

# Larkspur, San Rafael libraries snag big state grants



A Larkspur Library fundraising progress sign stands at the corner of Doherty Drive and Rose Lane, where a new library building is planned, on Thursday, Sept. 15, 2022. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)

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PUBLISHED: September 19, 2022 at 5:58 p.m. | UPDATED: September 19, 2022 at 5:59 p.m.

Larkspur has landed a \$5.23 million state grant for the construction of a new city library, while San Rafael has secured two \$1 million grants for projects at its downtown and Pickleweed Park library branches.

The funding is part of the California State Library's "Building Forward" program.

"This is an exciting opportunity to complete the project," said Larkspur Councilmember Catherine Way. "The plan is now to find out what the specifics are from the state, to continue fundraising and start getting some community design going."

The Building Forward grant program is the single largest investment in California's public libraries in more than 20 years, according to the state library. About \$439 million in one-time funds have been allocated to address safety and maintenance needs in libraries across the state.

The award for Larkspur was the largest grant the city qualified for. The grant requires a city match.

Way and Councilmember Kevin Haroff, who are running for reelection in November, are part of the city's ad hoc committee working with the Commons Foundation nonprofit on the library fundraising.

Joe Jennings, president of the foundation, said the nonprofit entered into an agreement with the city in 2018 and began fundraising a year later. The foundation has amassed \$4.65 million in cash donations and pledges.

The goal is to garner another \$350,000 to reach \$5 million by the end of the year, he said. Officials will draw from city funds to fill any gap.

City officials are planning to build a 6,845-square-foot library on the vacant parcel known as “the Commons” on Rose Lane. The city’s 109-year-old City Hall at 400 Magnolia Ave., which houses the current library, is in need of a major renovation that would be more expensive than building from the ground up.

In its grant application, officials noted that if they chose a full renovation of City Hall, it would cost about \$18 million. Original estimates suggested it would cost about \$11 million for a renovation, officials said. The city arrived at the new number after considering unknowns such as inflation, a volatile construction market and the availability of materials.

Previously, staff presented preliminary estimates for what a 5,000-square-foot library would cost as well as a new City Hall equal in size. Together, staff believed the cost to be around \$10 million.

The actual size, design and features of the new library have yet to be determined, said City Manager Dan Schwarz. He said the state is expected to release “grant implementation guidelines” by the end of the month, which will dictate how funds must be expended.

The city staff is planning to hold a presentation on the next steps at a City Council meeting in October, he said.

Schwarz said the city plans to issue a request for proposals at the beginning of next year, with the goal of completing the design and approval process by the end of the year.

“The public will be able to weigh-in as we move through the approval process,” he said.

Because development on the Commons property was studied as part of the city’s environmental review for its “communities facilities master plan,” staff does not anticipate needing to do additional environmental analysis, Schwarz said.

Mayor Dan Hillmer said he is “overwhelmed” by the news of the grant.

“I want to thank our staff for putting together a compelling application,” he said. “This is a momentous day.”

Jennings said it was a team effort that also involved the support Friends of Larkspur Library.

“The community should celebrate when all these groups come together and it works,” Jennings said. “It’s amazing. But we’re not done.”

Barbara Friday, president of Friends of Larkspur Library, said, “We couldn’t be happier. It’s a dream come true.”

This is the second state grant awarded to the city for its library project this year. Assemblymember Marc Levine, whose district includes Marin County, secured \$1 million earlier this year that will be used to prepare the project site and install infrastructure.

The city expects to begin construction on the new library in 2024.

In San Rafael, Catherine Quffa, the city library and recreation director, said staff will get going on the downtown branch project first.

That project will involve replacing the aging roof, updating the HVAC systems and improving restrooms. The city expects to release a request for proposals in the coming months, with some construction beginning in the spring, Quffa said.

The Pickleweed project will involve an expansion and interior renovation to improve the operations of the library. The planning for that project will happen next year, Quffa said.

“The city is committed to providing innovative, modern library services and this significant investment in our infrastructure will support us in achieving that goal,” Mayor Kate Colin said.

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