

**Transcript: City of Oakland Library Advisory Commission Public Hearing  
6 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 7, 2014, Cesar Chavez Branch, 3301 E. 12<sup>th</sup> St., Oakland**

The City of Oakland's Library Advisory Commission hosted a public hearing entitled, "Open Libraries/Open Doors: A Panel Discussion of Oakland's Diverse Library Services and Current Funding Challenges." The hearing was intended to educate the public about library services as a vital Oakland resource. It highlighted the \$2.5 million-\$3.5 million annual budget gap the library faces starting in July 2015. If not filled, the gap will force cuts to the library's budget – which could mean the equivalent of 6-8 branch closures.

The hearing featured a five-member panel of representatives from various sectors of the city, including:

**Margaret Jerene:** Margaret Jerene has worked in early care and education for more than 20 years. She is currently an Early Care & Education Specialist at First 5 Alameda County. First 5's main objective is to prepare children from birth to age 5 for success in school and life. Margaret's role is to assist libraries in our county to prepare young children who are not in formal early care and education settings, like preschool, for success. Margaret has worked with OPL in this capacity for more than four years.

**Ann Gallagher:** Ann Gallagher has been the District Librarian for the Oakland Unified School District for the past eight years. Ann has been a Middle School/High School Librarian or Supervising Librarian for the past 25 years, in Southern California and before that in Maine. She also is a credentialed secondary teacher.

**Alex Bracco:** Alex Bracco is a representative of the OPL's Youth Leadership Council and is a lifelong patron of the Rockridge Branch. Alex also serves on the Teen Advisory Board at Rockridge.

**Joyce M. Guy:** Joyce M. Guy is the Program Specialist for the West Oakland Job Resource Center. Joyce works with local residents to get employment in the construction industries. She is a retired union Ironworker, Local 378, and has a degree in Labor Studies from Laney College. Joyce also owns Limitless Horizons LLC, which works with local programs and assists organizations with information about construction apprenticeship programs.

**Paul Figueroa:** Paul Figueroa is Assistant Chief of the Oakland Police Department. A lifelong Oaklander, he grew up in the Fruitvale and did a lot of homework at the Melrose Branch. He credits being surrounded by librarians and books as one of the things that kept him on the straight and narrow as he grew up.

The panel discussion was moderated by Alan B. Smith, a Contra Costa County library commissioner since 1997. Alan is a board member of California Public Library Advocates and has served as a mentor and trainer for our own Library Commission. He is president of the Braille and Talking Book Library User Advisory Council and chair of the BART Accessibility Task Force.

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**TRANSCRIPT:**

**Margaret Jerene, First 5 Alameda County:**

The most recent data we have from a kindergarten readiness survey shows that of children in the Oakland Unified School District, 40 percent are proficient in all areas for kindergarten readiness. That means 60 percent aren't, right? That's a big percentage. Children who go to preschool do better when they enter kindergarten. The work I'm doing with the Oakland Public Library is trying to reach the children who aren't in preschool.

Fewer children have access to preschool if their parents make under \$35,000 a year. In Oakland, 78 percent of families polled said they made less than \$35,000 a year. *78 percent of families make less than \$35,000 a year.* So those children aren't accessing preschool. The place that they're accessing is the library. There's a library in every community. It shocked me – when I first came to OPL to a Storytime, I was just floored by the sheer numbers of children and parents and caregivers in the library. Every Storytime I've been to has had numbers of 50 to 100 to more. I have a hard time keeping up trying to count how many people are there.

There are so many families who don't have preschool who see the library as the place to go to prepare their children for school. And they're going! Because all parents want to do well by their children. And OPL is in every neighborhood. Parents can walk to it, even though they don't have money. The other thing that we found is, the higher level of education a mother has, the more prepared a child is for school. In Oakland, the majority of moms reported having high school as their highest level of education. Those moms are comfortable enough, though, to come to the library and are bringing their children to the Storytimes.

