

University Heights Library: Past, Present, and Future



According to the most recent “Performance Audit of the San Diego Public Library System” (2016), the University Heights Branch of the San Diego Public Library is one of the smallest, has one of the lowest per capita ratios of space per resident, and is one of the lowest ranking in both number of programs offered, and in program attendance. Despite all of that, this mighty little branch has served our community for nearly 60 years providing books, computer time, reference assistance, and so much more. Despite its small size, the UH branch has consistently ranked among the highest in materials circulated. This is thanks in no small part to the amazing and dedicated staff, volunteers, Friends of the UH Library, and the community at large.

As our community grows over the next 3-5 years, with many hundreds of new housing units and thousands of new residents, our library will face ever-increasing demands from that growing population.

This special four-page section is focused on our library—past, present, and future. The UHCA board believes this is only the beginning of a community-wide conversation about what we need, want, and deserve in a public library that is funded by our tax dollars, grants, donations, and the time and energy from an army of tireless volunteers. This conversation will continue into UHCA Monthly Community Meetings in the Fall, with the City's Library Master Plan presentations and focus groups, in meetings with our councilmember and other elected officials, on social media, and in these pages.

The UHCA Board of Directors discussed the issues around the library at our April 25 board meeting and passed a resolution expressing our position that the library serving our community needs to be expanded, and that any and all avenues need to be explored. We are, as an organization, and in partnership with other community groups, pressing our elected officials to meet this urgent need.

The University Heights Community Association Board Resolution Regarding our Community's Library Needs, April 25, 2021:

1. The current UH branch library is undersized for our current and growing number of residents.
2. Increased density requires increased investment in infrastructure, and the Library is a critical piece of infrastructure for the community.
3. All opportunities for new/expanded library space need to be explored in an open manner with the entire community's input.
4. This matter must be prioritized and handled with urgency.

In this section, you will find the history of our library and how it came to be, along with commentary from some of the dedicated people in our community who have helped make it happen. We've included examples of amazing libraries neighboring communities enjoy, which include spaces for programs, exhibitions, and community events. These examples of libraries are inspirational and illustrate what can be accomplished. Additionally, we have submissions from neighbors who have shared their visions of “what could be,” as well as preliminary results from a community-wide survey we launched with our partner organizations.

We look forward to engaging the UH community to move from ideas and conversation to real action, and ultimately, a library that will enrich our community and make it an even better place to live, learn, and work. 📖

- UHCA Editorial Team & Board of Directors

Origins of the University Heights Library

By Kristin Harms, University Heights Historical Society

This information was taken from an article by Librarian Leslie Simmons for the University Heights News, March 1999 issue; *Turning the Pages: San Diego Public Library History, 1882-1982* by Clara E. Breed, “Once Upon a Time” article from the San Diego Sun, and the dedication pamphlet for the April 18, 1966 library opening.

The first University Heights Branch Library opened in April 1914. It was a 20-foot by 30-foot wooden structure built of donated materials by carpenters and plumbers who donated their time. There is some question of its location - it was either at El Cajon Boulevard and Mississippi Street, or at its present site on Park Boulevard at Howard Avenue.



Spanish/Mission style library structure, 1926



Present library site, 1966

A permanent Spanish/Mission style structure opened on March 29, 1926. Designed by Lincoln Rogers, it was described as having an atmosphere of restfulness and quiet dignity. These quotes are from a newspaper article about the “new” branch:

“The arrangement of book shelves, tables and window seat, the display of pictures and posters, as well as a liberal showing of one of California's chief glories, beautiful flowers, add to the general effect of good taste.”

“Another distinction is the fact that this is the first branch library to be built in the library's building program.”

“In the basement an auditorium with a dressing room and a conveniently appointed kitchen adjoining, is suitable for community use in the holding of club meetings and elections.”

