

**A REPORT BY  
THE 2018-2019 CONTRA COSTA COUNTY GRAND JURY**  
725 Court Street  
Martinez, California 94553

Report 1903

**Safeguarding the Library's Local  
History Collection**

APPROVED BY THE GRAND JURY

Date MAY 21, 2019



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ACCEPTED FOR FILING

Date MAY 21 2019



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Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 1903

## **Safeguarding the Library's Local History Collection**

**TO: Contra costa county Board of Supervisors,  
Contra Costa County Library**

### **SUMMARY**

In its efforts to modernize its operations to serve patrons' needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Contra Costa County Library system (the Library) could lose important and irreplaceable remnants of the county's rich history and heritage.

Libraries today are more than repositories of books and records. They are community centers providing patrons of all ages and backgrounds with programs and activities, promoting literacy, and enabling access to technology and the unlimited opportunities available on the World Wide Web.

With 26 locations in Contra Costa County, the Library is successfully pursuing its strategic goals of:

- Ensuring easy, equitable access to library services for all county residents
- Championing adult and child literacy
- Delivering a consistent, high quality, and inviting experience for its patrons

The Library maintains special collections on subjects such as genealogy, jazz, and Russian literature that are available to patrons interested in those subjects. However, the Library's large collection of books and materials on the local history of Contra Costa County (the Collection) is another story. These materials are housed mainly in a secure and climate-controlled vault at the Pleasant Hill branch. That facility is scheduled to close in late September of 2019 to make way for a new branch scheduled to open in the Spring of 2021. If plans are not in place to safeguard the Collection before the Pleasant Hill branch closes, the people of Contra Costa County could be at risk of losing a collection of historical materials that cannot be replaced.

The Library values its total collection at nearly \$46 million for insurance purposes. That

amount does not include a replacement value for the Collection, which the Library deems irreplaceable. If your home were to burn, you could rebuild it and replace the furniture, clothing, and appliances with insurance money. But no amount of insurance could help to replace the family photo albums. The Library's Collection, with its rare books, old records, vintage photographs, letters, and other memorabilia, is the county's family album.

The Grand Jury recommends that the Library consider implementing plans for safeguarding the Collection in the short term and ensuring that it will be preserved and available for public use over the long term.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Grand Jury:

- Conducted multiple interviews with Library staff and outside professionals in the historical preservation field
- Examined the Library budgets for 2014-2018
- Reviewed the Library's inventory of its special collections
- Studied the Library's Collection Development Plan, its annual work plans, its 2014-2017 Strategic Plan, and its 2017 triennial review
- Reviewed assessments of the Collection and the Contra Costa County Historical Society by outside experts
- Examined agendas, minutes, and other documents from meetings of the Contra Costa County Library Commission (2014-2018)
- Visited the vault and other locations at the Pleasant Hill branch and the Contra Costa County Historical Society in Martinez

## **BACKGROUND**

This investigation began when members of the Grand Jury learned that people in the community had raised concerns about what might happen to the Collection when the Pleasant Hill branch closes in anticipation of its move to a new facility. Patrons noticed that the Library had made arrangements to move its genealogy collection from Pleasant Hill to Walnut Creek, but had not announced plans to move the Collection, much of which is housed in a vault at the Pleasant Hill branch.

The Grand Jury began its investigation by examining agendas, minutes and staff reports of the county's Library Commission to see if this issue had been considered by that body. We found no mention of the Collection in those records dating back to 2014. In fact, we found only one reference to any of the Library's special collections during that

time period: a September 25, 2014 agenda item mentioning that, “Commissioners will discuss disposition or storage of the jazz collection during the closure of the San Ramon Library for remodel and expansion in the Fall of 2015.”

The Grand Jury noted that Commission records did not reference any similar discussions of collections housed at the Pleasant Hill branch in view of its pending closure. The Jury decided to look into the Library’s policies and procedures governing its special collections and how they are being applied in the case of Pleasant Hill.

## **History, Goals, and Preservation Policy**

The Library was founded in 1913 and now has 26 branches in 18 cities and unincorporated communities. The Library serves all of Contra Costa County with the exception of Richmond, which has its own city library system. The Library reports to the Board of Supervisors through the County Administrator. A 24-member Library Commission was established by the Board of Supervisors in 1991 to serve in an advisory role, providing community input on the Library’s policies and operations.