One great thing out of this study in Alameda County is that 55 percent of the parents are reading, singing and telling stories with their children five or more times a week. 38 percent or more are doing that two to four times a week. What you're offering by having developmental Storytimes is not just stories. Your librarians have gone beyond that and have Baby Lap Sits, where it's all about bonding and parents talking with their babies and singing with their babies; Toddler Times, where the focus is on the toddlers and moving and singing, and then to Preschool Circle Time. And they're getting ready. They're getting self-regulation skills. They're getting academic skills and social skills that they may not get other places and other times. And here's the thing – the library is free, and it's in their neighborhood. They can afford it, and they can walk there, and you have services that will help them get their kids ready. They're learning to follow some directions, to take turns, to talk with other kids, seeing other children and playing with other children. Not only are your groups offering Storytimes, but there's a playtime offered afterward. So the children can actually interact with one another, negotiate some play spaces, play together, and all of that's really important for kindergarten.

Librarians have gotten the parents very involved in being present, singing the songs, learning the songs, taking home sheets about the music, being referred to books – (parents) definitely are really engaged. It's great. If you've never been to a Storytime, you've all just got to go and watch. See the parents learning the songs, participating in the Storytime, watching their children's reactions. It's just beautiful; it's beautiful. The library is one of the only places that we

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can partner with that's in every community, that can reach every child who's not there in preschool. So vital, so vital to my work, and to our work at First 5.

*(Question: What effect would branch closures have on your work?)*

It would be devastating, because there's no other partner who's in every community, who's offering free services, where children and parents are going already and are engaged already, and that has literacy and language expertise available right there for those children and parents. There's no one else in our community we can partner with who can offer that.

**Ann Gallagher, Oakland Unified School District:**

We cooperate all the time with the Oakland Public Library. They're out there in the community. They have hours that the school doesn't have. They support the same kids. We see the same kids all the time. So we're in this together. The Oakland Unified School District very much feels that the public library is one of our best community partners.

I have a number of friends (at OPL) that I can pick up the phone anytime I need to and ask questions. The public library is very generous with their discards, giving them to the school district. Encyclopedia sets we get all the time. The branch librarians are known to our library staff. We have in the district 75 potential school libraries, which is a lot. Two-thirds of them are open some hours each week; one-third are still closed, unfortunately. But we have a new superintendent, and we have a new Chief Academic Officer, Devin Dillon, who's here tonight. They are pledging support and restoration of our school libraries, and we're very thrilled and excited about that.

We also have a very strong community 501(c) (3) group that formed around the work I do. That's Executive Director Kari Hatch – sitting next to Devin Dillon – of Friends of the Oakland Public School Libraries. ... We have real faith that this community can pull together and work on early childhood education, which I'm trying to do in my libraries with my staff by putting in lower level books than we've ever done before. We have board books in our collections now. We invite and encourage parents to come into the school libraries before and after school, bring their preschoolers and borrow books.

When you think about a school, what is one door that's always open at the school? It's the school library – if the library is functioning, that is. Classroom teachers tend to close their doors ... but the school library door is always open. That's because the school library is central to education. We really need the public library to share our resources; to not duplicate services; to be in touch with each other, and just to really focus on the young people.

I have most recently been attending with Amy Martin the meetings of the eResources Committee. The district purchases online digital resources, and so does the public library. So when we get together, we try not to duplicate, so students can use their library card at the public library to access your online resources, and then go to the district's online resources and get something that will complement that.

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The school libraries close the last day of school, and usually kids stop borrowing books two weeks before the last day of school. Our libraries are also not open to our afterschool care program. Some of our kids eat three meals a day at school. They eat breakfast, lunch and dinner. And during the afternoon, the library is not available to them. It's also not available during summer school, which a lot of the schools have. So we see opportunities there. We haven't been able to stretch that far yet, but we see great opportunities in having the school libraries open more hours and working more with the public library during the summer months.

*(Question: How do students access resources when the school library is closed?)*

You can always tap into the online research, but that requires you to have Internet access. As we know, that's not the reality for a lot of our folks. The public library is open on Saturday now, but it's also open evenings at some branches, and that makes it possible for kids to go and get help with their homework.