The present University Heights Branch Library was built in 1966 with 3,749 square feet. It was designed by the City of San Diego Engineering Department and constructed by the Edwin V. Harris Construction Company for a cost of \$118,000. The dedication was held on April 18, 1966. 📖

Several ideas have been discussed over the years about what we can do to create a new library for University Heights. We have limited available land in our community, which limits where a new library could be located. Two of the ideas that have continued to come up are discussed here by UH residents. These aren't "proposals" – neither has been endorsed by UHCA or the city, and critical elements are still unknown, most importantly costs and feasibility. These ideas are presented here as "conversation starters." With greater community and city engagement, we hope these and other ideas are considered, robustly debated, and ultimately help to achieve a real solution for our needs.

A New Library for UH?

By William Smith,
Board Member, Uptown Planners

The departure of the San Diego Unified School District headquarters from the Ed Center property at 4100 Normal Street presents both a challenge and an opportunity for University Heights.

Some welcome the possibility of a significant amount of new, moderately priced teacher housing on the site, while others find that idea difficult to accept. Regardless of where you stand, I think we can all agree that the 11-acre site is well past its prime, and it is time for it to take its place once more as the jewel of University Heights.



From the start, the school district has promised to leave behind a treasured neighborhood amenity as this site is redeveloped with a significant amount of new housing. Based on input gathered over the last three years, it appears the community will accept a well-designed site with significant

greenspace, a dog park, and restoration of the historic Teachers Annex building as recompense. Now the real work begins. Exactly what should it look like, and how will it be paid for?

The amount of greenspace will depend on the amount of housing that is built and how high it can go. There is room for a dog park, but the city must find the budget to build and operate it. Restoring the Teachers Annex building will be expensive, so we need to get it right. Turning the building into a library seems like a no-brainer and completely appropriate for a site devoted to all things educational for more than a century, but the devil is in the details.

The Teachers Annex has a national historic designation which limits what can be done to it, so let's assume the exterior must remain the same but the interior can be configured to meet the needs of a meeting space, a community center, and/or a library. Clearly, the refurbished building must meet modern seismic, asbestos, access, and environmental standards. That means elevators, ramps, a complete rebuild of the interior, and strengthening of the exterior. While we don't know what that cost will be yet, it can only be assumed that it will be expensive.

It would be far less expensive to tear the existing building down and build an exact replica in the same or a better location on the site, or to build a modern, state-of-the-art library somewhere else on the property and figure out what to do with the Teachers Annex later. Both of these approaches are unlikely, so let's assume the existing building will be refurbished with money from a bond measure that includes Ed Center site improvements. The school district passed a resolution stating that they would do just that in July 2018. Such a bond measure might be brought to a vote as early as 2022.

In order to use bond measure funds, the district must continue to use the building for educational purposes, such as special educational events or teacher training programs. This they plan to do. However, the City of San Diego would need to find the money to "build out" a significant portion of the Teachers Annex space as a library and, of course, budget each year for its operation. The city is unlikely to do either, unless they own the building. Fortunately, the school district is open to exploring ways to do that. While the financial feasibility of this is yet to be calculated, one would hope that the sale of the existing library property would fund the bulk of the library build-out costs, and the existing operating budget would substantially cover operations in the new location.

Some time ago the California State Librarian is said to have toured the building and expressed the opinion that it is not suitable for a library, presumably due to the form factor of the space and the amount of money needed to make the building suitable. But the school district expects to pay for the rehabilitation of the building, and the library will presumably have a free hand to design the interior to meet its needs. When you factor in the value of saving a historic building, perhaps we can live with and maybe even rejoice in, having our own neighborhood library in a historic educational building within a safe and easy walking distance for the children from our community grammar school next door. I know I can. 📖



New York Public Library, Stapleton Branch, Staten Island. Example of blending new and existing construction together.



LocHal Library, Rillburn Netherlands. A former locomotive station "rebuilt" with a library inside the existing structure.

