TO:   HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

FROM:   CITY MANAGER                         DEPARTMENT: LIBRARY

DATE:   DECEMBER 13, 2004                                                   CMR:513:04

SUBJECT: APPROVAL OF LONG AND SHORT RANGE PLANS TO CONSOLIDATE AND STRENGTHEN LIBRARY SERVICES

RECOMMENDATIONS
Staff recommends that the City Council take the following actions:

1. Adopt a long-range plan to establish a single full-service library for all of Palo Alto, at an existing or to-be-determined site;

2. Appoint a Blue Ribbon Committee, with diverse membership representing all stakeholders, with members to be recommended by the City Manager and the Library Director, and a charter to develop a work program, timeline, and funding plan for the long-range vision. The Committee will submit its report to the Council by January 31, 2007 in time for the Council to incorporate it into the next budget cycle.

In line with the long-range vision of enhancing library services, staff further recommends the Council:

3. Authorize the conversion of the College Terrace and Downtown Branch Libraries to other community uses, to be completed by June 30, 2007;

4. Shift all staffing and other resources from the College Terrace and Downtown branches by June 30, 2007, to enhance services at the Main, Mitchell Park and Children’s Libraries.

BACKGROUND
These recommendations are coming to the City Council as a result of a recent study session to examine the status of the Palo Alto City Library. During that study session, the Library Director presented an overview and analysis of the Library, including its staffing, services, collections, technology and facilities. The 2002 library bond measure was discussed, as was the Library’s response to Council direction to improve productivity, adopt more new technology, and use more volunteers. Despite significant accomplishments in each of these areas, the quality of library service continues to degrade while costs continue to escalate. It has been shown that without a significant influx of new revenue, the City of Palo Alto can no longer afford to operate five
Library service points. Six possible long-term options to improve library service and the cost-effectiveness of Library operations were outlined. At the conclusion of the study session, the City Manager stated he would bring specific recommendations regarding the Library back to the Council.

The City of Palo Alto is facing a $5.2 million general fund budget deficit in FY 05/07. Staff throughout all City departments are already at work on proposals for service reductions. The deficit equates to a loss of 35 to 50 employee positions. More information about the structural budget imbalance can be found in the Long Range Financial Plan, included in this agenda packet. In this fiscal environment, with a looming $5.2 million deficit, growing employee costs, storm drains that need upgrading, a commitment to building a new police headquarters, and many other significant infrastructure maintenance needs throughout the City, it will be very nearly impossible to identify new funding sources for improving the quality of library services. Reducing the number of library facilities is the most prudent way to improve the quality of library services.

**DISCUSSION**

City officials have struggled for many years with how to balance community needs and desires for library services with the City’s many other competing priorities. Achieving this balance is all the more challenging within the current environment of critically constrained public funds. It is clear that no long-term vision will please everybody. The City will need to define the most cost-effective and sustainable plan, and then work with stakeholders to engage the community in a dialogue to refine the plan and determine a funding strategy to attain it.

The long-term plan needs to be consistent with the City’s fiscal reality. It needs to take into account present needs and also anticipate the needs of the future. The plan needs to reflect the trend of increasing employee costs and ongoing infrastructure maintenance requirements. For example, Infrastructure Maintenance Program projects totaling over $6 million are needed at four of the five libraries. Seismic retrofitting, mechanical system overhauls, ADA-compliance and other basic maintenance needs will be addressed. None of these capital projects will add any square footage, nor will they result in renovation of any staff work areas or public spaces.

**A Full-Service Library for All of Palo Alto.** Adopting a single, full-service library service model will mean stepping away from the heavily redundant structure that has been greatly treasured, but has hampered progress in Palo Alto’s library for more than 30 years. It does not necessarily demand the elimination of all satellite facilities, but it does guarantee that excellent service will be available in at least one location. Obviously, a single, excellent, full-service library for all of Palo Alto is inconsistent with the City’s Comprehensive Plan and its laudable goal of walkable neighborhood libraries. Yet by consolidating full-service resources in one location rather than two or three (as currently exists with the redundant “Resource Library” model of Main, Children’s and Mitchell Park), stronger services can be provided in the central location, while not precluding limited services distributed throughout the community, to the extent that funding will allow. Moreover, the Palo Alto shuttle program could be enhanced to provide frequent runs from all neighborhoods to the new Library.

