existed before and will remain once the pandemic is over.

There is hard statistical evidence from the El Cerrito library that shows the need for this internet access. In

2018, the El Cerrito City Council voted to fund increased library hours from the 35 hours per week then provided by the county to 50 hours per week — about a 43% increase in the time the library was open. By contrast the internet usage on the library's public access computers increased over 100% at a time when countywide the internet usage remained flat. Increasing library hours resulted in a two for one increase in internet access. The obvious conclusion from this is that the new hours not only provided more time for traditionally underserved people to be able to access the internet, but it provided that at times that were more available to those users.

How serious is the lack of access to the internet? According to the none-too-good and probably significantly understated data available from the FCC, 28% of our fellow Contra Costans lack broadband access. And what does this cohort look like — they are overwhelmingly poor, people of color, and seniors.

## 2. Aid to People Experiencing Homelessness

Then 2020 Contra Costa Annual Point in Time Count (<https://cchealth.org/h3/coc/pdf/PIT-report-2020.pdf>) was taken on January 22, 2020 and showed that on that date there were 2,277 people experiencing homelessness in our county, 1,570 were unsheltered, and 707 were

sheltered. Seven percent were minors and 16% were seniors. This survey took place before the global coronavirus pandemic which surely has exacerbated the situation.

Those experiencing homelessness are significantly people of color: 23% are Latinx; 29% are Black; 8% are Native American.

How do libraries serve people experiencing homelessness. A library represents a place where a person can find out about training and jobs and apply for some of them; find out about shelters and other governmental services; and get all sorts of other assistance those of us privileged to have homes take for granted. Libraries also provide a respite, a place where a person can be free from the noise and disruption of life on the streets.

### 3. Education at all age levels

Libraries provide an important educational service. Story time provides an introduction to very young children to the wonder that is in books, creating in them a desire to read which is so essential to success in our society. The “read to a dog” program provides young readers with the confidence they need to become proficient readers. And “Project Second Chance” teaches literacy to adults

throughout the county, including a person who wants to be able to read and complete a job application and a grandparent who wants to be able to read to their grandchild.

A study issued in July of this year by the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago examined the effect of public library investment (in this case involving capital improvements) on student achievement measured by test scores (<https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai21-386.pdf>). The study found that investments in libraries resulted in an increase in the students' reading scores while it had no effect on their math scores. This is consistent with the emphasis on reading and books that remains the heart of our libraries' mission.

Other programs the libraries offer include tutoring to students. Economically disadvantaged parents need these services which can be self-financed by those with greater resources.

#### 4. Climate change

Libraries also provide a respite to our most vulnerable population to effects of climate change. A poor person is, even if housed, less likely to have air filters and air conditioning. But many of our libraries do have them. So

when the weather is extremely hot, or when the air is smokey because of fires, a library represents a place when one can breathe cooler and cleaner air courtesy of the HVAC system of the library.

### How Our Libraries Are Funded

Our county library system, bluntly put, favors richer communities simply based on its organization. Whether this is the intention of the system is not the issue; this is the effect. It is not unique among library systems but it is the system on which we can have some effect. So we have to do whatever we can to work against this aspect of the system.

The structure of the library system is that of a joint enterprise between the county and nearly all its cities. (For historical reasons the City of Richmond has an independent library system.) Each city provides the building for a library and its maintenance. (In certain unincorporated areas the county provides the building.) The county provides the collection for that library branch, the administration and equipment, and enough personnel to have the library open 40 hours a week. If a cities wishes to, it can pay the county to keep the library open for additional hours. This works out to schedules like this:



- Under the 40 hour plan, a library will be closed Sunday and Monday and only open past 6 pm on Tuesday.
- Under the 46 hour plan, a library will be closed the same two days but open past 6 pm on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.
- Under the 52 hour plan a library is only closed on Sunday and is open past 6 pm on Monday and Tuesday.
- Under the 56 hour plan a library is only closed on Sunday and is open past 6 pm on Monday through Thursday.

It should come as no surprise, as shown in the County Librarian's presentation, that the four cities which have their libraries open 56 hours a week are the four cities with the largest household income in the county. This is the antithesis of equity.

Comparing the per person expenditures on the library by the county versus our surrounding counties, based on the numbers in the County Librarian's report, shows Contra Costa clearly at the bottom of such spending. The following figures show the percentage above the Contra Costa County expenditure in these counties:

Alameda:	+ 51%
Solano:	+ 70%
Napa:	+137%
Marin	+273%

This is not the first time this inequity and disparity has been pointed out. In 2016, the Contra Costa County Library Commission noted, in a publication titled *Promoting Excellence in Library Service in Contra Costa County*: “[T]he Library’s funding model ... puts some community libraries at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to their peer libraries located within the county’s wealthier community. ....Our primary conclusions are that funding for the Library is not adequate ... and that **inequities in Library services** continue despite the expressed need for the Library to reach out to underserved populations.”

In 2016 the money to correct this hugely inequitable wrong arguably wasn’t available. But whatever the justification for this arrangement in the past, the existence of Measure X money to fix it makes the change imperative.

### Conclusion: What a Difference Hours Make

Libraries means different things to different people. They do serve a variety of needs. And the hours a library is open have different effects on different people.

As a Library Commissioner, I sometimes get asked whether we even need to have physical library buildings anymore. Perhaps this is true to a person:

- Who can afford to be and is often online from their home;
- Who owns a computer or tablet that serves as an electronic book reader;
- Who chooses not to participate in the rich variety of free programs each library offers its patrons (only a few of which have been mentioned here)

But to others — especially people of color, poor people, and seniors — the various services a library provides that are highlighted above are essential to their physical, emotional, and intellectual needs. To these people, (and they are the people who are most intended to be assisted by Measure X funds) libraries serve as what is sometimes called a “second responder” role: (<https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2019/05/when-libraries-are-second-responders/590098/>)

The services to our most needy that are provided by our libraries all share one common aspect. They are only available to a patron when they can come to the library at a time the library is open. Like an umbrella, a library doesn't work for them when it is closed.

There is one additional advantage to the proposal by the County Librarian. It is truly a win-win proposal for all Contra Costans. To see this you only need to go visit one of our libraries. Libraries rank as one of the most popular functions of our government across the population.

People using our libraries are as diverse as our county. In the words of former California Poet Laureate Dana Gioia, libraries are the one place in a community where everyone feels safe and welcome. As shown above, they fill many needs of our most vulnerable. And Contra Costans deserve to have a robust access to them.