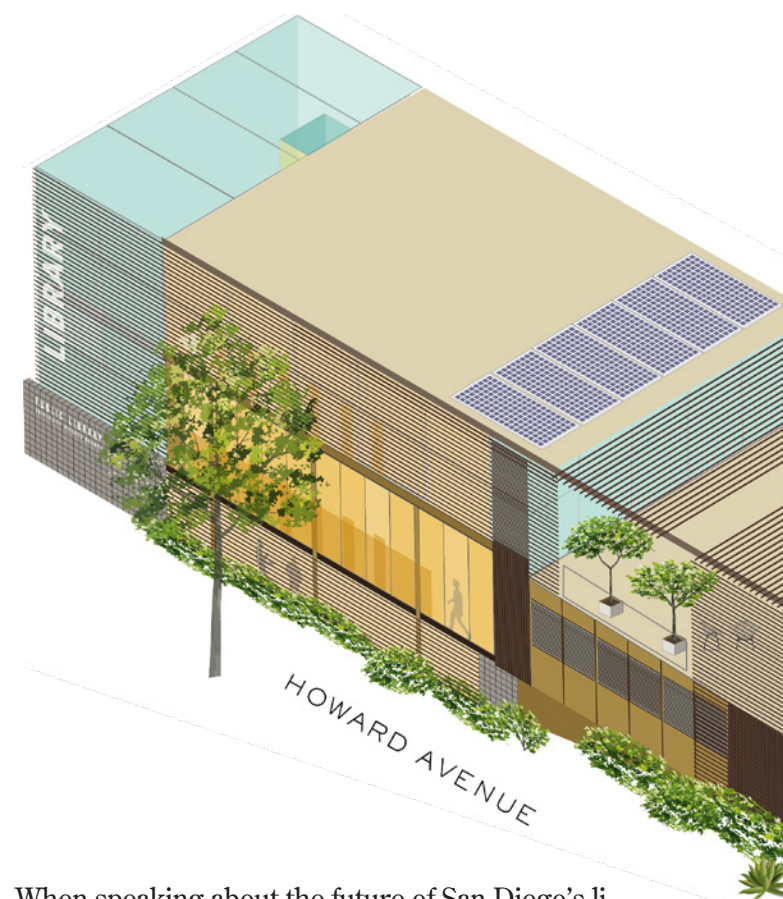


Library Renovation / Expansion

By Paul Farris, UH Resident & Activist

Everywhere you look in our neighborhood, there is new construction underway, from small infill projects to multi-story mixed-use developments with big construction cranes. For the last several years, the city has been pushing high density along the transit corridor of El Cajon Boulevard and Park Boulevard and mid-high, pedestrian-oriented infill development on adjacent residential streets.

According to city planners, this increased density development will bring thousands of new residents into the area within the next few years. What is not happening are any visible changes or plans for upgrading or expanding our neighborhood library to accommodate a dramatic increase in patrons. Currently, the San Diego Public Library website lists 12 different projects planned or underway for various branch locations around the city. University Heights is not one of them. While our neighborhood is expected to absorb some of the highest new density in the city, the UH branch is not even mentioned. Built in 1966 with half the floor space dedicated to the now-defunct bookmobile program, it was never perfect and is long overdue for renovation.



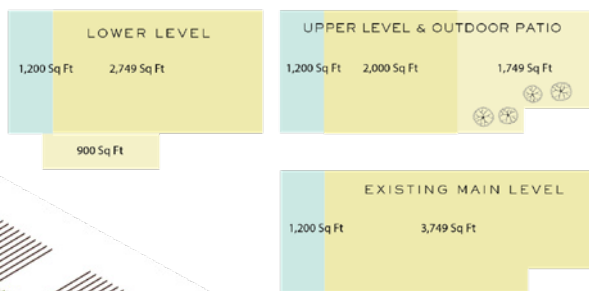
When speaking about the future of San Diego's libraries, Public Library Director Misty Jones has stated, "We're giving people of all ages and backgrounds the opportunity to use cutting-edge technologies — 3D printers, laser cutters, and mills — along with the space and support they need to build or invent. SDPL branch libraries offer job services, Veterans Resource Centers, free tax help, and adult literacy instruction. We are transforming into community hubs for innovation, learning and civic engagement."

