



Let's Build Libraries Where the People Go

by Tom Moore

I have a theory that public libraries and public transportation developed at pretty much the same time. Public libraries were for the most part built in central cities which were the hub of public transportation. Larger cities which developed a branch system built those branches in regional transportation centers. As long as people relied upon public transportation to get around, these libraries in the hearts of the cities thrived. After World War II, automobile usage began to change the way that Americans shopped, pursued recreation, and even used libraries.

At first the changes were gradual. During the fifties and the sixties regional and strip shopping centers developed and invited customers to use their cars to get there by building large parking lots around them. Downtowns began to fade as commerce and shopping centers. We, however, continued to build large main libraries downtown.

During the seventies and eighties, library leaders like Charlie Robinson advocated decentralized library systems. "Give 'em what they want" and "Build 'em where they are" were his two main themes. People like myself followed his lead and built libraries around the county in shopping centers and in other highly traveled places. We found that our customers would come almost wherever we placed our libraries.

I believe that we had built-in biases. In fact, when it comes to placing branches, all directors think almost exactly alike. Don't put a branch near a school, we say. The kids will overrun us! Don't put the library near a post office. Instead, let's find an old abandoned post office to use as a library. Don't put the library in or near a park. We'll be used as a rest room and cooling off place. Don't put the library inside a school because, because ... Just because!

I believe that our old thinking is just that, old. Let's try some new things. Let's put our libraries where the people go. In Wake County we have libraries in shopping centers (three different ones in different parts of the county), in office parks (our busiest branch is hidden in an office park), in government complexes (one with a town hall and police department, one with a post office and senior center, one with a senior center and one inside the county office building), in schools (located inside a high school, this library has the most loyal customers of all our libraries), and even in parks (one inside a park and one next to a swimming pool). A few of our branches are stand-alone buildings with nothing else around. As long as there is parking, they are well used.

When I think back to my reasoning against having libraries in many of these sites, I realize how set in my ways I was. I thought that you shouldn't put libraries in these places because I read somewhere that you shouldn't. Or maybe I didn't read it; I heard someone say it. Or maybe I just made it up because I didn't want to put a library in any of these places.

These are two events that changed my thinking on placement of libraries. The first happened about twelve years ago. A county commissioner announced that a new branch was going to be placed in an office park. I was appalled. First, I didn't know anything about this done deal, and second, who was going to go to a library in an office park? I quickly got over the first. The answer to the second was, more than we could handle. The second event happened just a couple of weeks ago. We had just cut the ribbon on our newest branch. It's located in a park. Before the refreshments were eaten up, I saw two boys in the branch with BASKETBALLS!!! Before I could say, "What are you doing in here with those basketballs?" I realized what they were doing. After exercising their bodies, they were exercising their minds. They were looking at books. They were waiting to check out books. They were using a library that was located where they were. I rest my case.