San Mateo County Libraries

Agenda Item IV.

To:	JPA Governing Board
From:	Anne-Marie Despain, Director of Library Services
Date:	June 3, 2026
Meeting:	June 8, 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

Atherton Library Children's Garden
Our new 6,500-square-foot, nature-inspired Children's Garden will be completed this month, bringing a joyful outdoor destination to the Atherton Library, where children and families can explore, imagine and play together. The project reflects our ongoing commitment to creating welcoming public spaces that bring people together and inspire lifelong learning.

Community engagement for the project began in spring 2024, when the Library and Town hosted a public design workshop led by Miller Company Landscape Architects. Residents, families, and library users shared ideas and dreams for what the space could become, helping shape a garden that truly reflects the community's vision.

In September, the Town of Atherton awarded the construction contract to Selway Construction Inc., and the project broke ground in early 2026. The garden's playful, nature-rich design includes features such as log benches, a treehouse, a willow hut, a tree-stump walk, accessible paving and ramps, railings and fencing, all carefully designed to encourage exploration, movement, creativity, and connection with the natural world.

We look forward to celebrating this exciting milestone with the community on Saturday, June 27, at a festive ribbon-cutting celebration featuring musical storytime and family-friendly activities.

Meeting Room Pods

Demand for meeting and study room space in our libraries continues to grow. To help meet this need, we are installing our first stand-alone meeting pods at the San Carlos Library, expanding the ability to provide flexible, modern spaces for community use. Scheduled for installation in mid-June, the project includes two pods designed for up to four people and one larger pod for small group use.

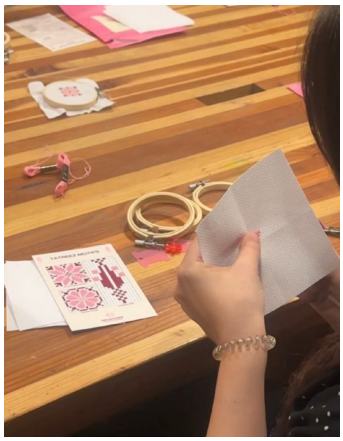
These thoughtfully designed spaces will provide patrons with access to quiet, private areas for small meetings, virtual appointments, tutoring, focused work, and collaboration. Each pod features comfortable interiors with sensor-activated lighting and adaptive ventilation to create an inviting environment. The pods will also include integrated technology to support virtual meetings and collaborative-online work, while maintaining privacy within a busy public setting.

We are grateful to the Friends of the San Carlos Library for their generous donation of $60,000 toward this project. Once installed, these three new meeting pods will further strengthen the San Carlos Library as a vibrant community hub for learning and connection.

The FY 2026-27 Recommended Budget also includes funding for the purchase of four additional meeting pods to support future space enhancements, providing even more opportunities for community members to work, study, hold a private meeting, or collaborate comfortably.

We champion a culture of continuous growth and discovery for all

Celebrating Southwest Asian and North African Heritage



We invited community members to explore the rich histories, artistic traditions, and living cultures of Southwest Asian and North African communities in ways that were both hands-on and meaningful. In one workshop, participants explored tatreez, the art of Palestinian embroidery, learning about its historical and political significance before practicing the fallahi stitch and beginning their own motif to continue beyond the session. Other offerings introduced adults to the history, cultural meaning, and artistry of Arabic calligraphy, while family programs brought people together through drumming and Egyptian folk dance, creating joyful opportunities to move, learn and celebrate across generations. Altogether, 728 participants engaged in these experiences, reflecting strong interest in programming that fosters cultural understanding, creative expression, and a stronger sense of connection and belonging across our libraries.

Opening Museum Doors

The Discover & Go program represents a great example of community engagement at San Mateo County Libraries, expanding access to cultural experiences. With 29,290 unique users having participated since its inception, San Mateo County ranks 11th in California for program engagement, which constitutes a strong performance in relation to the population served. In total, library patrons made 5,454 reservations over the last twelve months, of which 3,124 were redeemed, resulting in a notable usage rate of 57.28%. On average, the program sees 455 reservations monthly, with numbers peaking near 550 during the summer months.

