

Local Attitudes Toward Public Libraries

By John Nienstedt

The latest installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll shows that most San Diego County residents do, in fact, use the public library system and do not want local governments to abandon public libraries. However, public opinion is not so certain when it comes to building a new main library in downtown San Diego. Twenty-one percent say the City should not spend *any* time and money on the new main library, 10% say only “a little” effort is warranted and another 18% are unsure what should be done. Despite some reservations about how much civic effort should be devoted to the project, most residents say they will visit the main library, though 21% say they will try it just once. The survey also found that, while most residents believe new information technologies will not displace libraries, a sizeable number do believe libraries will become less important in the future.

Is That a Library Card in Your Wallet? The Demographics of Library Usage

The survey shows that 60% profess to have visited a public library in the past year. Twenty-three percent are fairly infrequent users (less than five times per year), 11% are moderate users and 24% visited 10 times or more last year. Nine percent can be dubbed “library fanatics,” as their usage exceeded 24 times last year. The average number of annual visits is nine while the median is two.

Further examination of the data reveals that seniors are far less likely to use a public library than those younger than 55. Seniors average about six trips to the library but 47% did not go at all last year. On the other side of the scale, 18 to 24 year-olds averaged a stunning 19 visits last year and only 35% did not set foot in a library.

The survey shows that one’s political alignment is another marker for library usage. Democrats use the library far more often – averaging 11 visits – while Republicans managed an average of only seven visits last year. Just 34% of Democrats say they

have not been to a public library in the past year.

Income also plays a role. As could be surmised, lower income residents tend to visit public libraries much more frequently than affluent residents. Those making less than \$20,000 per year experienced the highest amount of usage as they averaged 15 visits last year. Residents earning \$20,000 to \$40,000 visited public libraries about once per month on average. Conversely, residents earning more than \$60,000 annually averaged only seven visits.

Finally, where a person resides strongly influences how often they visit the library. Those who live in the north part of the City of San Diego (north of Interstate 8) show markedly higher levels of library visitation. Those living in the south suburbs (National City to the border) also visit libraries more often. Fewer than one-quarter south suburban residents did not visit a library last year! Perhaps it is not surprising that residents in these two areas also report a higher quality of life, as the previous KPBS/Competitive Edge Research poll showed.

Support for Library System

Twenty-three percent believe local government should be spending a lot of time and money to support public libraries and another 51% think they should get some support . Only 5% say government should not be dealing with libraries at all.

Not surprisingly, those who take advantage of public libraries believe government should do more to support them. Almost half of those who visit libraries twice per month or more say public libraries should get a lot of time and money. On the other end of the scale are folks who do not visit libraries at all. Only 15% of them say libraries deserve a lot of government time and money, while 29% say the government should put little or no effort into them.

The survey also shows that very liberal residents are a bit at odds with the mainstream

on this question. Very liberal residents are squarely on the side of the government putting more effort into public libraries, as 44% feel it should be doing a lot to help them. But moderately liberal residents are not that enthusiastic and those on the right side of the ideological spectrum are even less so. Still, even staunch conservatives generally recognize that libraries should get some support from government.

One of the most interesting findings is that those in the north city and, to a lesser extent, those in the south suburbs – the two areas where library usage is highest – *lag behind* residents in other areas in their desire for local government spending on public libraries! This suggests that, whatever is drawing these folks to the libraries has satisfied them to such an extent that they do not see a need for more time and money being spent. Further, perhaps the reason visitation is lower in other areas is because residents there perceive that not enough time and money is being spent on libraries there.

Finally, women tend to want a little more support for public libraries than men do.

The New Downtown Library

More residents (21%) say the City should be spending no time and money on the new main library than say a lot of effort should be going into the project (17.5%). Further, 10% say only a little time and money should be spent on the project and another 18% are unsure. Clearly, there is no consensus when it comes to the new library.

What we did find was that regular users of the public library system are huge fans of the new library while the 40% who do not visit libraries are its harshest critics. Thirty-eight percent among the latter group feel the project should not get at least some time and money from the City. On the other hand, over 60% of those who regularly frequent libraries think the downtown library deserves some or a lot of time and money.