At the very least, the Children’s Library will always be part of the Library system. However, it is a historic structure, and because of space constraints and the needs of neighboring services
such as the Children’s Theatre and the Community Theatre, it can never be expanded to fully
meet Palo Alto’s needs for library services for youth. Yet it should be retained as a treasured
artifact – a heritage library that endures as a special place for parents and young children to
discover the joy of books together.

Mitchell Park could well become the location for the City’s full-service library. A larger
footprint than the existing one for the Mitchell Park Branch is required, however. Its location is
not geographically centrally situated, but it is near two main traffic thoroughfares, and near
several schools. There are many questions to be answered, such as: Could the Library be
relocated elsewhere within the park? Could the Mitchell Park Community Center be re-located
elsewhere, such as to the Cubberley Center, allowing the Library to take over the existing
footprint of both buildings and the walkway in between? Is the location suitable for a full-
service library? Could traffic and other impacts be satisfactorily mitigated?

If the full-service library is not placed at Mitchell Park, a strong case can be made for retaining
that library as a satellite branch, with a particular emphasis on supporting the schools
surrounding it, and serving the students at those schools.

The Main Library could also serve as the full-service location. Its drawbacks include its location
in a highly residential neighborhood, and the fact that it is not well-situated geographically. As
is the case with the Children’s Library, the Main Library is a historic building, which would limit
its flexibility for renovation to meet current and future programmatic needs. Many neighboring
stakeholders, notably the community gardeners and advocates for green space, may object to an
expansion.

A new site should also be considered. As one example, the California Avenue area has the
advantages of being near the major thoroughfares of El Camino Real and Oregon
Expressway/Page Mill Road; could help revitalize the California Avenue shopping and
merchants district, as well as that section of El Camino; is readily accessible by car, train, bicycle
and on foot; and the City owns available land there, and there is at least one vacant lot in the
vicinity with an owner who might be interested in gifting to the City. Other sites might be good
candidates as well.

The distribution of service points beyond the full-service library must be a financial decision.
Distributed service points would provide more limited services than those available at the full-
service library. For example, hours of operation might be shorter, collections might be smaller,
and programs might be fewer. Even with the most progressive technology and the most
abundant complement of volunteers, if the service point is operated as a traditional branch
library, staff will still be needed at each facility for the hours that it is open for business. For that
reason, it is important to envision distributed library services in new and innovative ways, not
necessarily the way they looked 25 years ago. If there are ways to meet community needs
through different models, they should be explored with open minds.

Another option would be for the City to turn the branches over to be managed and operated by
volunteers, which shouldn’t be completely ruled out.
Blue Ribbon Committee. The library has many constituencies. An effective way to fully develop a viable long-term plan, including a funding plan, is to assemble a Blue Ribbon Committee, made up of representatives of the Library Advisory Commission, the Friends of the Palo Alto Library, the Palo Alto Library Foundation, the Palo Alto Unified School District, and other members of the community. This committee should include seniors and young people, and it should be charged with developing the vision adopted by the Council into a thorough and coherent plan, including funding strategies. It should incorporate as much citizen input as possible into the plan, and bring it back for the Council’s review no later than January 31, 2007, in time for the Council to incorporate it into the next budget cycle.

Convert College Terrace and Downtown branches to other community uses. In addition to addressing the redundancy of the Main, Mitchell Park and Children’s Libraries as designated “Resource Libraries,” it is the conviction of staff that although the College Terrace and Downtown libraries are greatly beloved by many members of the community, it is simply no longer feasible for the City of Palo Alto to continue to operate them in the traditional manner. Library services will be improved and strengthened at no additional cost by shifting resources from the lesser used facilities to the three more heavily used libraries: Main, Mitchell Park and Children’s.

