

Covert Library Patron

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## Abstract

The Civic Center branch is the largest of the three public libraries in Livermore. The community it serves is a combination of scientific and the area's traditional ranching and viticulture. It is predominantly White but also has a significant Hispanic portion. The library moved to a new building in 2004. It emphasizes computers and electronic information. The library offers its own computers, as well as both Ethernet hookups and a wireless network for laptops. The new building is large and somewhat intimidating, but the library staff is friendly and helpful, and the library offers many services to the community.

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### *Demographics*

Livermore is located in Alameda County, and is considered the eastern most city in the San Francisco Bay Area, before the Central Valley. The city is suburban, but still retains much of its ranching and viticulture origins. Livermore also has a strong scientific and technical community, having two national laboratories, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratory. Lawrence Livermore is the city's largest employer (Wikipedia, 2005). The population is just over 73,000, 81.9% of which is White. The next largest portion of the population is Hispanic, with 14.4% (Census 2000 Data, 2000).

### *Library Location and Appearance*

The Civic Center branch of the Livermore Public Library is located at 1188 South Livermore Ave., next door to the police station and City Hall. The building opened for business in 2004, in the same block as the old Civic Center branch. This is the largest of the three branch libraries in Livermore. It is located along a major road, but outside of the main part of town. It is close to a senior living center and a church, as well as a winery, and is near the city's main bicycle trail. The library building is set back from the street, with room not only for the parking lot but an expanse of lawn and trees, and a sitting area which contains a mosaic of literary and historical figures. The landscaping to one side of the building makes use of native, drought tolerant plants, and around the back there are small areas of grapevines, the city of Livermore's signature plant. Overall the building and surrounding area are inviting and comfortable, and seemed to be designed with a strong mind toward the community.

However, its location means that very few people would stop in on impulse. It is not near any of the main shopping or activity centers. Not far beyond the library the city becomes more rural, so the library does not get much cross traffic. There is a shopping center less than a block away, but it has been on the decline for several years. The three buildings, the library, the police station, and city hall, all have a similar design, and even after I was parked I had trouble distinguishing between them. Also, being set so far back from the road makes picking the library out and knowing which driveway to use difficult. At the speed which most cars drive past, many would not notice the library. The library advertised when the new building was opening, and will occasionally put out word when a talk or event is taking place, but mostly, the library seems to rely on its website or on people knowing its there.

### *Inside the Library*

Just inside the front doors is an entryway with a “Welcome to the Library” computer terminal and a podium which is sometimes staffed by a library worker. To the left is the community information center, which has flyers and the library’s suggestion board, and a small room that has the Friends of the Library book sale. To the right of the entryway is the Library Café and the restrooms. The hallway on this side also acts as a small art gallery, and displays the work of local artists. Straight ahead is the library proper.

The library has a wide central pathway which contains displays of recent publications as well as popular books. To one side is the circulation desk, and further down the reference desk, and to the other is a separate room for the children’s area. Just beyond the children’s area are the library catalogue and self checkout computer stations, and surrounding these are the CD and video racks. Behind all this are the book shelves, on

either side of a slew of tables. Each table had a lamp with power and Ethernet outlets, and the library has recently started offering a wireless network. Some of the bookshelves remain empty, or partially empty, and despite having been in this building for over a year, the library still has a just-moved-in feel.

At the end of the walkway, beyond the reference desk, is a quiet area with computers meant for internet browsing and studying. Beyond the computers, tucked into the back of the library, is the reference section and the back issues of periodicals. Between the quiet area cum reference section and the circulation books is a reading room with tables and the current periodicals. In addition there are several conference rooms and small study rooms. According to the library's web site, the library also offers services such as passports, tax help, legal help, and internet classes, as well as an adult literacy program. I made use of the library's passport service the year before and found it convenient and straight forward.

When I first entered the library I was intimidated. The floor plan is very open, and emphasizes computer and study areas over books and reference material. The expanse of empty space confused me at first, and made me uncertain as to which part I wanted. However, the library workers I observed were all friendly and eager to assist the patrons. I often saw them walking around the library to see if anyone needed help, and they wore black aprons and name tags, which made them easy to identify. This made the library seem friendlier and a little less intimidating. After spending some time there my impression changed to one of a library which is very community oriented, which matches my impression of the outside of the building. The old library building had a small, homey feeling to it, and some of that is missing from the new building. The greeter at the

entry way, and the library staff walking around assisting patrons seem to be attempts to bring some of the feel of the old library to the new building.

### *Library Patrons*

Most of the library patrons were either White or Hispanic, and these two groups seemed fairly balanced, despite the census data showing that the population of Whites is much larger than that of Hispanics. I know from working retail that much of the adult Hispanic population in Livermore speaks little or poor English, which made me wonder why I didn't see any signage in Spanish. Also, the library web site is only in English. This seems to be ignoring the needs of a large group of their patrons. The library does have a fair selection of Spanish-language books, which is easy to find. Browsing around, I didn't see any other foreign-language books.

Perhaps two-thirds of the patrons were in their teens or early twenties. Most of the teens were using the computers in the quiet area, and most of the twenty-somethings were using laptops. The older patrons were using the study tables, either the ones toward the edges of the library or the ones in the reading room, away from most of the library traffic, and most were not using laptops. I only saw a few patrons browsing the shelves. Drucker states that for non-prophets "performance means concentrating available resources where the results are" (1990, p. 108). The computers and study tables seemed to get the most use, and so the library is emphasizing these services.

The children's section is in a separate room and not visible from the main part of the library, but I saw only a few families entering or leaving the library during the times I was there. The library is not near any schools, and so is not a convenient after school gathering place. I suspect the children's section would be busier during the summer,

when children are out of school, since the library offers summer reading programs and children's activities. The children's section is large and well stocked, and has several small tables, and seems very child friendly.

### *Summary*

The Civic Center branch of the Livermore Public Library is the largest of the three branch libraries in Livermore. The building was designed to reflect and accommodate the surrounding community, incorporating artful sitting areas and landscaping that makes use of both native and signature plants. The library offers a number of services, such as passports and legal help, for the convenience of the patrons.

The inside of the library emphasizes electronic information, offering computers for both library catalogue and general internet browsing, as well as internet hook-ups, both Ethernet and wireless, for personal laptops. The majority of the library's patrons are young, and primarily make use of these services. The library can seem intimidating at first, but the library staff works hard to counteract this and make the library a friendly, welcoming place. However, approximately half of the library's patrons are Hispanic, and aside from a selection of Spanish-language books, the library does not appear to offer any signage or services to accommodate in Spanish.

The Civic Center library is doing its best to make itself viable and useful in the age of electronic information, but it has perhaps lost some of what used to make it inviting. Since it is located as it is away from the busiest parts of town, it needs to do more than offer services; it needs to make its services known. The library's web site does this to some extent, but the library could do more. It could start with being more accessible to its Spanish-speaking patrons, by offering signage and flyers in Spanish. Overall, I think

the library has made a good start in its new building and has a lot of potential as a community center, but it still has room for improvement.



## References

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