San Mateo County Libraries

Agenda Item V.

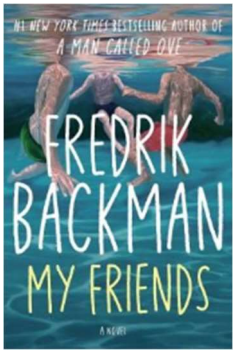
To: JPA Governing Board
From: Anne-Marie Despain, Director of Library Services
Date: January 28, 2026
Meeting: February 2, 2026
Re: Director's Report

This report summarizes significant library operations and program activities that have occurred since the last meeting of the Governing Board. Services and activities are aligned with our Strategic Plan Goals.

We listen to our community and create responsive services and spaces where everyone belongs

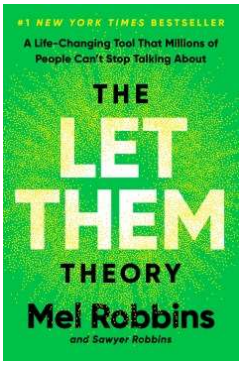
Top Print, Digital and Audio Titles

The past year included exciting debuts and the return of beloved authors—offering something for readers of all ages and interests. As we look ahead to 2026, here is a snapshot of the most popular titles of 2025 in print, digital and audio formats.



The top three popular books for adults were *My Friends* by Fredrik Backman, a tender and reflective novel; *Great Big Beautiful Life* by Emily Henry; and *Three Days in June* by Anne Tyler. In the young adult category, *Sunrise on the Reaping* by Suzanne Collins was the most read, as it marked a return to the Hunger Games universe. While our young patrons kept series such as *Dog Man*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Big Nate*, and *Spy School* at the top of the most popular books, *Upstaged* by Robin Easter garnered a lot of attention with its subject matter centered around navigating social groups as a middle-schooler.

Our digital collections are attracting more readers than ever. Once again, adult fiction led the way with *Funny Story* by Emily Henry continuing to hold its title as most popular eBook. For audiobooks, *The Frozen River* by Ariel Lawhon was the most listened-to title, topping all eBooks and audiobooks in downloads. Other favorite titles for adults included *The Wedding People* by Alison Espach and *The Let Them Theory* by Mel Robbins. While series such as *Throne of Glass* and *Powerless* remain very popular, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak and *Check & Mate* by Ali Hazelwood were two of the most popular titles with our young adult patrons. Finally, the most downloaded titles for young patrons included series such as *Baby-Sitters Club*, *Smile*, and *Wings of Fire*.



Local Author Talk Spotlight

On November 5, 70 patrons gathered at the Millbrae Library to hear Bay Area author Nicole Wong discuss her book *The Mahjong Project: House Rules from Across the Asian Diaspora*. The diverse crowd represented a wide range of ages and ethnicities, and both Wong and the audience shared stories and insights that highlighted the rich, varied traditions and experiences of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) families. As one patron remarked at the end, "I'm AAPI, and I learned so much and felt connected to a community!" If Wong's book didn't already make the case for mahjong's power to forge connection, the hour of gameplay that followed her talk certainly did. Nervous newbies were warmly welcomed by experienced players, and patrons of all backgrounds learned and played together. Some of those in attendance have also begun joining regular mahjong sessions in the branches.

Native American Heritage Month

In November and December, we celebrated Native American Heritage Month with music, dancing, art, and more. Families were invited to share in the All Nations Singers and Dancers Pow Wow Presentation to enjoy drumming, dancing, and learning about the beautiful attire worn by the group. Adults further enjoyed a Native/Indigenous Peoples Community Discussion at the East Palo Alto Library and a Native Art Workshop and Lecture on the Red Power Movement and Occupation of Alcatraz at the Sharp Park Library. Teens and adults alike at 11 community libraries learned traditional pine needle weaving techniques and then used these skills to create medallions.

Over 624 attendees joined us in learning about the history and current experiences of the Indigenous People who remain a vibrant part of our local culture.

Immigration Resources

On December 5th, we held our final immigration workshop of the year at East Palo Alto Library, where 15 attendees met with an immigration attorney for personalized legal guidance. Participants received support on the citizenship process, U-visa questions, Temporary Protected Status, and other general immigration concerns. To enhance the day, the Mexican Consulate joined this event and interacted with more than 40 patrons, offering additional resources to the community.

The immigration workshop is part of a series with the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which, together with the sessions previously offered in Half Moon Bay and Millbrae, has reached 85 individuals this calendar year. 11 community members have successfully completed and submitted their U.S. citizenship applications through the assistance provided. We look forward to continuing to connect residents with needed resources through strategic collaboration with our partners.

