

## New Mcallen Library Director Starts Job Today: New McAllen library director starts job today.

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Byline: By Marc B. Geller

Jun. 19--By Marc B. Geller

Monitor Staff Writer

McALLEN -- Nearly four months have passed since longtime McAllen library director Gerard Mittelstaedt retired from his post. But the man who steps into his shoes today will be a familiar face in the Rio Grande Valley and at the municipal library.

Newly hired director Jose A. Gamez, 49, of McAllen, comes to the job from a three-year stint as director of Pharr Memorial Library, where he led the expansion from the former facility to the new 20,000-square-foot addition.

Over the past three decades, the San Juan native has worked for the McAllen library at various times as the Lark Branch manager, the head of reference services and the head of adult nonfiction and audiovisual materials.

City Manager Mike R. Perez and Mayor Richard Cortez selected Gamez from more than 25 applicants, basing the decision on input from the mayor's library advisory committee, which includes Deputy City Manager Brent Branham; Wendy Wicker, president of the library board of directors; Joe La Beau, city human resources director and local teacher and Monitor columnist Chris Ardis.

"When I learned of the position, I felt that it was a chance of a lifetime," Gamez said. "And having worked in McAllen for about eight years, it was a chance to come back and apply knowledge gained through experience there in McAllen and especially at my last job."

Gamez also was eager to help lead an ongoing project to develop a new main library.

"He's got some experience in construction," Perez said, referring to the challenging task Gamez faced in trying to get the Pharr library expansion on track after the project was plagued with an assortment of logistics and construction problems.

"Probably you learn more from the bad experiences you've had," Perez added. "They've had a tough experience there, and he's kind of got it back in line and in the process of finishing it now."

McAllen's leadership had held off sending out requests for qualifications to prospective architectural firms for its own library project pending the hiring of the new director and site selection.

"We've got a bid in for a piece of property," Perez said, adding city leaders could announce the location before the end of this month. "We're hoping that everything kind of falls in line and we'll start to see things move pretty quickly again."

Wicker, the library board president, said Gamez possesses not only valuable experience overseeing the library expansion -- a project estimated to cost around \$30 million -- but also the management and public relations skills needed to successfully run a library system with nearly 90 employees and a \$3 million annual budget.

"He's pretty much everything we were looking for in one package," she said, explaining it was an added bonus that Gamez, with his firsthand knowledge of the Valley, jumped into a job applicant pool that include people from as far as Florida and Utah.

"We were just lucky that we got Jose," Wicker said. "As well as all the managerial skills, you need to have someone that can deal with the public."

Gamez's experience in library expansion also includes assisting with the planning and setup of McAllen's two branch libraries and the campus library for the Texas State Technical College McAllen Extension.

And he brings experience culled during his five years in the mid-1990s as the owner and founder of a McAllen-based video production business called Videolife.

Raised in Pharr and a married father of five children ranging in age from 13 to 26, Gamez earned a bachelor's degree in sociology from St. Edward's University in Austin and a master's degree in library and information science from the University of Texas at Austin.

He counts Mittelstaedt, his predecessor, among his friends.

"I do have some catching up to do," Gamez said of the McAllen library expansion. "Gerard and I are very good friends. He will be a valuable resource to me. ...

"I just am very grateful for the opportunity to be here and I think McAllen should be very excited about this new facility."

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