The North Park Community Plan, adopted by the City Council in 2020, listed the UH library as moving across the street to the Teachers Annex, which is in the Uptown Planners jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the 214-page Uptown Community Plan from October 2019 devoted only a couple sentences to our library. UH is split between those two planning groups, with our library right on the boundary, which might explain why the library has been ignored. Serving two communities puts an even greater demand on the small facility and its role as a vital part of the community learning infrastructure.

As we prepare to eventually reopen California post-Covid, the shortcomings and need for updating our library only become more obvious. We do not have enough computers with free access to the internet. There is no dedicated space for teens, and no quiet study areas, meeting rooms, or space for library programs, community engagement, and social services, such as career or literacy assistance. The children's area is too small and too close to the entrance and quiet areas, making it difficult for programs and "storytime."

How can we adapt the space we have now? The lower level of the UH library was originally used to garage the Bookmobile program, which was stopped in 1979. The space was then given to the Friends of the San Diego Public Library, who moved there from the basement of the old Central Library. Relocating the FSDPL to another location, such as the old Mission Hills branch library, the old Serra Mesa Library, or Balboa Park, would put it in an area with increased foot traffic and sales potential for book sales. Any of these locations would better serve the FSDPL needs and allow for expanding the UH library immediately, doubling the usable floor space.

Remodeling the lower level would allow the UH Library to expand its services without moving, retain the existing footprint, and add over 11,000-square-feet of additional space. The lower level could provide 2,849-square-feet of flexible makerspace and event areas. Remodeling could include replacing the storage shed and outmoded aluminum awning in the bookmobile driveway and reconfiguring the space with an open accessible plan that adds new stairways, an ADA-compliant elevator, and glass walls extending three levels. These changes would allow visual and physical connectivity between the lower, main, and a new upper floor, as well as flooding the building with natural light.



Enclosing the carport along Howard Avenue would add another 900-square-feet of quiet study area and meeting rooms. A new upper floor would expand the book collection with 2,000-square-feet of space and a 1,749-square-foot pergola-covered outdoor reading area that would take advantage of the weather and overlook Park Boulevard with views to the west.

This open, sustainable design could include features to help meet 21st century standards for energy efficiency while establishing connections between inside and outside and the two fast-growing and diverse neighborhoods the UH library serves.

Our library should be a community hub providing free learning through print, digital, and live programs. It should also provide quiet study spaces, meeting rooms, a children's area, event areas, and makerspaces for creative collaboration. With some of the highest concentration of population density coming to University Heights, there is an underlying need and obligation for the city to deliver the necessary infrastructure, which includes a modern, efficient community library. 📖

What is a Modern Library?

Some amazing library branches exist in greater San Diego. The three described below, including two from neighboring communities, demonstrate what a modern library can be. We offer these descriptions as inspiration to help our community imagine possibilities for our own UH library.

San Diego County Library: Borrego Springs

This 14,000 square foot library was opened in 2019, located across from a park and amphitheater. It features a 2,135 square foot community room, large patio, 1,600 square foot children's area with separate 600 square foot teen area. The library features many technology amenities: high-tech conference rooms,



computers, printers, MakerBot 3D printer, public WiFi, and also features a Vet Connect station to help local veterans apply for and manage their benefits. The library is also a zero net-energy building and was built on pilings to ensure it would survive flash-floods.