I stress with my staff ... that they need to know who their branch librarian is. They need to work with them about getting a library card and having a visit. We've always partnered with the public library to develop the summer reading list, for example; we've done that for many years. And also the drive for kindergarten registration, so that all the kindergartners get a library card. That happens through the school.

We've had Back to School Nights and Parent Reading Festivals, and the public librarians have shown up and helped. So they're visible to the parents. The parents get the message that their public library cares about them and wants them to come in. Any opportunity we have to coordinate our efforts, we take advantage of as much as possible.

Our children are very much low-income. Over 70 percent of the enrollment in Oakland (qualifies for) free and reduced lunch, and there's not a lot of money for books in the home. There's just not a lot of money for anything. If they don't have a school library, which a third of our kids do not have – that's over 10,000 of our students who do not have access to a school library – then the only place they ever have a library experience is the public library.

If more branches were to close, the kids who need it the most won't get it. And that's the crime. I hate to say it, but I'm from the '60s, so I'll say it – defacto segregation. It's by income and by ethnicity, too. That's what happens when you have people with more income who can afford to buy books for their kids and take them on field trips and have conversations with them that increase their vocabulary. People who are not knowing where their next meal is going to come from or how they're going to pay their bills or where they're going to live have other stressors in their lives that reading sort of takes a back seat to. So those kids need us the most. And we don't want to lose any of our kids. They're all valuable to us.

**Alex Bracco, Youth Leadership Council:**

I definitely spent a lot time (at the Rockridge Branch) as a kid – before preschool, during preschool, during elementary and middle school, and still now that I'm going through high school. It's definitely still a resource that I use quite a bit. Storytime and access to books were

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big things for me when I was little, because I had a lot of trouble learning to read. Having access to the books and the variety of books and wanting to know what was in them without having to ask people was really important to me and encouraged me to force myself to find a way to read. I think that's part of how you learn to do those really difficult things that you're having trouble with.

It's walking distance from my school. It's walking distance from my house. I don't necessarily need, as I get older, to be with a parent to get to the library. It's somewhere I can go even if my parents don't have time. It's somewhere I can go without having to pay money or having to schedule an advance space use.

I think a lot of people have the stereotype that libraries are angry and silent, which has certainly never been my experience. The Teen Zones are very loud and vibrant, and everybody's always playing games. The kids' areas are always a lot of fun. There's reading times, and there are also people in there reading and having fun – as friends, as kids – even when there's not a reading time going on.

It's quiet and focused enough that I can work on my homework. Also, no one's going to judge you for having paper and books in the library. Whereas if you're in the park, (shouts) "Come on, man up and play with us!" ... But it's also a place that doesn't feel silent or empty, because for me to be able to really work, I need to feel like I'm somewhere.

It's safe. It's fun. It's a place where we won't get kicked out for loitering or have to pay anyone to be there. It's somewhere that generally is open, and somewhere you can go to have a good time.

It's a place where you can meet new people and hang out with people you know. It's vibrant with people with different interests. It's a very communal space and also a very living-room-esque space ... where everyone can go equally and everybody has the ability to get to.

***(Question: How would branch closures impact you?)***

It would be difficult. I don't have a driver's license. I possibly could hitch a ride with my parents, but I think after the age of 10, you stop being able to just say, "Hey, Mommy, I wanna go to the store! Hey, Mommy, I wanna go to the library!" I'd probably have to take the bus. There's also the time and distance. If it's going to take me a half-hour to get to the library, I lose that time I would otherwise be spending at the library.

**Joyce Guy, West Oakland Job Resource Center:**

I work at the West Oakland Job Resource Center, a place they put in West Oakland at the library around helping people get into construction apprenticeship programs.

Most of the people I deal with are economically disadvantaged. They're limited on their education. There are so many barriers for them to get basic employment, much less come out and want to become a construction worker, carpenter, laborer, elevator constructor, and various

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building trades. We're based in the library because the city and community thought the library would be a good central place where all kinds of people come.

