

**Public Libraries in Solano County:
So Many Books, So Little Time
2004-2005 Grand Jury Report**

I. Reason for visits

The Grand Jury elected to visit all public libraries in Solano County to determine how they are meeting the needs of the communities they serve.

II. Procedure

The Grand Jury:

- Toured libraries and branches
- Talked with staff and residents
- Observed patrons using the library for computer, periodical and book index research.
- Observed handicap access and looked for safety concerns
- Reviewed the Solano County Library Facilities Master Plan dated February 2001
- Interviewed Solano County Head Librarian and Assistant Head Librarian

III. Background, Findings & Recommendations

Solano County has three public library systems: Benicia Public Library, Dixon Public Library and the Solano County Public Library, which includes branches in Fairfield, Rio Vista, Suisun, Vacaville and Vallejo. All the public libraries in the County are members of the SNAP system (Solano, Napa and Partners Library Consortium) which provides a centralized library catalog and circulation system. The SNAP system allows patrons to access the collections of all the member libraries which, in addition to the libraries listed above, include Napa City-County Library, Napa Valley College Library, Solano Community College Library and St. Helena Public Library.

Voter-approved Measure B, passed in 1998, imposed a 0.125% countywide sales tax for library services which has greatly benefited libraries throughout the county, enabling them to expand hours of operation and the size of collections. The table below summarizes the size of the facilities, staff and collections of the libraries in the County.

Solano County Library Branch	Square Footage	Collection	Full Time Staff	Public Meeting Room	Small Conference Room
Fairfield Civic Center	30,000	115,897	18.5	Yes	No
Suisun City	5,460	46,609	5.5	No	No
Rio Vista	5,288	41,478	5	Yes	No
Vacaville Cultural Center	25,186	139,573	16	No	Yes
Vacaville Town Square	15,000	34,800	9.5	Yes	No
John F. Kennedy	47,000	144,016	19	Yes	No
Springstowne	2,700	48,522	5.6	No	No

Dixon Public Library	6,000	40,000	6.5	No	No
Benicia Public Library	23,000	99,000	22.8	Yes	Yes

In addition to traditional books, magazines, newspapers and reference materials, public libraries in Solano County provide a wide selection of audiotapes, videotapes, CDs and DVDs. Library patrons now have access to public computers which provide free internet and productivity software (for word processing, spreadsheets and slideshow presentations) as well as library catalogs. Libraries now have wireless internet access for patrons using their own laptop computers.

Library services also may be accessed via the internet so that patrons can search the SNAP catalog, check their library accounts, renew books and place materials on hold, all from their home computer.

Computer technology training is vital as the population adapts to this new technology. Four branches of the Solano County Library system now have computer centers which can be used for training classes or as public access computers when classes are not scheduled. The table below shows the number of public access computers available at each library.

Solano County Library Branch	Total Public Access Computers	Computers with Internet Access	Computers with Internet Access AND Office Software	Catalog-only Computers	Computer Center	Wireless Access
Fairfield Civic Center	65	60	24	5	Yes	Yes
Suisun City	8	7	1	1	No	Yes
Rio Vista	8	7	1	1	No	Yes
Vacaville Cultural Center (after remodel)	44	39	39	5	Yes	Yes
Vacaville Town Square	35	32	32	3	Yes	Yes
John F. Kennedy	63	58	24	5	Yes	Yes
Springstowne	8	7	1	1	No	Yes
Dixon Public Library	14	10	10	4	No	Yes
Benicia Public Library	26	18	12	8	No	No

The SNAP Consortium has an Internet Use Policy which lists unacceptable uses of SNAP computers, but which also clearly states that SNAP does not censor access to information or protect users from offensive information. Under this policy, parents are responsible for the protection of their children, including monitoring their access to the internet. At the time of this report, the Solano County Board of Supervisors is considering requiring that filtering software be added to internet computers in all libraries under the County's jurisdiction.

A. Benicia Public Library

The Benicia Public Library is located at 150 East L Street and is a relatively new structure, having been opened in 1993. It has 23,000 square feet on the main floor, 8,700 square feet of basement space and is located in the civic complex near the middle of town which is convenient to most residents. The library has two meeting rooms available for public use.

The structure is functional, light and airy without being cavernous, and its reading area features a fireplace and comfortable chairs with windows featuring views of the city and the bay, making for a restful and pleasant place to enjoy a good book. The city is to be commended for this first rate facility.

The Benicia Public Library is governed by the Benicia Library Board of Trustees, which is appointed by the mayor of Benicia. The library is open seven days per week.

B. Dixon Public Library

The Dixon Public Library is located at 230 North First Street in an historic Carnegie library building, one of the few original Carnegie libraries still operating as a library in the United States. The library first opened in 1913, and the building was enlarged in 1958 and again in 1990 so that today's library is about 6,000 square feet, with an additional 2,000 square feet of basement space that is not accessible to the public.