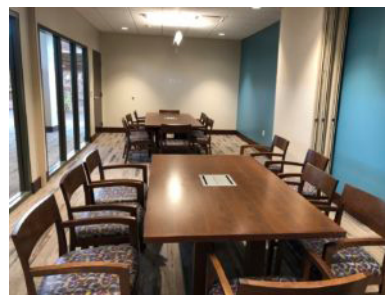
This library is part of the San Diego County Library system and was funded by the SCL, Friends of the SCL, and a private land donation. 📖



Photography courtesy of William Ellig and Jeff Durkin

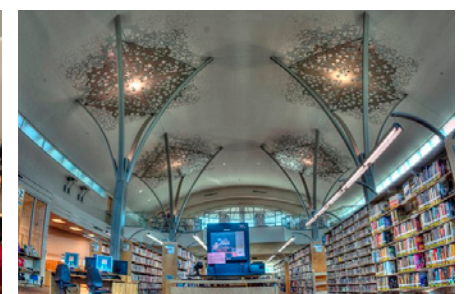
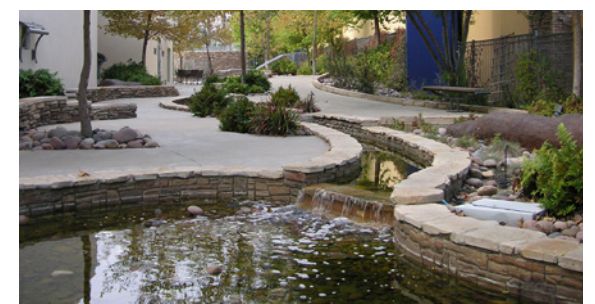
San Diego Public Library: Mission Hills-Hillcrest/Knox Library

The newest library in the SDPL system is in neighboring Hillcrest/Mission Hills. The new 15,000 square foot library opened in January 2019 and replaced a much smaller 5,000 square foot library built in 1961. It features modern amenities, including designated areas for teens and young children, a large community meeting space, study rooms, computer labs, drought-tolerant landscaping, an underground parking garage, and a design expected to achieve LEED Gold certification. The local Friends chapter helped raise funds to equip the computer labs and a MakerBot 3D printer. 📖



San Diego Public Library: Mission Valley Branch

Opened in 2002, the Mission Valley Branch is one of the largest in San Diego at 19,760 square feet. The award-winning design features public art displays, meeting rooms, an outdoor patio, children's garden, and terrace. The large spaces for children's activities are complemented by a large 104-person capacity meeting room and two 12-person study rooms, plus over 26 computers for public use. 📖



Libraries Need Friends



Isabel Schechter, President, Friends of the University Heights Library

Our organization is the community group that partners with the University Heights branch library to supply financial and volunteer support so that it may fulfill its literary, educational, technological, community, and cultural purposes.

We work hand in hand with our library staff to fulfill the day-to-day operating needs of the branch by supplying funding for those needs. Essentially, the Friends of the University Heights Library exists to supply the funds our branch needs to be an outstanding resource for the University Heights community.

We have purchased books, eBooks, and DVDs specifically for our branch collection, as well as supplied funding for a variety of programs for children and adults including Love is a Vegan Box of Chocolates and the Bayou Brothers playing at the holiday party. We bought makerspace equipment including a Silhouette Cameo cutting machine as well as the furniture, and homework station in the children's area.

Two of the most important equipment needs we have supplied funding for include the RFID machines for checking out materials, and security cameras for the inside of the branch as well as the exterior of the building. These things are not exciting and flashy, but they are necessary.

In addition, we have worked to improve the outside of the building by purchasing large, colorful banners for the front and side of the building to increase the branch's visibility. In collaboration with our community partner, UHCA, we worked with their Beautification Committee to turn the former unattractive landscape in front of the building into a lush, inviting garden that draws positive attention to our branch.

And of course, our branch runs on the hard work of the dedicated library staff. We have shown them our support and appreciation by purchasing breakroom furniture and equipment and providing financial support for educational opportunities and resources to help them do their jobs even better than they already do.

The best part of spending money to support our library is that thanks to the City

of San Diego's library matching fund program, the money we spend may be matched so that our branch receives even more funding! Pretty great, right?