Since the West Oakland Job Resource Center has been open, I have seen over 700 people. Over 390 (people) I've actually sat down and done case management. It's a small staff, three people. I'm the intake worker, orientation, outreach coordinator, political coordinator, program specialist, contract compliance individual, it goes on and on. At the end of the day, here's what we've done. We have managed to get more than 46 people into different building trades, including surveyors and glaziers. The glaziers don't work for the doughnut shop – they're the people who install your glass in the windows in buildings. We have laborers, iron workers.

We do math tutoring, trade-specific. Another 60-something people have gotten into transitional jobs. They have other barriers, like housing, that we're working on. We're managing to work through that. (Their math proficiency) is probably around a fourth-grade level. The numbers are low. When they have to test into a trade, we do math prep with them based on trade specifics. We give them classes in that particular trade of math. All of us have had that math test in the third grade when we got the D, and we've been traumatized ever since. These people have been afraid of math all their lives, so they just don't deal with it, and they try to avoid it.

Even though we're based in West Oakland, people come from all over. ... We see numbers that are unbelievable with the high school dropout rate. The numbers are unbelievable with people who don't graduate from high school. They drop out between about the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade because that's when they figure out they have to do assignments and survive on their own, so their confidence level goes down, and they drop out. They go out and try to survive, and at about 20 or 21, it all kicks in that they can't read or they can't write.

Being at the library, we're able as a resource to send them down there and say, "OK, here's what we need you to do. I don't have the time to teach you a whole math class, but we're going to go down and get a book, and we're going to copy out some pages."

I've been (at the West Oakland Branch) two years, and one thing that's really fascinating to me when I'm sitting outside is ... the diversity of our community. Because everybody comes to the library. When I'm sitting out on break or lunch, I see little kids coming in because they utilize it for preschool in the morning. They're singing their fun songs. Then there's the people who come and drop off books, videos – because everybody cannot afford the \$156 that DirecTV wants to charge you for eight channels that play the same thing over and over again.

I come to work at 7 or 8. There are people who can't afford a laptop so they're sitting outside the library (waiting to use) the Internet to look for jobs. At the resource center, we only have a couple of computers in our office for people to use. They come in to do their resumes; they research work, or they're researching how to do a better resume. Our staff is very limited (so we tell them to) go down to the library. Sometimes I walk down with them. Our librarian is awesome. I love her. She's right there for us all the time.

What I know is it's very safe. People drop their children off. I was a library mom. I went to college. I grew up right here in the Fruitvale District. The library was my baby-sitter. (My son)

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would get out of school. I would drop him off, and I knew he would be safe. He would do homework, read books, play with the activities that were there at the library. For three hours of my day, I didn't have to worry about him because I knew he would be safe. ...

They have copy machines (at the library). We're in West Oakland. There is not a lot in West Oakland. There's not a Kinko's. ... So the people who are coming there, it is their *survival*.

It's about economics. We've gotten into the age of Internet, so we assume everybody's got cell phones, and we assume all this other stuff. We cannot destroy these unbelievable percentages of people and say, you know what, they'll figure it out later. How do they figure it out if they don't have anywhere to figure it out from?

The library for me is awesome. I use the library, even though I have Internet. You want to know why I use it? Because I want to get out of the house and have some quiet time. I don't want to be in Starbucks, and I don't want to be in Peet's Coffee.

**Paul Figueroa, Oakland Police Department:**

St. Elizabeth's is in the Fruitvale District, and I grew up on High Street. The two libraries I used, one was the Latin American Library back when it was at 1900 Fruitvale. I actually would go to tutoring there when I was in elementary school. Closer to my house, I would go to the Melrose Library. One thing I will confess to is cardboard on the front steps, and that's all I'm gonna say at this point. (laughter) It was a lot of fun. You got hurt sometimes, but such was life.

I had a lot of good memories growing up there. It was really the only place you could go and get fun books. I'm from a family of nine, and so we weren't of tremendous means growing up. So we would go there, and they would have different programs and things for youth in the libraries. I think, in high school, I got assigned to do a report on Dwight D. Eisenhower. I kind of knew who he was, Ike. Didn't know where to start. Went, started to open up those drawers and flipping through the cards, and next thing you know, found just a ton of books on Dwight D. Eisenhower, of all people, at the library. Ever since then, it's been a resource.