The Library developed its 2014-2017 Strategic Plan following broad public input. That plan established four goals, along with objectives and strategies for addressing them. The goals are:

- 1. The Library ensures easy, equitable access to library services for all Contra Costa County residents.*
- 2. The Library champions personal and community engagement in literacy and reading to enrich lives.*
- 3. The Library delivers a consistent, high-quality, and inviting experience at all points of contact.*
- 4. The Library successfully promotes its value, programs, and opportunities to the community.*

These goals, and their accompanying objectives and strategies, were intended to drive decisions and activities through 2017. The Strategic Plan makes no mention of the handling of special collections that the Library owns. The Library’s special collections policies are covered in its Collection Development Plan, drafted in 2011. The relevant section of the plan states:

*As part of this role [Preservation of Materials] the Library will preserve and conserve unique and endangered information resources that it collects and retains. The Library will actively monitor the physical conditions of its collections and take action to prevent deterioration.*

The plan lists nine special collections. Library staff is responsible for seven activities in connection with those collections:

1. *Define the criteria for unique and endangered information resources*
2. *Identify collections that meet the criteria*
3. *Secure funding to support preservation and conservation*
4. *Educate staff in techniques of preservation and conservation*
5. *Develop agreements for retention and/or exchange of materials*
6. *Identify institutions or organizations willing to accept and store preserved materials or materials in need of preservation (i.e. local history)*
7. *Participate in the California Preservations Workshops regarding Disaster Preparedness and Response*

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Preserving the Past While Building the Future**

The Library's Collection Development Plan notes that the Collection constitutes "an invaluable and unique research resource." The Plan states that, "Ongoing maintenance and development of this resource is highly desirable to retain its historical and research value." It assigns responsibility for this maintenance and development to branch librarians.

The Library's assessment of the importance of preserving the Collection as libraries modernize is widely accepted among scholars and library professionals. For example, in her 2018 book about the evolution of libraries into "information and knowledge centers rather than simply storehouses of material," author Susan Orlean acknowledges that she could not have written the book without accessing "the musty boxes of material stashed in the library's Rare Books room." (Susan Orlean, *The Library Book*, Simon & Schuster, 2018)

Today's libraries have evolved from places where people can browse and borrow books, to spaces where the public can meet, learn, mingle, and access technology. Susan Orlean's note is a reminder that libraries must also preserve the archives that document our collective past.

### **The Collection at Risk**

The building that houses the Pleasant Hill branch is more than 50 years old and has deferred maintenance needs estimated at \$10 million. In 2014, the Library and the City of Pleasant Hill began making plans for closing the Pleasant Hill branch and replacing it with a new, modernized library. In Contra Costa, branch libraries are built, owned (with

some exceptions), and maintained by the cities in which they are located. The Library owns and maintains the materials housed in the branches and provides the staff to operate the branches.

The Pleasant Hill City Council created a Library Task Force in March 2014 to explore prospects for building a new library. The city hired the architecture firm of Bohlin Lywinski Jackson and conducted extensive outreach to the local community to determine priorities, which were integrated with the Library's strategic goals. The city held a town hall meeting in November 2018 to give the public an opportunity to review the new design. Neither the design itself, nor the town hall discussion, included any mention of a vault or other climate-controlled environment, or any provision for housing the local history Collection. <http://www.ci.pleasant-hill.ca.us/1226/Library-Project>

Library staff searched for locations within the Library system that might be able to house some or all of the Collection, but no solution was found. The Library has also had preliminary discussions with external organizations that might be able to provide space for the Collection. These include the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley and the Contra Costa County Historical Society in Martinez. The Library has not entered into agreements with any of these organizations to house the Collection.

Library managers said they would begin working on a formal plan for disposition of the collection in early 2019. At the time of this report, none of the components of such a plan had been established, including a needs assessment, cost estimates, a survey of Library facilities, and a list of organizations that could potentially house the Collection.

One additional obstacle is the fact that the Library does not have anyone on staff or contract who is a professional archivist or preservationist. While this report was being prepared, the Library received a grant of professional preservationist services from the California State Library. The grant will provide access to a preservation assessment. According to a presentation to the county Board of Supervisors, the assessment will "include scope and scale of preservation needed as well as recommendations for care of the collection." The Library says this information will provide a basis for developing plans for the short- and long-term future of the Collection.

A pressing issue is that Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors decided to close the Pleasant Hill branch a year and a half before the new facility is scheduled to open. This decision was made to enable the county to take advantage of the current real estate market to pursue a sale of the property. So far, the Library has not developed a short-term plan to ensure the safety and security of the Collection temporarily if the building is closed or demolished before a long-term solution can be implemented.