Another way we support our branch is by being active advocates for our library. LibrariesTransformSD is a coalition of the San Diego Public Library Foundation, the Friends of the San Diego Public Library, and the City of San Diego Board of Library Commissioners (www.librariestransformsd.org). The Friends of the University Heights Library is a chapter of the Friends of the San Diego Public Library, which is the official community partner of the San Diego Public Library. Together with our partners in the LibrariesTransformSD coalition, we engage in library advocacy efforts at the city level, especially related to budgetary issues.

The San Diego Public Library and San Diego Public Library Foundation are currently developing a new Library Master Plan. The plan is being built in collaboration with the Mayor and City Council, the Friends of the San Diego Public Library, and the City of San Diego Library Commission. It will provide a long-range vision and strategy for San Diego Public Library facility, technology, and program investments.

Our coalition recently conducted a Master Plan survey. Preliminary results from the survey show that communities across San Diego love their libraries, and that there are improvements that can be made. The Friends of the University Heights Library is here to help our branch with those improvements!

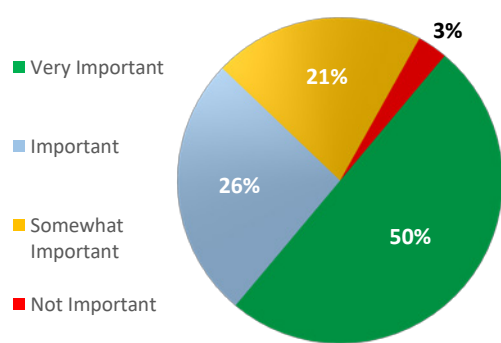
While we are excited about the Master Plan process, it will take time to analyze and present the data and propose solutions, and even more time to implement solutions. The University Heights library can't wait that long for solutions, and the Friends of University Heights Library is not going to wait to act until the Master Plan process is completed. We are going to keep working in partnership with our branch staff right now - not a year from now, not two years, not twenty years - to help make our branch a place you can turn to for books, programs, learning, entertainment, digital access, and much, much more!

We have already begun working with our UH Library Branch Manager, Rachel Esguerra, on supplying funding for the coming fiscal year's needs. We are excited to partner with her, and our branch staff, to supply the resources our library needs to serve the University Heights community. 📖

What Does UH Say?

As the City of San Diego updates its Library Master Plan, the Community Coalition of University Heights (CCUH) surveyed the University Heights community about its assessment of our branch library and priorities for the future. This survey was created using a template from the Library Research Service, an office of the Colorado State Library, which is a unit of the Colorado Department of Education. The survey was promoted in May on the University Heights and University Heights Community Association (UHCA) Facebook pages and via email to CCUH, UHCA, and UH Community Development Corporation email subscribers. Results from 131 respondents as of June 7th are shared here. If you haven't completed the survey, you still can at www.uhsd.org/librarysurvey.

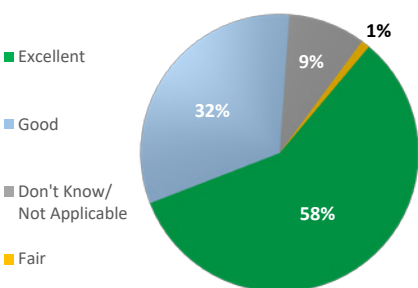
Importance of the UH Branch Library to You and Your Family



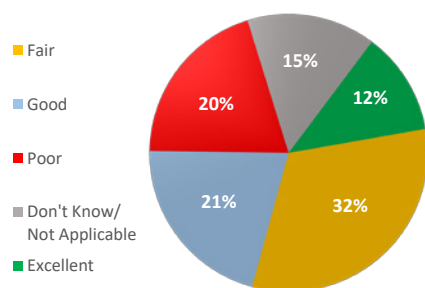
"A library is so important for our community!!"

