

Kansas City Business Journal - March 20, 2000

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West KC residents ready for new chapter in library service

Kansas City Business Journal - March 17, 2000 by [Leslie Zganjar](#) Contributing Writer

A new branch in west Kansas City was not in the public library system's original master plan, drawn in the mid-1980s. But after years of fighting -- and compromising -- among residents and system officials, a \$1.1 million West Branch soon will be a reality.

Final construction details are being hammered out, and contracts are being signed, according to officials involved in the project. If all goes as scheduled, ground will be broken in the next several months.

"It's been a long haul," said Lynda Callon, who coordinates the International Hispanic Friends Library Organization. "But they went back to the drawing board and came up with a new master plan that includes our branch. I have to laud them for that."

Callon's group formed to fight for the West Branch.

"We hadn't intended to build a new branch," said Therese Bigelow, the library system's deputy director of branch services. "But the way it's worked out has been a pleasant surprise."

More 'people space'

The new 4,000-square-foot branch will be built on West Pennway. Plans call for 14 computers and a meeting room that residents can use, along with the Spanish-language materials that traditionally have been accessible to the 4,100 residents of the predominantly Hispanic community.

In addition, the branch will have what Bigelow refers to as "people space" -- areas set aside for people to sit and read or study, including an area for children with child-sized furniture and a special collection of English and Spanish-language children's books, magazines, audio books and videos.

The library's internal design will be flexible enough to handle any changes that might be needed, according to WRS Architects Inc., which designed the building. And there is room on the property to expand.

For the past 11 years, the West Branch has operated in small storefronts, first at 902 Southwest Blvd. and now at 525 Southwest Blvd. The current location provides about 1,000 square feet of space, enough for a good-sized collection of Spanish-language books, magazines and videos and a more limited collection of English-language materials, Bigelow said.

But what the current location lacks, she said, is space for people who want to sit and read a book or magazine, read to a child or work on a computer.

Before the Southwest Boulevard locations, the West Branch was housed in West Junior High School. At that time, the public library system and the Kansas City School District operated jointly,

as a way to save money, and many library branches were in public schools.

When the library and school systems parted ways in the mid-1980s, the West Branch was forced to find a new home.

Master plan merger

The library system drew a master plan for rebuilding the system, which called for merging many branches and closing some older branches. The plan would have merged West Branch with the Westport Branch.

"The neighborhood was torn," Callon said. "Here was a chance to get a larger, new branch. But we worried that our residents would get the short end of the stick because the constituencies of West Branch and Westport are so different."

Residents opted to fight to keep a West Branch. Eventually, the library system offered a compromise: the West Branch and Westport Branch would split the \$2.2 million raised through a property tax approved in 1996 to pay for their merger. The Westport Branch would be renovated, and the West Branch would get a permanent home.

After the compromise, officials began searching for property for the new West Branch. West Kansas City is among the oldest neighborhoods in the city, Callon said, and was modeled after older cities on the East Coast, with small, narrow lots. She said it was difficult to find enough land to build a new branch.

The library system settled on a piece of property at 2107 West Pennway that consisted of a seldom-used baseball field and an auto repair shop. Callon said work on the project was again delayed because residents had to persuade the city's park system that they preferred a library to the baseball diamond.

Callon said the library system has involved residents in the design and operation of the new branch. Those items that residents wanted most -- more computers and meeting space -- were included in the plans.

"The digital divide is a real concern. Most of the families in this community can't afford computers or monthly Internet charges," Callon said.

In addition to computer access for children and computer training for adults, residents also will have access to online versions of newspapers from their native countries of Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador.

"It's been a long haul," Callon said. "Now people just want to see the library built."

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