



## Library fans praise plan to test run longer hours



By [Jonathan Whitaker](#) On Sep 19, 2019

Advocates of the Merced County library system are applauding the final budget for the 2019-20 fiscal year approved by the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

They might want to bookmark this date in history.

“The projects that were funded reflect a radical increase over the status-quo budget, and so this is a resounding success for the Merced County Library and for all members of the Friends of the Library,” said Susan Flinspach in an email to her group after the budget news broke. “Thank you, and don’t forget to write a least one ‘Thank You’ to your respective supervisor!”

They’re happy because the board unanimously approved the development of a pilot program that will extend evening hours at various library branches — a concern that has come up in recent surveys and many times during public comment at county-led meetings.

The purpose of the new pilot program, according to county staff, is to collect data during these extended hours to evaluate its success. Factors will include attendance, circulation and the number of programs held. The board’s action Tuesday allows staff to begin “the process of developing” this phased pilot program.

Some funding was set aside in the budget to implement the pilot program, but the estimated total cost for the project is around \$82,000, officials told the Times, and the funding could flow into next year’s budget. County Librarian Amy Taylor is helping to design the program, according to Times sources.

“The approval of this pilot program is a significant step forward for the library,” said Mike North, the county’s public information officer. “This investment will allow the county to collect

the necessary data to determine how we can better serve our clients and provide improved customer service.”

Survey results have showed that 82 percent of respondents would like various library branches across the county to be open until 8 p.m. Customers have said they would like a safe place for students to meet for homework groups, be open when working individuals could use the library, offer adult programming outside the normal workday, and provide a venue for public meetings.

More than 20 years ago, there were 22 library branches, compared to the 12 it has today, and they were open until 8 p.m. Over the years, the system has been trimmed down, including during tough economic recessions. In 2018, county leaders shifted hours (not expanded) to allow libraries to remain open until 6 p.m.

“I think the pilot program for extended hours is a great idea,” said Supervisor Lloyd Pareira. “Surveys and public requests by interest groups don’t always give you the entire picture. Let’s see how many people will come to the branches after 6 p.m., and then we can consider extending the project. ... What I would like to see is more of the programs that they offer at the Main Library in Merced to be developed for the smaller rural communities.”

Based on the preliminary discussion, it looks like the pilot program will be implemented in branches representing the five supervisorial districts. Pareira said he expects the community of Delhi in his district will be the target of the program, and Supervisor Rodrigo Espinosa mentioned Livingston, but a list of locations is not available at this point.

The library system also received funding streams for nine capital improvement projects in the county’s final budget, including a Merced main branch Skylight, a Merced branch Children’s Public Service Counter, a Merced branch Public Service Counter, a Merced branch Gracy Room AV project, Merced Branch exterior handrail study, an Atwater branch paint and carpet project, a Gustine branch carpet and fireplace project, a Gustine branch exterior ramp, and a Los Banos branch carpet and bookshelf project,

“A huge THANK YOU to all who wrote letters and emails, left phone messages, and spoke during the Board of Supervisor meetings,” Taylor wrote in an email to library supporters that was obtained by the Times. “Your voices were heard! ... The Pilot Evening Hours and Capital Improvement Projects are based on community input received from the customer satisfaction survey conducted in February, 2018. The Library Advisory Commission (LAC) played a role in the development and implementation of the survey. This approved budget allows the Library to move forward with suggests our residents would like to see within our libraries.

“This list of projects are the most pressing facilities. I recognize that every library is in need of facility improvements. A priority list for future projects is being developed and will be put forth to the LAC and County with future budgets.”

“Thank you for your support of our libraries. I do not have to tell you the difference libraries make in people’s lives every day by providing access to information, free programming, public restrooms, and a safe place to get out of the elements. Walter Cronkite once said, ‘Whatever the

cost of our libraries, the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation.’ Today the Board showed their willingness to invest in our communities.”

In another email, Flinspach wrote: “If we get evening hours at the Merced Library in a pilot, believe me, we will do some fun things during them.”

## **Balanced budget**

All in all, the FY 19-20 Final Budget at \$674 million is an increase of \$49.5 million from last year’s Final Budget of \$624.5 million. This increase is primarily due to additional road projects, development of the California Auto-Tech Testing and Development Center (CATDC), and investment in countywide infrastructure.

Of the \$674 million, \$533 million is programmatic funding and \$141 million requires funding from local discretionary resources (net county costs).

Although there was a \$3.1 million shortfall for proposed budget earlier this summer, the Final Budget is balanced as a result of additional revenues, grants and other adjustments.

County CEO Jim Brown was pleased to announced that there were no significant September surprises, or budgetary impacts, coming down from the State.

Public safety maintains the greatest share of the county’s discretionary funding at 54 percent (\$75.4 million)