"The library is an important part of the community and with the increased housing in the future, providing a place to get resources, learn and meet is critical. The UH library is in need and deserves to be upgraded to continue to be a bright spot in the community."

UH Branch Library Staff Excellent but Facility Inadequate



Customer Service



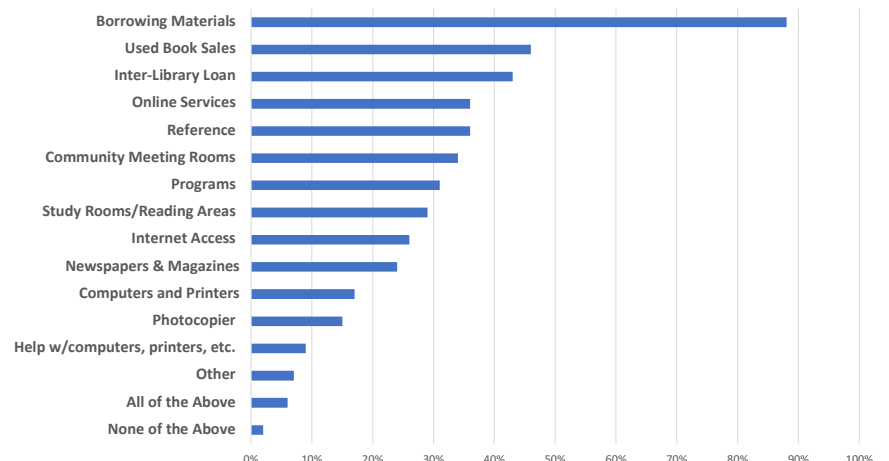
Facilities

Several respondents commented that library space is too small to meet the needs of our growing community but acknowledged that the staff do the best they can with the limited space.

"The current staff is amazing and does so much to serve us - but the building just doesn't have the space for programs or community events or a larger collection."

"We are a growing neighborhood and need a branch library that is sized for our needs and can offer the programs we should have. The current staff is amazing and does so much to serve us - but the building just doesn't have the space for programs or community events or a larger collection."

Materials. Collections Top the List of Valued Library Services



By far, the vast majority of respondents felt that "Borrowing Materials" was the single most important library service (88%). Other services were rated by less than half of respondents as important including "Used book sales" (46%), "Inter-Library Loans" (43%), "Reference" (36%), "Online Services" (36%), "Community Meeting Rooms" (34%) and "Programs" (31%).

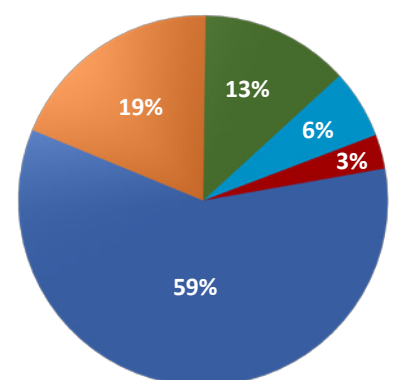
"The library should have ample room for meetings, get togethers, study group areas for children and adults, casual reading spots (couches, tables etc.), and be a one stop location for people to get information about community events, programs and services, educational opportunities, city programs, benefits, and other city services beyond those of the library."

Preferred Location for Larger Library

If money and location were no obstacle, the majority of respondents (59%) preferred that the historically-designated Teachers Training Annex 1 at 4100 Normal Street be adaptively reused as the University Heights

Branch Library. Only 19% would like to see the current library renovated and expanded, while 13% preferred selling the current library and building a new one elsewhere in University Heights.

- Sell current/ adaptively reuse Annex 1
- Renovate & expand current
- Sell current/ build new somewhere in UH
- Demolish current/ rebuild larger in place
- Keep current as-is



"Moving the library to the Teachers Training Annex would contribute to the already burgeoning University Heights cultural arts scene. Iconic, gorgeous, historical, and much larger than the existing library, said structure would become a focus for the community—not only for University Heights but for surrounding communities as well." 📖