

# Atherton could build library before rest of Civic Center

One is fully funded; people are still working to fund the other



An architect's rendering of what the new Atherton Library is to look like. At right is the Historic Council Chambers, the only part of the existing Civic Center that is to be retained, and which will be part of the new Library. The wing of that building to the far right may be used as a public cafe. (Courtesy of WRNS Studio and the Town of Atherton)

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PUBLISHED: October 25, 2016 at 6:43 pm | UPDATED: October 26, 2016 at 11:58 pm

## HIGHLIGHTS ▼

- "I personally think we should start building the library," said City Council Member Rick DeGolia in an Oct. 14 interview. "As people watch it being built, hopefully it will encourage more people to invest in the new buildings."
- City Manager George Rodericks on Monday said he thought it would be too expensive

to build the Library first, then get to the other buildings if and when the funds arrive.

The new Atherton Library has reached the same 50 percent mark in terms of planning design as have the other components of the proposed new Civic Center.

The difference is, the library already has the money in the bank to tear itself down and rebuild itself, and the police and administration buildings are still about \$15 million short.

The library is funded directly by property taxes, and as tax rates in Atherton have soared over recent years, so has the amount of money set aside for the library.

According to the San Mateo County Library Joint Powers Authority agreement, each library in its system can retain its extra funding, and the Atherton Library has been stashing its extra funding so it can build itself a new home.

The rest of the Civic Center, however, is limited in how it can be funded because of Measure L, which was passed in 2012.

That measure, which passed 2,739 to 989, asked, “Should the Town of Atherton primarily use private donations to construct and design a new Town Center? Other funding sources might include funds derived from Building fees or future grant money but would not use general fund or parcel tax money.”

The Atherton Now committee was formed to coordinate fundraising for the project, and has raised about \$6 million to date, part of which has gone to funding the design work by WRNS Studio.

When WRNS, which is guided by the City Council and the Civic Center Advisory Committee, completes its plans for the Civic Center and the library, the question will be, should the library begin construction on its own, even if the administration and police buildings are not yet funded?

“I personally think we should start building the library,” said City Council Member Rick DeGolia in an Oct. 14 interview. “As people watch it being built, hopefully it will encourage more people to invest in the new buildings.”

The council will probably address this question in 2017, DeGolia said.

City Manager George Rodericks on Monday said he thought it would be too expensive to build the library first, then get to the other buildings if and when the funds arrive.

“Even if it’s the same contractor, the costs of staging for construction twice would be too high,” he said. “And the various connections to utilities and so forth should all be done at the same time. Otherwise it would be too difficult and too expensive.”

The town’s planning for the police and administration buildings has been pared down in size and features, in an attempt to reduce the amount needed to build them.

The library, on the other hand, has more options.

DeGolia, who is the City Council representative to the Library Board, said. “Because the library has the luxury of those tax funds, design is less constrained than the other two buildings. The council wants to make facilities as sustainable as possible. The library will be zero net energy.”



A floor plan for the new Atherton Library shows the council chambers at lower left and the large entrance and children's area in the middle. (Courtesy of WRNS Studio and the Town of Atherton)

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That is, the library, among other features, will have a full array of solar panels and other sustainability features that are not yet funded for the police and administration buildings, although they are being designed to allow installation of solar panels later.

“The other buildings,” DeGolia said, will have such features “to the extent we can afford it.

“There are all kinds of nuances related to that.”

DeGolia pointed out that since the historic City Council chambers is the only building to be retained in the new Civic Center to become part of the library, the difference in floor levels must be taken into account.

“At the historic council chambers,” DeGolia said, “the floor is 2 to 3 feet above the ground. ... The new library is to have same floor level, and we will use the underfloor space to provide all the electronics and cooling and heating, so they don't have to put it in the walls, which will be a huge advantage for zero net energy.”

If Atherton Now can't raise the full funds needed for the Civic Center, said Rodericks on Monday, and if funds don't arrive from some other source such as grants, the City Council in 2017 may have to consider going back to the voters to repeal Measure L.

While current council member Bill Widmer was one of three council members to vote to put Measure L on the ballot in 2012, the other two, Jim Dobbie and Kathy McKeithen, are no longer on the council, and the town's revenues have increased, thanks to a rise in property taxes.

In an interview Tuesday, Mayor Elizabeth Lewis, who did not vote as a council member to put Measure L on the ballot in 2012, but supported it during her re-election campaign at the time, said the current council is “committed to getting the Civic Center built by all means possible. Everybody sees the need, and wants better conditions for our staff. So far down the road, we’ve done a good job with our plans. What we have now is an embarrassment.”

Lewis also said that back in 2012, after having seen Portola Valley raise funds through private donations to rebuild its civic center, “I felt we could do the same thing. ... I wasn’t farsighted enough to see how hard it would be to raise the funds.”

Bev Lenihan, part of the Atherton Now committee, said a \$100,000 donation was confirmed on Monday night, which puts the committee at about \$200,000 toward fulfilling a \$1 million matching grant that has been offered to the fund.

She also said new mailings would be going out this week to Atherton residents.

“Every member of the council has contributed to the construction fund,” Lewis said. “Every member of the council is committed to make sure that whatever funding takes place, private or otherwise, we’ll do what’s necessary. And we are seeing residents stepping up.”

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