Political party again plays a role here. Democrats want a more active role for government as 25% want the City spending a lot of time and money on the new main

library and another 36% want some effort spent on it. Just 13% of Republicans say a lot of time and money should be spent on the project while 28% say no effort should be made.

Younger residents also tend to want the City to take a more active role while older residents, especially those over 54, are leery of more effort. Almost one-third of the elderly believe San Diego should be spending *no* time and money on the new main library.

We expected to find that residents outside the City of San Diego would be the new library's biggest detractors under the theory that they would be less likely to use it. However, it is those in the north city region who are least enthusiastic of all. On the one hand, being City residents, they are more aware of the City's fiscal difficulties than those living outside the city and, being San Diego taxpayers, are more wary of the financial burden the main library may place on them. At the same time, they live farther away from the site and are therefore less likely to use the main library than those on the south side of town. For their part, most south city residents want to see some or a lot of effort devoted to the downtown library.

The Impact of the New Main Library

Whether or not residents support the new main library, it does promise to boost library visits. Once respondents were read a brief description of it, even 22% of those who had not visited a public library in the past year say they will make it to the new main library once to try it out and another 14% say they will use it at least once per year. Obviously, those who now visit libraries claim they will use the new downtown library much more frequently than non-users. Over one-third of the "fanatics" claim they will visit the downtown library at least once per month!

Ideology is another factor driving visitation for the downtown library. Liberals promise to be stalwart customers, as only 15% say they will not visit and 56% will visit it more than

once. But, an astounding 61% of those on the far right of the ideological spectrum say they will abstain completely from the new library! While general visitation rates for very conservative residents are low, this finding suggests that something more is at work when it comes to the downtown library. Perhaps ultra conservatives are suggesting they will stay away “on principle” or to make a point about what they may consider to be a boondoggle.

Younger residents predict they will visit the new main library far more often than older residents. Forty-two percent of those under 25 foresee visiting the main library once per month or more. Projected visitation drops precipitously from there and 48% of the elderly say they will never visit the new main facility.

Finally, south city residents -- where the library will actually be located -- say they will take advantage much more frequently than others.

Is The Library of the Future an Oxymoron?

In the face of the Internet and other information technologies, some people believe that libraries have outlived their usefulness. Others think public libraries will be just as vital in the years to come. Public opinion is fairly split on this issue. Thirty percent appear convinced that libraries will be around for a long time to come and another 21% agree, but a less strongly. On the other hand, one-quarter strongly believe new technology will make libraries less important, 17% believe that but less strongly and 7% are unsure.

Again – and not surprisingly, those who frequent libraries most often disagree strongly with the characterization of libraries as out-dated. The dividing line here appears to be two visits per year: those visiting more frequently than that tend to be skeptical of the doomsday scenario for libraries. However, those who use their library card once or twice per year are split on the question, and those who do not go at all mostly agree that libraries are passé. It looks like residents are voting with their feet here.

Geographically, the only region in the County where more residents agree that libraries are becoming less important is the north city area – possibly the most “wired” residential spot in the country.

Two additional findings support the idea that libraries and the Internet are locked in competition with one another. The first is that men are significantly more likely than women to perceive that libraries will lose their importance. Research has shown that men tend to be more technology-oriented than women and women make up just 25% of the nation’s information technology (IT) workforce. The second clue is that moderate conservatives are more likely than others – even right-wingers – to believe the library is less important due to technological advances. These tend to be fiscally conservative/socially moderate types who predominate in the new IT economy.

Conclusions

Most San Diegans use their public libraries with Democrats, those less than 55 years-old and lower income residents much more likely to take advantage of the library system. Most also want local government to actively support libraries. But despite general support for public libraries, residents tend to be wary of the new main library. Given the recent civic experience with large projects and city finances, this is not surprising. Since the county shades conservative anyway, new public libraries will generally have a tougher time garnering support here. In addition, a significant number of San Diegans are skeptical that libraries will play an important role in the coming years. One could surmise that the stars are aligned against a new downtown library.

But perhaps a new main library will work to turn negative opinions around. The survey shows that, once exposed to what the new main library has to offer, even many non-library users will be lured to the downtown branch. The synergy created by Petco Park, the trolley and the revitalization of the City’s east village should boost the chances that the new library will be a triumph. Only time will tell, but there is clearly much riding on its success.