Atherton Library Children's Garden

The Atherton Library Children's Garden project is set to launch an exciting new phase. Following a public bidding process, the Town of Atherton awarded Selway Construction Inc. the contract with a winning bid of $617,000. Construction begins in January and is expected to be completed in 90 days. The 6,500 square foot, nature-rich Children's Garden will transform the space into a vibrant outdoor learning environment, inviting children to connect with the natural world. Designed to spark curiosity and creativity, the garden will offer a welcoming place for all. We are thrilled to watch this project come to life and enhance the Atherton Library.

North Fair Oaks Library Bathroom Project

A new bathroom is being added to the North Fair Oaks Library. The project is funded through a combination of a California State Library Building Forward grant and County funds. This improvement addresses a long-standing accessibility issue by providing an interior, family-accessible restroom dedicated to the library. The project is underway and should be completed by mid-February.

San Carlos Makerspace

Exciting advancements are taking shape for the new makerspace at the San Carlos Library, a dynamic hub designed to spark creativity, curiosity, and collaboration. The San Carlos City Council approved the release of the Request for Proposals for January 14, 2026, with proposals due by February 19. This milestone positions the City and Library to select a contractor and begin construction this spring.

Located on the library's second floor near the community rooms, the 1,000-square-foot makerspace will be part of a lively hub of activity, complementing meetings, programs, and hands-on learning experiences. With strong support from the community and the Friends of the San Carlos Library, the space is designed to empower learners of all ages to experiment, create, and bring their ideas to life using state-of-the-art tools and technology.

Foster City Makerspace

Exciting progress is underway on the new Foster City Makerspace, a project shaped by community input and guided by our Makerspace Master Plan. The initiative will transform a teen and conference room into a 1,000-square-foot, flexible, technology-rich environment designed to inspire creativity and support hands-on learning for all ages.

Final plans are now being refined for city review, paving the way for the next steps in the project. The makerspace is expected to move into the bidding phase early this year, with construction following soon after. Once complete, the Foster City Makerspace will provide a dynamic hub for creativity, experimentation, and community connection.

We connect people and build partnerships to achieve shared goals

Let's Read Together Family Literacy Workshops

This year, we deepened our Big Lift and subsidized preschool partnership to further develop family engagement. Let's Read Together directly supports families through hands-on literacy workshops. Nationwide, families are reading less at home with their children, and 35% of families that attended the first workshops self-reported that they only read 1-2 times per week at home with their child.

Over the past few months, our staff trained preschool educators and co-facilitated 19 family workshops from Pacifica to Pescadero to East Palo Alto. During the workshops, families learned ways to incorporate literacy skills by reading signs aloud at the grocery store, listening to audiobooks downloaded for free from the library, or telling stories in the car. One attendee expressed appreciation for being reminded that reading with her child doesn't need to be a "perfect experience" and shared that she's going to start reading to her child at bedtime every night because she knows it's okay if they don't finish the whole book.

In addition, attendees committed to a new literacy habit in the home. A Pacifica family shared "I learned a lot today and plan to ask more open-ended questions while reading with my kiddo," an East Palo Alto family commented "the reading tips [will help me] build my child's vocabulary and learn sight words," and a North Fair Oaks family stated "I loved the workshop, it taught me how to read with my son". Overall, 98% of caregiver attendees reported that they now felt more confident reading with their child after having participated in the program.

Ageless Adventures

Our 55+ programs focus is on creating deeper social connections, promoting cognitive health, and providing resources for engagement and healthy aging. Age-Friendly Brain Games is a series that stretches both body and mind, encouraging community members to form relationships and connections beyond the bounds of the library. Since February of 2025, Brain Games has had 447 participants — evidence of the program's clear impact on the community.

Creative Writer's Workshop brings together retirees who bond over their writing projects. One recent attendee learned about the writing workshops through our Medicare classes and two patrons in their 90s are working on writing their first books. The class not only provides purpose; it offers opportunities for verbal and social interaction. We bring together educators and experts to support the needs of this diverse and varied population.

Mahjong classes provide a gathering place for seniors to learn and play. A talk focused on a solo traveling adventure to Mongolia at the age of 87 inspired participants about the adventures available to us as we age. An Alzheimer's Association three-part class provided critical support to individuals and their caregivers. Medicare classes prepped patrons for open enrollment and provided tips for maximizing their benefits.

We engage our communities through meaningful outreach and expanded access to resources

Student Language Proficiency

In September we introduced an effort to support English language learners in preparing for the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). This program was developed as part of Pitch-It, our annual competition to encourage and support staff innovation. Susan Verlander won the staff vote to bring her idea to the community. With less than 15% of students passing the exam in the 2023–2024 school year, the initiative addresses critical literacy gaps through family workshops explaining ELPAC content and scoring and bi-monthly practice sessions for students to build foundational skills.