Other community uses for the College Terrace and Downtown facilities should be sought, with a goal of retaining a library service component in each of them. Uses that are either revenue-generating or cost-avoiding should be given top priority.

Shift all Library resources to the Main, Mitchell Park and Children’s Libraries. Staff recommends that all of the resources from the small branches be redirected into service enhancements at the Main, Mitchell Park and Children’s Libraries. Adding the staff time would address acknowledged staffing deficiencies, and would also result in at least three additional hours of service per week at Main and Mitchell Park. The Library’s entire budget for books and other library materials would actually go further, as it would be used to maintain three collections instead of five. As an example, the Library would be able to purchase approximately 2,300 more books in year one by redirecting funds from the College Terrace and Downtown collection allocations.

ALTERNATIVES TO STAFF RECOMMENDATION
At its November 18 meeting, the Library Advisory Commission voted to recommend to the Council that it adopt a long-range vision of a single full-service library supporting a system of satellite branches, including all of the existing branches. The Board of Directors of the Friends of the Palo Alto Library has endorsed this recommendation. The Council could direct staff to identify the costs of this service model and return with recommendations.

On November 8, the Library Director presented the Council with an option to maintain the existing service model. It was suggested that approximately $850,000 (year one) could be added to the Library’s annual operating budget, to fund several new positions along with improvements to the collection. On top of the new revenue for operations, more money would also be needed for much-needed facilities upgrades at four of the five libraries. This is in addition to the $6 million already required to repair and renovate four facilities, and the $1.4 million being contributed by the City to the Children’s Library renovation and expansion. The Council could
direct staff to identify the costs of this service model and return with recommendations, including possible tax measures for generating the necessary revenue.

**RESOURCE IMPACT**

Adoption of the first recommendation, establishing a long-range plan for a single, full-service Library for all of Palo Alto, will call for substantial capital resources to build the Library. The existing budget for the Library ($5.2 million in FY 04/05) would be sufficient to operate a single full-service library. Funds might also be available to support the operation of an outreach van or other mobile service to the neighborhoods. The Library could still be open at least 67 hours per week (as opposed to the 62 and 58 hours per week that the Main and Mitchell Park Libraries are currently open, respectively). Advanced technology could be incorporated into the facility to further reduce staffing requirements. The purchasing power of the “collection dollar” would very nearly double, because there would no longer be a need to duplicate almost every new title, such as currently must be done for placement at Main and Mitchell, or Children’s and Mitchell.

Cost of renovating/expanding or constructing a new full-service library would depend on several factors, including its size, whether or not the building is being expanded or built from scratch; and land acquisition costs, if any. Based on recent Bay Area library construction projects (Livermore, Santa Clara, Cupertino and Dublin), the cost could range from $500 to $600 per square foot. These new libraries ranged in size from 30,800 sq ft (Dublin) to 84,000 sq ft (Santa Clara). Palo Alto’s funding could come from a bond measure.

Minor costs would be associated with the work of the Blue Ribbon Committee assigned to fully flesh out the Library vision. These costs would include some time for support staff, supplies for meetings, and production and distribution of reports and publications.

There will be one-time costs associated with converting the two small branches to other uses. By shifting all staffing resources from the two smaller branches to Main, Mitchell Park and Children’s Libraries, recognized staffing deficiencies in the Library will be addressed and service hours will be expanded at the three remaining libraries. Collections will be improved because the materials budget will maintain three collections instead of five. Library services will be strengthened and improved at no additional ongoing cost.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

These recommendations represent a very clear change to the existing service model and the Comprehensive Plan vision of walkable neighborhoods. They are in line with the City Council’s priority for maintaining a long-range financial plan, and they are also consistent with the City Works/Infrastructure Top Five program.

**TIMELINE**

If the Council approves the conversion of the College Terrace and Downtown branch libraries to other uses, staff will immediately begin investigating the most likely options. Staff will also pursue innovative ways to respond to community demand for convenient library locations, and to mitigate the effects of the conversion of the two small branches. Frequent progress reports will be provided to the Council.
ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW
The recommendations as presented do not constitute a project under CEQA.

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