

Benchmarking Success in San Diego, Part II

By Vince Vasquez

Last week, this author analyzed recent trends in the “performance measures” of San Diego city services, identifying the need to improve emergency response times and fundamental road maintenance. Now, we shift our focus to evaluating the state of our public parks and libraries. A close look at city data suggests that new solutions are needed to keep our most treasured institutions afloat in our current financial storm.

As last year’s mid-year budget protests revealed, San Diegan residents are passionate about their public libraries; for many, they are the cornerstone of the community. However, even as the system has expanded, hours have been reduced. In Fiscal Year (FY) 1999, 34 city libraries were open a total of 86,000 hours; in FY 2008, 36 total libraries were open for less than 77,000 annual operating hours. That represents a service reduction greater than 10%. Meanwhile the total operating budget for the department *increased*. How taxpayer dollars are being spent appears to be one part of the problem.

“Efficiency” performance measures indicate that our library department today is significantly less cost effective than it was at the end of the last decade. In FY 1999, the average cost per item cataloged and processed at city libraries was \$3.18; in FY 2008, this figure more than tripled, to \$9.90. In addition, the average cost per item circulated at branch libraries in FY 1999 was \$1.79; however in FY 2008, this expense soared to \$5.44, according to data received from the Mayor’s Office. It is incumbent upon the Council and the public to ask why.

The same phenomenon can be seen in the Parks and Recreation Department. In FY 1999, the average cost per hour to operate a recreation center was \$46.72; in FY 2008, the average cost rose to \$66.32. In FY 1999, the City operated 47 recreation centers, which opened their doors for a cumulative 135,584 hours; in FY 2008, 52 recreation centers were only open for 124,711 hours. It would appear that now is the time for tough questions for department directors in an open public forum; elected officials should require them to explain the causes behind the runaway costs of our parks and libraries.

These and other performance measures show that building new libraries and recreation centers is not likely to improve the overall access San Diegans have to their treasured community institutions, and City Hall has yet to secure the best value for our taxpayer dollars. If managed competition will continue to be stalled by political interests, and if our city workforce will continue to be targeted for staff reductions, then the City Council must work with the Independent Budget Analyst and other policy experts to determine how to restore and improve public service levels. As previously mentioned in our column, strategic partnerships with businesses and non-profits may prove to be beneficial for residents and cost-effective for our local government. These must be on the table. The Council must also question the wisdom of spending future taxpayer dollars for additional parks and libraries through the Capital Improvements Programs budget at a time when

operating hours have been slashed, and significant investments in the city workforce have not followed the growth in new public facilities.

Citizens can play an important role in the restoration of parks and libraries, by responding to President Obama's and Mayor Sanders' call for a renewed commitment to community volunteerism. More help would be welcome from city departments. Despite the addition of new recreation centers and thousands of park acres, the total volunteer hours spent in support of our Parks and Recreation Department shrank more than 15% from FY 2000 to FY 2008. And with our growing economic crisis affecting the city's General Fund budget, our public libraries need more help than ever before. As a way to start the process of renewal, Mayor Sanders should consider challenging city department directors to find creative ways to boost the ranks of volunteers by 20%, and develop strategies that use volunteer muscles, talent and dedication to restore operating hours at our parks and libraries to previous levels.

Performance measures show us the failures and challenges in serving the public good, but they can only point the way to recovery. San Diegans must rise to the occasion, devoting greater time and energy to turning around the eroding quality of life in their city, and hold elected officials accountable to the interests of taxpayers. Working together, our community can overcome any obstacle that presents itself on the road ahead.