Workshops in Half Moon Bay, Pescadero, and East Palo Alto attracted 50 participants, who shared high satisfaction ratings when surveyed and actively participated in Q&A sessions. From September to November, one-third of online homework help visits were to the new ELPAC section, and community partners are interested in replicating our parent information sessions.

Reading Tutoring Program

This fall we completed the first 12 weeks of a new afterschool tutoring program. Youth met in small groups with expert tutors to receive English Language Arts support in North Fair Oaks, Pacifica, East Palo Alto, and Half Moon Bay. Local school districts helped us connect with youth reading below grade level, who then engaged in twice a week small group sessions. In total, the program provided 290 hours of tutoring to 162 students, supporting our commitment to creating responsive services and improving reading rates for students.

"We are so appreciative of this program and want to commend [the tutor] for being so helpful and caring, it has made a big difference for [our fourth grader] and he never complains about going straight to tutoring class after school because the program is comfortable and positive for him." -Pacifica parent

Bookmobile Weekend in Pescadero

While the bookmobile frequents Pescadero, it is not often that we are able to support two trusted community partners on the same weekend. On a recent Saturday and Sunday, staff brought services to more than 500 Pescadero residents at two different community events. Hosted by the Office of Community Affairs, the Bookmobile supported Emergency Preparedness Day by sharing emergency information, hotspot availability, and our extensive Library of Things to discover and explore. Attendees toured the Bookmobile and learned about its variety of materials for individuals to learn and spend time together, from books to DVDs, board games and karaoke machines.

On Sunday, the Supplies4Farmworker's Supply and Resource Fair included the Bookmobile hosting a storytime for children of attending families. Working alongside other organization's tables with clothing and household supplies, library staff drew attendees with information about our resources and information about local classes while distributing over 500 books.

We champion a culture of continuous growth and discovery for all

Expanding Adult Literacy Capacity

We are exploring a variety of novel efforts to engage new and additional members of the public this year. To power us toward our goal of serving additional adult literacy learners, we hosted well-attended volunteer parties and unveiled a radio, social media and digital ad campaign that successfully resulted in additional literacy tutors. The campaign had strong engagement levels, reaching 763,682 individuals with 7,694 clicking on the ad to learn more. This engagement resulted in increased traffic to our adult literacy webpage, as well as the libraries' social accounts. During the ad campaign, we received more than quadruple the number of tutor applications we received in the same six-week period last year. The media advertisements also promoted awareness of the importance of literacy and the library's role in addressing these challenges.

In December, we concluded our first series of library literacy classes for incarcerated residents, which expanded our reach into the community and provided a new opportunity to address literacy needs in vulnerable populations in alignment with strategic goals. Since July, in partnership with the San Mateo County Sheriff's office, staff delivered 86 hours of instruction to 14 learners, focused on the development of reading, writing, and English language skills. Interactive activities included workplace communication practice, drafting and revising essays, exploring new vocabulary through stories, and discussing historical events.

Noon Year's Eve

We waved goodbye to 2025 at our 10th annual Noon Year's Eve events across the county. These family friendly parties invite kids and adults alike to ring in the new year together. Each event featured a storytime, snacks, activities, and a special costumed picture book guest! This year we were joined by literary celebrities, including Llama Llama, Curious George, Paddington Bear, and the Very Hungry Caterpillar who all stuck around for a countdown at noon and family photos.

In total, we held 13 special Noon Year's Eve events at our community library locations and Pescadero! Over 1700 people celebrated the arrival of 2026 as we welcomed a joyful New Year.

Teen Winter Art

To break up the winter study sessions, we invited teens to help close out the year at special events in four of our communities in Brisbane, Belmont, Foster City and Pacifica. Our Winter Art Contest was a time for both creation and celebration as teens spent two hours creating the ultimate work of art and then voting on their favorites across several categories. For those looking to start the end of the year celebrations early, we held an early New Year's Eve and Mini Disco Ball Decorating Party. Over 150 teens participated in these events to enjoy fun, connection, and creativity as we added sparkle and color to the end of the year.

Personnel News

We are excited to share the following personnel announcement:

Peter Newson has accepted a promotion to the position of Community Program Specialist at the Half Moon Bay Library. Peter previously worked as a Library Assistant at the Half Moon Bay Library and as an Extra-Help Library Assistant at the San Carlos Library. Peter holds a bachelor's of science in mathematics with an applied mathematics concentration from Sonoma State University. Peter is bilingual in Spanish.

Kay Wong (Tsz Ka Wong) has accepted the position of Fiscal Office Specialist in our Finance Division. Kay joins us from the County of San Mateo's Human Services Agency, where she most recently served as a Fiscal Office Specialist supporting accounts payable and journal entry functions. Kay holds a bachelor's in economics with a specialization in international macro-finance from the University of California, Davis, and is bilingual in Cantonese and Mandarin.

