

STEVEN FALK | *From the community*

Who says libraries are dead?

WE'RE 20 YEARS into the Internet age now and every imaginable document has been digitized, all media is portable and powerful computers are ubiquitous. We can Google anything and e-books have been on the market for years.

The public library was supposed to be dead by now.

Instead, San Francisco recently cut the red ribbon on a \$6 million face-lift for the Main Library. Improvements include 6,000 square feet of new space for fiction plus a seriously upgraded audio-visual section.

Perhaps most impressively, architects have opened up the building's entrance to show off its dazzling five-story central atrium.

Libraries, after all, are about openness and freedom, so why not put that openness on display?

Patrons to "The Main" are now greeted with a sweeping view of the lobby. There are also lots of new computers and some high-tech self-return machines that allow readers to drop their books onto a conveyor belt that automatically sorts the texts by floor and section.

Cool factor: The first several feet of the belt are visible through a glass wall.

Out here in the suburbs, the library news is equally upbeat. The city of Hercules opened its stunning new library last year to great acclaim. The sleek and modern-looking building uses classic materials to reference the historic buildings that surround it, and the new library has captured top design honors.

Up in Marin, the Belvedere-Tiburon Library is the prettiest building in town and is planning an expansion because, even in a town where most people can afford any book or DVD they want, the library is loved to the point of bursting.

Teens pack the place until midnight during finals, enjoying the free snacks the library provides. During a big power outage this winter, the library

was the sanctuary where people sought company, refuge and a good literary diversion.

Walnut Creek opened bids last week on its monumental new \$41 million project and expects to begin construction soon.

And, here in Lafayette, the new Lafayette Library and Learning Center is rising mightily from the ground. The stone, wood and glass project, located in the heart of our small town, tumbles gracefully down a hill. When it opens next year, the library will house more than 100,000 volumes, a café, teen center and homework center.

Destined to become a focus of activity, the building will also include a performance hall, a used book store operated by our industrious "Friends" group and plenty of public art.

Perhaps most notably, the new Lafayette Library and Learning Center will be home to the Glenn Seaborg Learning Consortium — an unique collaboration between the library and a dozen of the Bay Area's most significant arts, science, education and cultural institutions.

When the building is completed, nonprofits like the Lawrence Hall of Science and the Oakland Museum of California will deliver a remarkable wealth of materials, archives, exhibits, curricula, lectures and films to downtown Lafayette.

The Commonwealth Club has already begun its programming here, featuring speakers such as Willie Brown, John Dean and Richard Clarke.

So . . . what happened to the dead library?

Here's what happened: People love their libraries and refuse to stop using and supporting them.

In San Francisco, voters have repeatedly checked "yes" on ballot measures to fund libraries.

In 1994, they earmarked a share of their property tax revenues for a special library fund. In 2000, voters approved

a \$105 million bond measure dedicated to improve the 27 branch libraries and to build a new library at Mission Bay. Last fall, voters renewed the 1994 property tax. The Main, alone, serves about five million people per year and houses a collection of 2.1 million books.

The new Hercules library attracts up to 800 visitors a day and some 20,000 items are checked out every month — close to one for every Hercules resident.

Lafayette residents are so anxious to see their new library built that, in a wave of generosity that must represent some kind of philanthropic record, more than 25 percent of the city's households have voluntarily made contributions to fund the building and its operations.

To date, Lafayette library supporters have given more than \$13 million, and the checks — ranging from \$1 to \$1 million — are still arriving.

People are not ready to abandon their libraries, and, likewise, libraries continue to evolve to meet their patrons' changing needs. This partnership has led to buildings that go far beyond the musty book repositories of legend and to libraries that rise to meet the Internet challenge by providing a multiplicity of learning opportunities.

This is great news for our society and bodes well for our future because, perhaps like no other civic institution, public libraries bring together people of all ages, backgrounds, colors, creeds and interests who — despite their diversity and differences — arrive unified with a singular purpose: they want to improve their lives.

And so this week — National Library Week — we celebrate not the death of libraries but, instead, their spectacular rebirth in cities and towns across the Bay Area, the state and the nation.

Falk is the Lafayette city manager.