We were constantly going back there. St. Elizabeth's School, being a smaller private school, didn't have a very thorough library. They focused on encyclopedias, pretty much. Having access to the libraries growing up was a really important thing.

Now I'm the proud parent of two daughters who are in the Oakland School District. ... They certainly spend a lot of time there. ... (Question: Why do your daughters go to the library?) Because Dad is too loud at home. (laughter) It's where the resources are.

Frankly, I'm old-school, but there is a difference between holding a book in your hand ... and scrolling up and scrolling down. I recently had a chance to finish a doctorate degree, and I still went to the OPL to find some obscure books on psychology. The Main Library had it.

The Latin American Library actually had some guest speakers from time to time. I remember a real vivid, very clear memory of meeting Edward James Olmos here at the library in the

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Fruitvale. Almost the whole school tried to cram in there. We drew pictures for him, and he had some real nice comments about the picture I drew for him. They would host a lot of events.

Certainly, throughout my career, I've had opportunities to go back for meetings and things in the library. It's been important. So many people have said it so well. The people I come into contact with now through our Ceasefire program, we're very involved in reentry. I'm really trying to make sure there are the correct wraparound services for people who want to take advantage of job training and things like that. ... (Wraparound) might be, I need healthcare; it might be, I need tutoring assistance to get job-ready; it might be, I need training to do a resume. ... I might have kids as well, so they might need some services, so I can have time to go and engage in some other things. Sometimes it's housing assistance, relocation assistance. I could go on and on and on. ... Just really (need to) be able to fill all those needs and have a multidisciplinary approach to it.

In some of the opportunities we've had to interact in the community with people over the years, it's been in the libraries. I was East Oakland commander for a lot of years. Most of my time as an officer started in East Oakland, in that area where I was raised. We would use the library on Edes Avenue, Brookfield, quite a bit. We would have our community meetings at the Brookfield Library, where we would meet with youth, meet with families. The whole community meets there. It was a safe place for them to show up. ... I've gone to many meetings at the Rockridge Branch, downtown (library), all over. They're great places to go.

***(Question: How would branch closure affect your work?)***

You look at everything taking place there now that would stop. The partnerships with the schools, particularly when we know reading is such a key – reading and math, really, are such a key to make somebody job-ready. The impact is tremendous. What I can say very clearly is, a lot of people do go there to get access to the Internet. Not everybody has cell phones. Not everyone has that ability.

I know budget times are tough ... so I can't say I can offer any wisdom in that area. But I can say that I do see the tremendous offerings the Oakland Public Library has, and I see the hard work all the staff there are doing.

**QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE:**

***Question: Do any of the panel members have ideas about how we can meet the \$3 million budget gap? How can each of us help?***

**JOYCE GUY:** I actually do. I think you're not tapping into some resources that are right in your back yard. All of these master developers who are coming in here and building these multimillion-dollar projects that will make tons of money – they're getting tax write-offs in a major way. Get them to donate some money, and it's going here (to the libraries). Because those same people are going to utilize the libraries and everything else. ... Those guys got big money, 'cause I work with them, so I know they do. ... When they want to come in and get a project

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started, don't they come pounding the pavement and say, "Rah-rah-rah, here's what we can do"? Then let 'em rah-rah-rah and give you some money.

**ALEX BRACCO:** I think something that pretty much everyone in the audience can do is talk about it. Get clear that this is something important to you. You are the people the government is serving. You are the reason the government exists. The people have the ability to tell the government what is essential, what is really important to kids, what's really important in jobs, reentry. By communicating that, we can make it real. By vocalizing that this is something that's important and essential to our community, we can get that money.

**MARGARET JERENE:** I agree. I think talking about it is the first step. Certainly, given the numbers of parents and children coming to your playgroups, you've got to let them know, you've got to let them know now, and you've got to let them know what they can do. The parents of the little ones could write something or could go somewhere or say something, and the older ones maybe could make a picture of what they love about the library. Parents are utilizing your services. For the teens and young people, this is so vital for them. Even though they can't vote, maybe their parents are happy that they're at the library and in a safe place, and maybe their parents could do something. We have to get everyone involved. Certainly, if you invite me to talk somewhere, I'll talk!

