Human side of city cuts: Neighborhood residents grow attached to their libraries and rec centers

San Diego Union-Tribune - Saturday, November 22, 2008

Author: Helen Gao and Ronald W. Powell

The Ocean Beach branch library recently celebrated its 80th anniversary, and the Clairemont branch its 50th.

The Azalea Recreation Center in City Heights is 36 years old, and the Tecolote Recreation Center near Mission Bay has been there 40 years.

They are among 17 facilities proposed to be shuttered by Mayor Jerry Sanders as the city tries to close a $43 million budget deficit. Each place has its own character and -- for now -- its own place in the community.

Ocean Beach

Patrons of the Ocean Beach library describe the cozy, 4,579-square-foot space as a neighborhood oasis. Parents and their children often walk there and leave the family car at home.

Activities include baby story hour, a sign language program and summer reading for more than 100 children.

On a recent afternoon, Kila Johnson walked the three blocks from her home to the library with her two children, Rita, 2, and Ruby, 6 months. They visit three times a week.

"This is one of the wonderful places to take my children to pick out books, movies and music -- you name it," said Johnson, 35. "We can get it right here at our fingertips."

She credits the library for Rita's development. "I think it is the No. 1 contributing factor to my child's vocabulary, for sure," she said.

Kelly Dell, 26, teaches at the nearby Pioneer Learning Center, a private school for autistic students.

"We have a small school, so this is what we use as our library," Dell said. "The children come here as one of their class periods -- to immerse themselves in the books we're not able to carry."

She doesn't know what else should be cut, but she says she does know this: "It would be a shame to close a library like this that so many people use."
City Heights

Shauna Venegas was in the same place last week that she had been hundreds of times -- sitting on a beach chair watching her 11-year-old son, Gabriel, practice a sport.

Gabriel, who plays tight end on the Azalea Recreation Center flag football team, was running pass routes and making catches.

Venegas, 36, said the center has been a source of exercise, lessons and great times for her son, who also plays basketball, soccer and baseball at the center.

"It keeps him occupied and teaches him discipline -- how to stick with things," she said. "It also teaches him how to be a good winner and a good loser."

The parents also benefit. As their children play on the same teams year after year, they become friends. They carpool, share food, celebrate wins and mourn losses.

Venegas said all of those things are too precious to lose. Her solution: Lop off a day or two of operations for all city rec centers to save money.

"That way nobody loses," she said.

Old Town

The Presidio Recreation Center in historic Old Town is a modest building with indoor and outdoor basketball courts.

People drop in for pickup basketball games. Schools and community groups rent the indoor gym for sports activities.

One group that regularly rents the gym is the San Diego Senior Women's Basketball Association. Members train for national competitions, using the indoor gym for health reasons.

San Diego High Hopes, one of the senior women's teams, practices Tuesday and Thursday nights. One woman rides the train from Orange County.

"We got high hopes for this gym too," said Marilyn Day, 67, a former military nurse from Carlsbad.

Her teammates suggest that the city eliminate open hours and operate the indoor gym solely as a rental place. They also said rental rates should be raised a bit if that helps keep it open.

Team captain Fay Schwartz, who lives in Solana Beach, has tried to look around for another venue, but she said, "Once March Madness starts, it's very difficult to find a
The Municipal Gymnasium in Balboa Park, Schwartz said, is expensive and booked up. Plus, that gym’s hours are also proposed to be cut.

**University Heights**

The University Heights library is a one-stop shop for hair stylist Alexandra Williams, 53.

She searches the Internet there and checks out videos and audio books. Her son Jonathan, a high-schooler, does research there. About eight blocks north of Balboa Park, the 3,749-square-foot branch, one of the smallest in the city, has weekly story time and crafts for children, an adult book club and a constant waiting line for the computers.

"The kids need a place to go and something to do," Williams said.

Fred Smalley, 60, semi-retired, sometimes visits the branch five times a week and frequently combines a library visit with a stop at Henry’s Market next door. The library is often packed.

"We need more computers. We have a lot of homeless people who need those computers to keep in touch with their friends and family members," he said.

He has written a letter of protest to Councilwoman Toni Atkins, whose district includes the branch.

"If there’s a shortage in funds," he said, "maybe you could cut all the libraries back one day a week. Cutting hours back overall would be better than just chopping our libraries and playgrounds down."

**Mountain View**

Friends of the library groups are often made up of retirees, but not at the Mountain View/Beckwourth branch.

There, a group of teens has established a friends group to tutor students from kindergarten to high school on Mondays and Wednesdays.

"It’s fun to help the students, especially the little ones who are so cute," said Zaira Ramirez, a 16-year-old student at Patrick Henry High.

Nestled in a tree-studded park, the library also offers a preschool singalong that draws 90 children and a Spanish-bilingual story and craft time for a dozen children.

"It’s very homey," Ramirez said of the library. "Everybody knows each other; everybody
helps each other out. It's nice to come here."

Miriam Melendez, 15, another tutor, said she fears the students she works with will suffer academically if the library is closed and the tutoring program ends.

Neither teen knows where else the city could save money, but they believe there's got to be another way.

**Point Loma**

Walter Heyward, who runs a before- and after-school program at the Cabrillo Recreation Center, is like a rock star to neighborhood kids and parents.

His program, which serves dozens of schoolchildren, has been part of the center since 1992. Scores of kids have grown up with him, playing sports and going on field trips. Some of his former charges now work for him or volunteer with his program.

"Kids come back, stop by, work or volunteer with kids. That's the best thing," he said. He is not sure what would happen to the program if the Cabrillo center closes.

David Garza, whose son attends Heyward's program, said it would be a hardship on families for the center to close.

"He's able to connect with the kids, teaching them things about life. He has a way of entertaining everyone equally without focusing on one particular child," Garza said.

Lorena Silva Bourbon, who entrusts her 10-year-old son to the program, said she would be devastated if it goes away.

"It's almost like having an extension of a family. You bring your kids in, you know they are in good hands, and they will be well taken care of," she said.

**CITY COUNCIL**

The City Council will next take up the budget:

**When:** 1 p.m. Monday

**Where:** City Hall, 202 C St., 12th floor

**How:** Go to the meeting, or watch it on Cable Channel 24 or at sandiego.gov/citycouncil

Caption: 1 CHART 2 PICS
1. CITY COUNCIL 2. Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune 3. Laura Embry / Union-Tribune

*Edition: CITY*

*Section: ZONE*