Interest has been high in communities such as San Carlos, Millbrae, Belmont, and Pacifica, highlighting the widespread appeal and accessibility of Discover & Go. The program includes 142 active venues, collectively offering over 28,000 single passes to a diverse array of attractions throughout California. Notable venues include the Asian Art Museum, Exploratorium, Filoli Center, San Francisco Zoo, and UC Botanical Garden at Berkeley, providing patrons with opportunities to explore arts, science, and nature in San Mateo County and the surrounding areas. This program helps San Mateo County Libraries meet its commitment to enriching lives and fostering lifelong learning.

Summer Adventure 2025 and Inspiring Summers

Big Lift Inspiring Summers increases access to meaningful summer learning experiences for youth struggling with learning to read. Every summer youth gain essential literacy skills and engage in high-quality, talk-rich STEAM activities led by library staff.

Last summer, we began using the district's research-based school-year literacy data to measure literacy skills gained during the summer, a rigorous measurement. 82% of youth participants maintained or made gains in literacy, exceeding our ambitious goal of 80%. Furthermore, 84% of youth participants learning English maintained or made gains in literacy skills. Some of the most significant gains were seen by districts new to the program, including Pacifica, where 89% of youth participants maintained or made gains.

This summer, we're set to serve an estimated 920 youth in the program and are especially looking forward to deepening our school and family partnerships in Half Moon Bay, Millbrae, Pacifica, and Pescadero through library field trips and literacy events, and continue to see significant results.

We are also preparing for another amazing Summer Adventure Program. Learners of all ages will be invited to participate by joining a reading and learning journey. They'll receive free giveaway books, engage in learning opportunities and have the chance to win great prizes, including a $1,000 scholarship for one child or teen in every community. This summer of unforgettable experiences will be brought to life with vibrant, commissioned artwork from local author and illustrator Sara Alfageeh, capturing the power of books as we dive into reading.

Free Community Tax Assistance

The East Palo Alto Library, in partnership with AARP Foundation Tax-Aide, and the Belmont Library, in partnership with VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) offered free tax preparation services to the community this tax season. Since launching in February, trained volunteers have offered tax preparation appointments to provide personalized support to patrons, helping them navigate tax filing with confidence and care.

This program has already made a meaningful impact. To date, East Palo Alto has scheduled over 120 appointments and successfully completed more than 75 tax returns on-site at their location; in Belmont, 82 out of 102 total available appointments have been scheduled across Saturday sessions. Beyond the numbers, this collaboration has helped empower community members with greater financial knowledge and access to critical resources, reinforcing the library's role as a trusted hub for essential services. We are committed to continuing and developing these partnerships to expand access in support of the enhanced financial well-being of our communities.

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

Library Night with the San Francisco Giants

On Sunday, April 26, San Mateo County Libraries brought excitement, creativity and community spirit to our second Library Day with the San Francisco Giants.

In partnership with fellow Bay Area libraries, we welcomed visitors at China Basin Park for a lively pregame celebration, where community members could relax in the Reading Garden, sign up for a special-edition Giants library card, learn about the One Book One Coast initiative featuring George Takei's book *They Called Us Enemy*, and explore the impact of the Library Foundation's work to expand equitable access to library services.

In the hours before the game, we connected with more than 420 community members and issued 133 new library cards, creating memorable opportunities for engagement, learning and discovery. As part of the festivities, attendees of all ages explored a hands-on maker activity where children and adults alike created customized pennants and discovered how library technology can spark creativity, personal expression and learning.
The celebration continued inside the stadium, where our message reached an impressive 40,445 attendees, giving us visibility on a major regional stage. The day was a strong reflection of how libraries build community, not only through services and programs, but by showing up in joyful, public ways that invite people to connect.

