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Contra Costa County only system in Bay Area with no libraries open on Sundays

By Sora O'Doherty



The Orinda Library Photo Sora O'Doherty

Contra Costa is the only county of the nine Bay Area counties whose libraries are closed on Sundays. Long time library supporter Carol W. Brown says that Orinda has enough funding to have the Orinda library open every Sunday afternoon, but the county won't allow the library to open because they think that it is inequitable to allow cities that can afford to pay to have their libraries open when others cannot.

Historically, nine Contra Costa County libraries, including Orinda and Lafayette, had Sunday opening hours before the pandemic. At that time, Orinda used funds from Measure L, a library bond passed in 2000, to supplement the county-provided hours to assure that Orinda Library would be open 60 hours per week, including Sundays. Orinda voters also passed Measure J in 2018, an extension of the parcel tax passed in 2008, with the promise of maintaining library hours and services.

During lockdown, all the libraries were closed for in-person use, then reopened gradually, starting with grab-and-go services, and then reopening fully, except for Sundays. It should be noted that the nine libraries are not open the same days or number of hours per week, but none are currently open on Sundays.

According to Brooke Converse, Public Information Officer of the Contra Costa Library system, there are a number of factors that prevent Contra Costa County from offering Sunday hours. Chief among them is the union contract with library staff that prevents them from being required to work on Sundays. And, although there are staff members who would be willing to work Sundays, Converse says that it was an administrative problem trying to fill Sunday hours with library staff, both in terms of administrative time and stress.

Converse provided some numbers in support of her contention. At one time, she said, there were 30 permanent intermittent staff (PIs) who could be required to work on 11 Sundays per year. However, there were 1,728 Sunday shifts, with some holidays included. 330 shifts were required to be filled by PIs, and the rest were filled by staff who volunteered to work Sundays.

The biggest hurdle to more library opening time is funding, and Converse points out that the Contra Costa County Library is funded at a significantly lower level than any of the other eight Bay Area counties. Contra Costa County libraries are funded solely from property tax, of which they receive 1.5%. The library does not receive any general fund monies from the County. The Library's budget for FY23-24 is \$41.3 million, which is less than 1% of the County's entire budget.

A survey of the other eight counties in the Bay Area revealed that they all have libraries that are open on Sundays, some for half days, some for even longer hours. Most county library systems receive funds in addition to property tax allocations. Solano County, for example, has had a 1/8 cent sales tax dedicated to the library for almost 30 years. In November 2022, San Francisco voters approved renewal of their Library Preservation Fund (LPF) for the next 25 years. The LPF is SFPL's largest budget source, measuring 99% percent of its FY23 budget of \$185.7 million, and making the San Francisco Library one of the best funded in the country. Santa Clara voters also endorsed special funding for their libraries in 1994, 2005 and 2013.

Converse agreed with Brown's suggestion that the county was basing their refusal to allow Orinda Library to open on Sundays on an equity issue. Although Brown points out that the Orinda Library is open to everyone, Converse stated that not all of the libraries have outside funding that allows for additional opening hours. Additionally, although there might be staff willing to volunteer at the Orinda Library, they might not be willing to volunteer at the other branches, including more distant ones such as Pittsburg, Antioch, or Oakley. Brown notes that the Orinda Library is close to the Orinda BART station, at only 0.6 miles away.

President of the Friends of Orinda Library, Nancy Ross-Madnick, commenting on Sunday library opening, said, "While it is a laudable goal, complete equity is difficult to achieve. By opening up some branches on Sundays, the libraries would be available to everyone in the county. Under the current plan, none of the 26 branches have Sunday hours. Isn't it better for the community to have some access to library services rather than none?" She added, "Ideally, the county should make fully-funding all Contra Costa County libraries a high priority. But if the county chooses not to, then let the cities that want to fund Sunday hours have their branches open to serve the greater community."

Converse said that while the cities in which the libraries are located are required to provide for the maintenance of the buildings and some technical services, the county pays for the operational costs, including staffing, books, etc. There are also five libraries that are in unincorporated county areas. There has not been a library bond, as such bonds are very difficult to pass, Converse said, requiring a two-thirds majority vote, and many other county departments would also love to receive bond funding.

However, according to Converse, there is a plan for a pilot program for Sunday library opening, starting with the Concord library, sometime in 2024. Under that plan, the Concord library, which is 0.8 miles from the Concord BART station, will be open on Sundays with no library staff present, except for one security guard. Library patrons will be required to get approval in advance for Sunday library use, and the details of how this will work have not yet been finalized.

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