## **Making Progress**

Despite the absence of historical preservation on its list of strategic priorities and the lack of plans for handling the Collection either temporarily or permanently, the Library

has taken some steps to care for the Collection, in keeping with provisions in its Collection Development Plan described above. The California Preservation Program at UC Berkeley conducted a Preservation Needs Assessment of the Library's "Californiana" collection in May 2013, including the Collection. The study made recommendations for security and protection from damage by fire, water, and other environmental hazards. The Library has been working through these recommendations, implementing them where it could, and assessing the feasibility of implementing some of the more difficult or expensive recommendations.

The report also calls for hiring an expert to evaluate the need for a regional local history resource and the potential for the Collection to meet that need. The justification for the recommendation notes that:

*The Californiana collection materials take up space that could be used for other Library functions, they need ongoing care to be used safely by library patrons, and they would require dedicated staff to maximize their value to the community. Insofar as the community served may extend well beyond Contra Costa County, the Library could explore opportunities to secure grant funding to hire a consultant to perform the recommended analysis.*

Given the pending closure of the Pleasant Hill branch, the Library could consider revisiting the recommendation in the context of determining the best future for the Collection.

## **A Potential Solution**

The closing of the Pleasant Hill branch creates urgency about what to do with the Collection in the short term. At the same time, it also presents potential long-term opportunities for an upgrade. Most of the Collection is housed in Pleasant Hill, but some items are scattered throughout other branches and could potentially be brought together in a single facility. In addition, if the Library were able to partner with an external organization, it could be housed in a place where preserving historical materials for public use is a priority.

One possible organization to partner with is the Contra Costa County Historical Society (Historical Society). <https://www.cocohistory.org/> The Library's and the Historical Society's collections both cover the history of the county, making them complementary. The Historical Society is housed in a secure, climate- and humidity-controlled building in downtown Martinez. The facility includes a small exhibition space, room for patrons to study, and a large state-of-the-art scanner. The scanner enables materials to be digitized to ensure their preservation and allows the Historical Society to discard bulky items where there is little or no value in retaining the originals.

Like the Library, the Historical Society underwent an assessment by the California Preservation Program and is implementing its recommendations. In addition, the

Historical Society underwent an organizational assessment in 2014 by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the American Alliance of Museums. That study concluded that, “The (Historical Society) is a very professionally run organization with a strong volunteer staff, an experienced executive director, and a wealth of fascinating collections.”

The Historical Society’s mission is “to preserve, protect, and provide public access to the records and heritage of Contra Costa County.” Acquiring the Library’s Collection would align with this mission.

There are obstacles that would have to be addressed in order for a partnership between the two organizations to succeed. For example, the Historical Society might not have sufficient space to absorb the Collection. It would likely require help from the county, either with funding or building space. But if a successful agreement could be forged, a partnership between the Library and the Historical Society would provide the county with a means of permanently safeguarding the Library’s irreplaceable Collection and ensuring its availability for public use.

## **FINDINGS**

- F1. The Library is transitioning from a traditional storehouse for books into a technology center, literacy advocate, and community gathering place.
- F2. The Pleasant Hill branch is closing in late September 2019 to make way for a new branch which is scheduled to open in the Spring of 2021.
- F3. The new branch will not be able to house the Library’s Contra Costa County history Collection, most of which is currently housed in Pleasant Hill.
- F4. The Library does not have a short-term plan for safeguarding the Collection after the Pleasant Hill branch closes, before a long-term plan can be implemented.
- F5. The Library has not developed a long-term plan for permanently housing the Collection.
- F6. The Library has received a grant of professional preservationist services that will provide a basis on which to develop short- and long-term plans for safeguarding and housing the Collection.
- F7. The Contra Costa County Historical Society is a potential repository for the Collection.
- F8. The Contra Costa County Historical Society would like to house the Library’s Collection.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Library should consider developing a short-term plan by September 2019 for safeguarding the Collection while a long-term plan is being developed and implemented.
- R2. The Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Library to develop a long-term plan for housing the Collection, including a budget, by June 2020.
- R3. The Board of Supervisors should consider directing the Library to explore the feasibility of an agreement with the Contra Costa County Historical Society for housing the Collection by August 2019.
- R4. The Board of Supervisors should consider providing the financial resources necessary to fund the budget for the long-term plan in the 2021-2022 fiscal year.

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

	<b>Findings</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors	F4, F7, and F8	R2, R3, and R4
Contra Costa County Library	F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7, and F8	R1

These responses must be provided in the format and by the date set forth in the cover letter that accompanies this report. An electronic copy of these responses in the form of a Word document should be sent by e-mail to [ctadmin@contracosta.courts.ca.gov](mailto:ctadmin@contracosta.courts.ca.gov) and a hard (paper) copy should be sent to:

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