

# Barnidge: Libraries aren't just for books anymore

Contra Costa Times columnist  
**Tom Barnidge**

AS STARTLING as this may seem in the era of Facebook, Twitter and texting, appreciation for literature may yet survive this generation. The signs are everywhere, if you look up from your BlackBerry to see them.

Lafayette opened a new public library eight days ago. Castro Valley opened one the previous week. The new Walnut Creek Library is scheduled for completion in mid-2010, and Pleasanton officials are considering a project of their own.

While neighborhood bookstores have been dismantling shelves and boarding up windows, libraries have attracted growing audiences with greater appetites. **In Contra Costa County alone, library cardholders have increased from 420,630 in 2005 to 561,273 in 2009, and books in circulation have swelled from 4.7 million to 6.7 million annually.**

Part of the explanation is as simple as dollars and sense. A free book at the library is a more comfortable read than a \$29.95 title at Borders, especially during lean times.

**"Whenever there's an economic downturn, library usage goes up,"** said Walnut Creek Library assistant Bill Kolb. "It's pretty predictable."

But there are more forces at work here than pocketbook motivation. Those stodgy, old, shush-shush libraries of your youth have undergone a transformation on the order of Bruce Banner turning into the Incredible Hulk.

The Lafayette Library and Learning Center, which sprawls across nearly 31,000 square feet, is typical of the modern approach, with 20 separate interest areas — some quiet, some for socializing — from Teen Center, to Homework Center, to Technology Lab, to the Activity Deck, to Children's Storytime Corner, to CafÃ©.

**"We like to think of the library as the community living room,"** said library manager **Susan Weaver**. "We encourage that atmosphere by providing lots of programs."

The Castro Valley Library has hosted magic shows and a Lego club, which attracted about 100 youngsters. Soon to come are safe-driving classes conducted by the California Highway Patrol, computer classes and Internet safety programs for parents. Lafayette has joined 12 arts, science and cultural organizations that will create a series of educational programs.

"We've been talking about this for 20 years," said Carolyn Moskovitz, Castro Valley Library manager. "We knew the world was changing, and we took a hard look at our mission."

Technology forced some of the changes, as Weaver can attest. When she first entered her field 15 years ago, her library had no Internet access. In recent years, the No. 1 reference question she hears is: "How do I attach my rÃ©sumÃ© to an e-mail?"

The Walnut Creek Library will have 90 personal computers available to the public. It previously had nine. When the new Castro Valley Library opened, its number of desktop PCs jumped from 20 to 59, and it added 30 laptops as well. Lafayette has 42 computers. If you have a library card, you have access.

Technology also has improved the library's ability to monitor its inventory. Each book now is

identified not only by bar code but also by a tag that comes with an embedded radio frequency.

"The beauty of it," Kolb said, "is that it's both a circulation and security device. We always know if a book has been checked out, and we can scan multiple items at once because it operates without line-of-sight access. If a book happens to get filed on the wrong shelf, we'll be able to find it with an RFID wand."

When books are returned, an automated handler recognizes them by ID tags, sorts them and loads them onto an Ergo Cart, which needs only to be pushed to the appropriate section of the library, where they are transferred directly to shelves.

See, we told you libraries had changed.

The most noteworthy advancements, though, have emphasized user-friendliness. **Reading areas now feature couches, lounge chairs and coffee tables. Restrictions on food and drink have been relaxed or eliminated — food is permitted nearly everywhere at Lafayette.** Book inventories can be accessed and titles reserved remotely by computer. Walnut Creek hopes to add a recommendation function, directing readers to titles they might enjoy based on their reading habits.

"Our goal," Kolb said, "is to make people feel more welcome. **The library used to have sort of a gatekeeper mentality. You'd check out your materials and leave. Now, we'd like you to come in and hang out with us.**"

Literacy appears to be safe for a while. Feel free to return to your BlackBerry.

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