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Austin Public Library Commission

Liaison Visits - June

General Overview Visits – June 20, 2012

At the beginning of my term as library commissioner I pledged to myself that I would visit all APL Libraries during my first year. Before 6/20 I had visited eleven libraries and the Recycled Read store. On the afternoon of June 20th I focused my visits on four of the east Austin libraries I had not seen before. I also visited the two most northern libraries: Millwood and Spicewood Springs. By the end of August I hope to be at 100%.

As always I'm very pleased to see how vibrant and active all the branches are. There is an interesting diversity of architectural styles among the branches. For the most part, the libraries have adequate parking. No library is underused. Obviously some of the facilities could use updating of furniture and in some cases more space. But it is indeed impressive how APL manages to keep such a large and diverse system going despite strong budget constraints.

North Village Library Monday, June 11, 2012. Visit with Sharon Herfurth, Branch Manager

Sharon and I had a very pleasant visit together. Before we went into her office, she introduced me to her new Youth Programs Librarian, Marion Rocco. Marion is bi-lingual (English/Spanish). The number of Spanish speakers using the North Village Library keeps increasing. I found Marion to be charming, interesting, and obviously ready to put a great deal of energy into her new job. APL is lucky to have a woman of her caliber on staff. Good choice!

During our hour-long conversation Sharon and I covered many topics, all of which helped me delve more deeply into library objectives and operations. One fact which was new to me: APL no longer requires a library user fee from patrons who live outside of Austin city limits. Previously a fee was charged, but now since APL receives state funding, a ruling was made that Texas residents can use most Texas libraries (there are a few exceptions). Sharon estimates that at the most 10% of library users come from outside the city limits – a number that is not a burden on the library system.

Another discussion point was the complexity of scheduling, since all branches are closed on Thursday or Friday and open on Saturdays (with the exception of the Faulk Central Library which is open every day). Some staff will work a day at another library. Unfortunately some staff members do not have two days off in a row, since they work on Saturdays (and the library is closed Thursday or Friday and Sunday). All staff members work five days/week.

Both adult and youth programming are active during the summer. I was surprised to learn the variety of community groups that use the library's meeting room, among others: Toastmasters, an Animal Protection group, several book discussion groups, and groups of children who are home-schooled. The library was well-attended during my visit and the parking lot was almost full.

Windsor Park Branch, Tuesday June 12. Visit with D.J. Harris Branch Mgr., Kara Hummel and Gustavo Ferate-Soto. We met in the library's large meeting room. The conversation began with a question from D.J.: "How has the first year on the commission been for you?" I emphasized that although I had a full career as a professional librarian (not in public libraries), I am constantly learning how complex it is to run a public library with so many branches and a large central library. I continue to feel that the library is underfunded and will do my best to try to work with Councilman Spelman to improve the situation. D.J. told me I was the first Library Commissioner to pay so much attention to his branch. I replied that the effort is a pleasure.

Then the conversation moved on to a wide-range of library related topics. For Windsor Park, summertime is even busier than the regular school year. Users seem to read more in the summer, there is almost a program every day and those programs are well-attended.

I praised the library for the fact that new books seem to be available to users quickly. Gustavo explained the special system the library has in place to get new books out to the branches in a timely fashion. Kara, D.J. and Gustavo explained the various system-wide committees, working groups, and task forces they serve on. It seems that each professional librarian serves on a minimum of three. Areas served vary from database subscriptions, cash handling, diversity, library best practices and many more.

We had a short discussion on security at Windsor Park. The branch has a security guard in the parking lot during all hours that the library is open. This is a contract position. The staff emphasized that customers are pleased with the improved security. As in other branches, the library was well-attended with all computers in use.

Southeast Branch – Paola Ferate-Soto June 14, 2012 Paola and I worked out schedule conflicts to meet at the Faulk Central Library. Paola reported on SE Branch activities and operations for the last few months. She was especially proud of a program she developed with assistance from ACC. The program was held twice and informed students and their parents about the need to plan ahead for college. The South east branch is fully staffed but could use one more person twenty hours a week. She continues to work to create relationships with nearby AISD schools.