The entrance to the library is in the section that was added in 1990. This area is easily accessible and includes book stacks, the circulation desk, reference section, computers and children's area. The older Carnegie portion of the library is at the top of a flight of stairs. There is no passenger elevator available. The library staff retrieves materials for patrons if they cannot access the upper level.

Library computers now include catalog access and most include personal productivity software, as well as internet access. Patrons with laptop computers may now access the internet through the library's wireless internet system.

The Dixon Public Library is governed by a Board of Trustees which is comprised of the elected members of the Dixon Unified School District. The Board appoints members of a separate Library Commission to oversee the day-to-day operation and policy matters of the library. The library is open six days per week

The 1999-2000 Solano County Grand Jury noted that the Dixon Public Library was the only public library in the county that did not belong to the SNAP system and recommended that the library investigate joining the Solano County Library system. The Dixon public library has recently addressed these concerns by contracting with the SNAP system for wider access to circulating library materials and for computer services.

Finding #1 The Dixon library building needs significant upgrades in order to meet the needs of the community as well as Americans with Disabilities Act requirements. Library officials are currently exploring the possibility of building a new 24,000 square foot facility in partnership with the city of Dixon.

Recommendation #1 The City of Dixon and the Dixon Library Board should continue to explore a new site and funding opportunities for a new library that will meet the needs of the community.

Comment

The historic Dixon Carnegie library, while inadequate for Dixon's current library needs, is a community resource that should be preserved. Other uses for the building should be explored.

C. Solano County Library

The first county library was founded in 1914 and was housed in one room of the Solano County Courthouse in Fairfield. Today the Solano County Library operates seven branch libraries in five communities. There are two branches in Vallejo, two in Vacaville and one each in Fairfield, Rio Vista and Suisun City. The library branch facilities are owned or leased by the individual cities in Rio Vista, Suisun City and Vallejo. The Vacaville libraries are owned by the Vacaville School District/Library District and the Fairfield Library is owned by Solano County and serves as the library system's headquarters.

The 2001 facilities master plan for the Solano County Library system anticipates the need to expand two of the existing branches, relocate three branches and construct seven new branches to accommodate the anticipated growth by the year 2020. One of the new branches (Vacaville Town Square) opened in January of 2005. The City of Fairfield was recently awarded a \$4.1 million Proposition 14 library construction grant to build a branch in the Cordelia/Green Valley area. The new branch is scheduled for completion in 2006.

Fairfield Civic Center Library

The Fairfield Civic Center library recently re-opened after a year of modernization work and reconfiguration of the interior. The modernization efforts were to upgrade the technology, heating system and replace lighting. The results are more space for users to sit, read, have better access to the staff and computers and allow for better shelving units. The building is accessible and appears to be in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The library maintains both English and Spanish materials and was awarded a state grant of \$25,000 to use on the purchase of books written in Spanish. Whatever is available in English is, more often than not, duplicated in Spanish. The library mirrors every section with an equivalent in Spanish, including books, reference materials, CDs, audio tapes, videos and magazines.

There are two meeting rooms and two larger community-meeting rooms. There are four study rooms, three in the adult section and one in the children's section. These rooms can be reserved for personal use. The library is open seven days a week.

It was noted that the lighting in the adult section and a portion of the children's section does not appear to be adequate. The low level of lighting made it difficult to see many titles of various materials in the library. Even with the open arrangement, there is a feeling of darkness. It was explained that these areas were designed this way to aid in viewing computers. However the library staff realizes that the design is problematic and is actively seeking to correct the lighting.

Overall, the Grand Jury found the library to be very open with a good presentation and display of materials. The children's section has very vibrant and bold colors which gives this section a fun and "glad to be there" feeling.

Finding #2 Lighting needs to be improved in some sections of the library.

Recommendation #2 Improve the lighting to make it easier to read the titles of library materials.

John F. Kennedy Library – Vallejo

The John F. Kennedy Library is located in the downtown area of Vallejo. It is a large building of 46,874 square feet. Because the JFK Library is located downtown in the civic complex, it is remote from the bulk of the population of the City. The JFK library building is well maintained and has pleasing aesthetics, but is somewhat cavernous and this leads to acoustic problems. It is a large structure with the adult section on the second floor and the children's section on the first floor. There are issues with regard to handicap access due to the stairs at the main entrance and multi-floor design.

The McCune Room, located on the lower level of the JFK library, houses a superb collection of rare and unique books, printing equipment and binding tools left as a bequest to the City of Vallejo by Dr. Donovan J. McCune. The particular strengths of this collection are in: Fine Printing and Binding, Californian and Latin & Greek texts, including incunabula. The McCune Room is open to the public three days per month.