Mobile Outreach

As warmer weather brings more community events, the Bookmobile is seeing increased activity and engagement across the county. In early April, staff brought library services to the 5th annual Izzi Fun Fest at Sequoia High School, designed to connect San Mateo County families with early learning opportunities and support services. For more than 40 years, Izzi has served San Mateo County families with the greatest needs by providing high-quality early education, no-cost care, and access to essential resources such as meals, developmental screenings, vision and hearing checks, and dental care. Izzi's culturally and linguistically responsive approach helps ensure services are accessible to the diverse families they serve.

The Bookmobile also participated in two Coastside SpringFest celebrations. On April 19, staff attended SpringFest at the future Pescadero Community Park site, where families gathered to celebrate agriculture, history, and community. Bilingual staff shared library resources in Spanish and English, helping connect with the diverse community. On April 25, the Bookmobile joined the celebration at Quarry Park in El Granada, where residents learned about Bookmobile routes, including children's story times at the Moss Beach and Montara stops. At all three events, the Bookmobile brought library services directly to children and families on the Coastside, reaching over 300 residents combined.

The Bookmobile will return to the County Fair for the full run of festivities to reinvigorate active library card use, provide a respite from the crowds with our reading garden and youth discovery space, and exploration of one of our library vehicles. We will be welcoming visitors this year from June 5- 14, 2026 with free giveaway books and a cozy reading garden—a perfect spot to relax and recharge. Our pop-up library will also offer hands-on maker activities for all ages. We'll also be highlighting the many benefits of having a library ard. The County Fair is a wonderful chance to connect with community organizations, discover local resources, and kick off a summer full of exciting library programs and events!

New Bookmobile Update

The purchase of a new bookmobile to replace our aging vehicle was approved by the Governing Board on February 3, 2025. This exciting investment also inspired a generous support from the Foundation of San Mateo County Libraries and several Friends of the Library groups, helping advance this meaningful form of outreach and expand access to library resources throughout the county.

The new hybrid Bookmobile will be a Freightliner M2 with a 22-foot body and is designed as a modern, fully equipped library on wheels. Blending accessibility, technology, and flexible community service, the vehicle will feature comfortable seating for interactive reading sessions and programs, a climate-controlled interior, welcoming LED lighting, and large windows that create a bright and inviting space for visitors of all ages.

Designed with sustainability and accessibility in mind, the hybrid driveline supports efficient travel between communities while reducing environmental impact, and an ADA-compliant wheelchair lift ensures that all community members can easily access library services and resources.

For many residents, Bookmobile stops provide a primary connection to library services. Across a large and geographically diverse service area that includes coastal, mountain, rural, and suburban regions, the Bookmobile plays a vital role in expanding access to books, programs, and welcoming library experiences wherever people are.

Beyond expanding access for residents without convenient access to a physical library, the new mobile library will strengthen community partnerships, and create responsive opportunities for connection, discovery, and belonging across the county.

The new vehicle is expected to arrive in San Mateo County in Summer 2026 and will begin providing vital community services shortly thereafter. We look forward to celebrating its arrival with a summertime ribbon cutting event before introducing the new Bookmobile at schools, neighborhood gathering places, and festivals throughout the county.

We connect people and build partnerships to achieve shared goals

Youth Art Exhibition & Family Art Night

At our East Palo Alto Library, we showcased artwork by more than 80 students from three elementary schools to host a youth art exhibition that celebrated creativity and community. Now in its fourth year, the exhibition opened with a joyful reception that brought together more than 180 student artists, family members and school staff.

Multiple hands-on art activity stations encouraged families to create together. Local partners from the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University led an additional activity and shared information about its free public museum and programs, further connecting families to accessible cultural resources.