Valery Marin Revolorio has accepted a promotion to the position of Community Program Specialist at the Portola Valley Library. Valery previously served as a Library Assistant at the Woodside Library. Valery holds a master's in social work from the University of Southern California and a bachelor's in French and Francophone Studies from Santa Clara University.

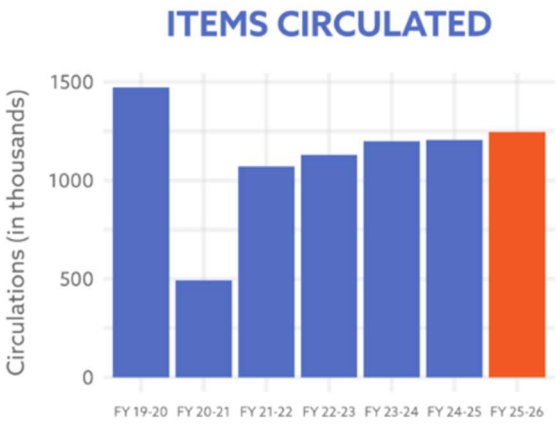
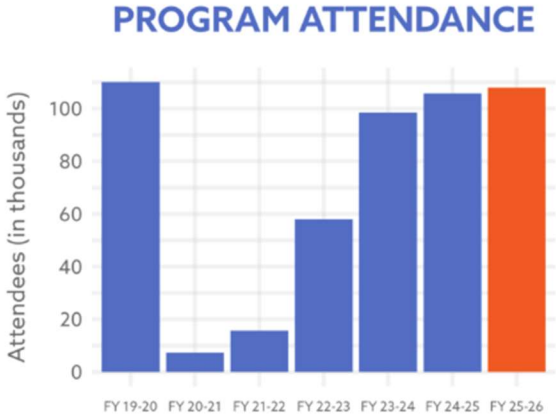
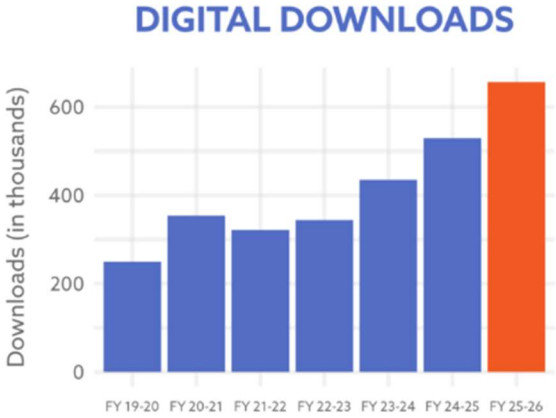
FY 2024-25 Invoices Over $50,000

The County's Open Data Portal (checkbook.smcgov.org) continues to provide an easily accessible view of Library expenditures and activity data to both the public and policymakers. A list of invoices with a total amount of $50,000 or more that were paid between July 1, 2025 and December 31, 2025 is provided below.

Vendor	**Amount**	**Description**
Bibliocommons	58,026	Website Software Annual Fee
Carahsoft	110,760	Zoom Licenses and Phones Annual Fee
CDW Government	105,009	Annual Adobe License Purchase
Ford Auto Center	119,293	Vehicle Purchases
Inside Source	67,036	Library Furniture
Kanopy	75,000	Digital Stream Resources Annual Fee
Laptops Anytime	75,515	Laptop Kiosks Hardware and Software
Midwest Tape Hoopla	160,885	Digital Media Streaming Service Fee
MG West	307,983	Library Furniture
Peninsula Library System	661,382 497,412 308,592 60,643	Annual Automated Network Changes Library Deliveries Annual Fee Overdrive Annual Fee Automated Material Handling Services
Ross McDonald	92,045	Furniture and Shelving

Libraries in the News

- 10+ ways to celebrate Diwali this October around the Bay Area, The Mercury News, October 10, 2025
- Words unread: The consequences of America's illiteracy crisis, Scot Scoop (Carlmont High School's Student News), November 12, 2025
- Atherton approves $617K contract for children's garden, The Almanac, November 21, 2025
- Our picks to ring in 2026: New Year's Eve parties, performances and deluxe dinners around the Peninsula, Palo Alto Online, December 18, 2025
- Best Bay Area Stroller Hikes to Bring Family This New Year, KQED, December 31, 2025
- A 200-year-old book distributor is closing. Here's what that means for public libraries, NPR, January 7, 2026
- Read all about it: Silicon Valley is home to a plethora of book clubs for all kinds of readers, Mountain View Voice, January 15, 2026

Mid-Year Data Update

The following charts summarize systemwide totals through the second quarter for key library services from FY 2019-2020 through the current fiscal year.