The third floor of the building has staff storage and community meeting rooms, plus the City's Fighting Back office, while the Vallejo Police Department is utilizing the basement for evidence storage. Several years ago, there was a bombing attempt outside the building which probably was aimed at VPD evidence.

Finding #3. The use of the JFK Library building by other tenants creates both security and service issues for the library that need to be addressed. Relocation of the Kennedy Library seems the only solution to its security and service problems.

Recommendation #3 The City of Vallejo should review its Capital Improvement Plan in conjunction with the library's Facility Master Plan and include planning for a new library, better located and configured to serve the citizens of Vallejo.

Springstowne Library – Vallejo

The Springstowne Library is located on Oakwood Avenue in East Vallejo. It is only 3,024 square feet, yet due to its proximity to the expanding population of East Vallejo and a number of nearby schools, does about one-third of the circulation of the much larger JFK library facility. The Springstowne branch is too small to meet the demand for services it receives from the East Vallejo patrons and also is not ADA compliant.

Finding #4 Expansion is needed. Expansion at the current site is unlikely unless the city can relocate its adjacent fire station and convert the station into an expanded library facility.

Recommendation #4 The City of Vallejo should review its Capital Improvement Plan in conjunction with the library's Facility Master Plan and include planning for a new library which conforms to ADA requirements and is better located and configured to serve the citizens of Vallejo.

Rio Vista Library

The Rio Vista branch library is conveniently located in downtown Rio Vista within a few blocks of Rio Vista High School and Riverview Middle School. The building is relatively small, but is open and sunny. There is no dedicated space for group study. There is a pleasant children's area and the facility includes a community meeting room.

Finding #5 The library appears to be very functional at the present time, but if the City of Rio Vista grows as planned, additional library facilities will be needed.

Recommendation #5 The City of Rio Vista should review the library's Facility Master Plan in conjunction with the planned growth of the City and should ensure that plans for additional library facilities are included in the planning.

Suisun City Library

The Suisun City library is located in a 5,406 square foot leased space on the second floor of an office building on Sunset Avenue. The entrance to the library is in the rear of the building and is not easy to locate. There is elevator access.

The library was crowded, and there did not appear to be enough space to accommodate all the books and other library materials while allowing room for patrons to read or study. The children's section of the library did not appear inviting and the furniture in one section did not seem age appropriate, although a brightly colored carpet made the space more lively.

Finding #6 The size, configuration and location of the Suisun City library is not adequate.

Recommendation #6 The City of Suisun City should review its Capital Improvement Plan in conjunction with the library's Facility Master Plan and include planning for a new library, better located and configured to serve the citizens of Suisun City.

Vacaville Public Library -Cultural Center

The Grand Jury inspected the facilities and contents of the library in December 2004. The library design relies on the use of natural lighting from the many windows throughout the library. The use of artificial lighting is understated. The seating arrangements take advantage of the many windows and their views.

There is a large children's area with fanciful décor that looks like it would be appealing to children.

The book selections are vast and growing. The library maintains both English and Spanish materials.

At the time of the Grand Jury's visit, the self-checkout area was not accessible because the self-check machines had been placed on a high counter. Soon after our visit, the branch closed for renovations which are expected to remedy this situation. The remainder of the library is ADA compliant.

The committee found the library to be inviting with a good presentation and display of materials.

Finding #7 The checkout counter is too high for many patrons to access the self-checkout machines. This is scheduled to be addressed during the current remodeling.

Recommendation #7 When the remodeled branch reopens, the library staff should ensure that the self-checkout area is more accessible.

Vacaville Public Library – Town Square

The new Vacaville Town Square branch library is in a good downtown location next door to the Vacaville Senior Center. The building houses the library downstairs with leased business space on the second floor which could be available for library expansion at a later date. The library design is open with large windows overlooking Ulatis Creek.

The library includes two small-group study rooms and a computer center that can be used for computer training classes. The children's section is inviting, and is decorated with a large mural representing Solano County.

At times the library seems very crowded, but it is likely because of the temporary closing of the larger Vacaville Cultural Center Library for renovations. A longer-term concern is the amount of parking available for the library in combination with the other Town Square tenants.

Finding #8 There appears to be inadequate parking for the library, especially in view of the fact that many of the businesses in the new Vacaville Town Square area are not yet open.

Recommendation #8 The City of Vacaville should monitor the parking situation when the new Town Square businesses open and plan for expanded parking if necessary.

IV. Affected Agencies

City of Benicia

Benicia Public Library

Benicia Library Board of Trustees

Dixon Public Library

Dixon Library Board of Trustees

City of Dixon

Solano County Library

City of Rio Vista

City of Suisun City

Vacaville Public Library Board of Trustees

City of Vacaville

City of Vallejo

Solano County Board of Supervisors