These partner driven exhibitions go beyond displaying artwork – they empower young people by spotlighting their creativity in a communal space, creating opportunities for all ages to build community, and strengthening the library's role as a shared public resource. The vibrant display has been met with enthusiastic feedback from patrons visiting the library and reflects our commitment to offer an inclusive, community-centered space that supports creativity, learning and meaningful engagement for all.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

Since we launched the Dolly Parton's Imagination Library program in late summer of 2024, over 100,000 books have been mailed to children under five in San Mateo County. To date, 12,826 children have enjoyed the program, accounting for 29% of the eligible population. The Foundation for San Mateo County Libraries continues to raise funds to support the delivery of this program, and our Friends groups provide critical annual donations to ensure its sustainability. As a new development, the program will benefit from an enhanced matching opportunity, which will cover 75% of the costs of books and mailing, an increase from the current 50%. This enhancement will be in place from May 1, 2026, through June 30, 2027.

The books are selected by an esteemed Blue Ribbon Book Selection Committee, a specially selected panel of early childhood literacy experts, is responsible for reviewing hundreds of potential titles for inclusion in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. The Blue Ribbon Book Selection Committee takes great care in choosing books that meet the different needs of children as they progress from birth to age five, including fundamental themes: Love of reading and learning; regard for diversity of people, their roles, culture, and environment; promotion of self-esteem and confidence, appreciation of art and aesthetics.

Literacy Services at the County Jails

Adult Learning staff returned to San Mateo County's two correctional facilities in March. This new partnership with the County Sheriff, permitted us to promote our services to a large number of incarcerated people in both facilities. During orientation sessions, staff introduced library resources and classes to 62 participants over the course of a single day, receiving enthusiastic feedback and strong interest in the program's return.

Building on the success of our first round, the program has increased and currently offers two ESL classes for 15 English language learners; one literacy class for 13 native English speakers focused on improving reading, writing, and comprehension; and one book club for 16 higher literacy participants.

Learners have shared meaningful feedback about the impact of the program, with comments such as, "I look forward to this class each week." One learner reflected on the lasting value of the instruction, saying, "I still remember the new words I learned from last year." Facility staff have also recognized the program's success, with one officer noting that the return of previous learners demonstrates the program's lasting impact and value.

In April, the library distributed new books for the first time at Maple Street Correctional Center in San Mateo, providing individuals in custody with reading materials tailored to their interests and reading levels. More than 100 residents participated, eagerly seeking recommendations and carefully selecting books to take and read. From fantasy fiction to subjects like mathematics and philosophy, the range of requests will help us select additional titles in the future to better meet the needs of this population. These efforts reflect the library's commitment to extending access to books and providing literacy services beyond traditional library spaces.

Personnel News

We are excited to share the following personnel announcement:

Elizabeth Sanchez has accepted the position of Facilities, Fleet and Special Projects Coordinator in Administration. Liz joins us from the County of San Mateo's Health Equity, Policy, and Planning, where she most recently served as a Community Program Specialist. Liz holds a bachelor's degree in Family and Consumer Sciences-Nutrition from San Francisco State University and is bilingual in Spanish.

Marissa Wong has accepted the position of Accountant in our Finance Division. Marissa joins us from the County of San Mateo's Human Services Agency, where she most recently served as an Accountant. Marissa holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration, with a concentration in Management, from San Francisco State University.

Employee Awards

Emmanuel Landa, North Fair Oaks Community Program Specialist, received the Stanford University Haas Center for Public Service 2026 Friends of Haas Award for expanding access to library services in underserved communities. Nominated by the Ravenswood Reads program director, Emmanuel was recognized for his passion for technology and education, helping individuals build digital skills, access resources, and connect with community programs. Known for his commitment and dedication to the North Fair Oaks community, we are excited to see him honored with this recognition. Congratulations Emmanuel!

In May, we celebrated Youth and Family Services Community Program Specialist, Silvia Escalante Corral, for an incredible milestone: 10 years of dedicated service. Congratulations to Silvia for her wonderful contributions and dedication to San Mateo County Libraries!