**ANN GALLAGHER:** I was reminded that the last time Measure Q was before the public, it passed by a pretty large margin – 72 percent. The people who tend to vote are maybe the older community, the better educated community. I think there's a wellspring of ground support out there for the public library. I work with a lot of volunteers, and I see a lot of people who are very interested in libraries and making sure that we all have them. It's a cornerstone of our democracy. If we didn't have a library, we wouldn't have access to the information we need to be a vital democracy. And that's the truth.

**Question:** *The panel is represented by interests in early education, job development, and crime prevention. if the library services are eliminated, are there other places users can go?*

**ALEX BRACCO:** You can spend money and have expensive Starbucks Wi-Fi – overpriced coffee with complimentary Wi-Fi. You're not buying the coffee, you're buying the Wi-Fi. There really aren't resources like the library. The library is that resource.

**Question:** *How is the possible budget deficit likely to impact volunteer work at OPL?*

**Jamie Turbak, Interim Associate Library Director (from audience):** I would just say that we use thousands of volunteers a year, and thousands of hours at all groups. We rely heavily on volunteers now. They work primarily at the facilities, although not always. ... Volunteers are already really, really core to what we do and how we serve people every day.

**Question:** *How is OPL preparing patrons, especially youth, for new digital learning models? For example, coding, website building and programming, computer literacy skills?*

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**Lana Adlawan, Teen Services Librarian (from audience):** That's a great question, and I'm so glad it's asked. We have an amazing program in its third year. It's called Ready, Set, Connect! ... This program had 80 applicants from across Oakland. We interviewed 40, and we accepted 20 youths. They'll be with us over the course of eight months. It's a professional job skill development program. They're connected with mentors from the tech industry who take them on field trips to tech facilities in San Francisco. Last year we went to Google, and (another) software development company. They're paired with mentors from international consulting firms. We give them access to the tech industry, people and support, while providing, on the library's end, a weekly curriculum. ... So really, we prepare them for the workforce over a period of eight months.

Part of Ready, Set, Connect! is that they get practical experience being computer tutors in the library. We have four stations here at Chavez and across the City of Oakland. So getting back to what would happen if libraries were to close and we lost six branches, last year we had 13,000 volunteer hours. Volunteering is a great step in the door for job opportunities and internship opportunities, so closing branches would affect teen employment and the future workforce.

**PAUL FIGUEROA:** I just want to say this is certainly not only an issue in Oakland. It's an issue all over the country. I was in D.C. two weeks ago and Cincinnati yesterday. ... In Cincinnati, one of the main things they're doing is really focusing on helping kids to read, so much so that the police chief there is really making a commitment with his officers' time to go in to do tutoring for kids to read. So some of that's in the schools, and some of that's in the libraries. There's an absolute recognition across the industry of how important reading is, and having the opportunities for tutoring and the space to make sure that's done. I applaud you for your work and all the work that all the supporters of the Oakland libraries are engaged in.

**JOYCE GUY:** It's so hurtful when people start applying for jobs and they can't even understand what the application or the job description is actually asking them. They're implementing something in the library where they come in and assist you with filling out the application, and they assist you with the job description. ... That's the important role the library is playing across the country.

**ALEX BRACCO:** Please vote. Please make sure your representatives know that libraries are important to you. And make sure you know that libraries are not just, "poof," in existence; it's a thing you need to support. I can't vote, and that is extremely frustrating to me. So use your voice, vote, speak to council members – all that.

**ANN GALLAGHER:** As OUSD begins to build its school libraries, I look forward to more opportunities to cooperate and fight the good fight with the public library, because we do see the same kids. These are all our children, and we want them all to be on the road to success. It starts with reading, and there's no joke about that.

**MARGARET JERENE:** As an Oakland resident, I have to say that the Oakland Public Library is a real bright spot in our city. It's really doing great work in a great way. We have to just do everything we can to keep it well-funded and to keep our wonderful librarians fully employed.