
McAllen Chooses Location For New Library.

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Byline: Marc B. Geller

Jun. 30--McALLEN -- Against a backdrop of men's and women's clothing -- presumably marked at "every day low prices" -- city officials on Thursday announced the future location of McAllen's new main library.

In an unusual turn of events, the library will be located in what is now the Wal-Mart store at 4001 N. 23rd St., near the Nolana intersection. City officials announced the \$5 million purchase of the store and the nearly 15-acre property on which it sits during a news conference inside the 128,604-square-foot retail venue. "Wow, this is exciting, isn't it?" Mayor Richard Cortez enthused. "When we learned that this building was available, we consulted with the Library Advisory Board to see what they thought about it, and they said, 'Golly, this would be great,' so we moved on it very fast." A consulting firm previously recommended building a four-story, 130,000-square-foot facility with a 200-seat auditorium and 280 parking spaces. It estimated the facility would cost \$28.5 million to \$32 million and would serve the city's needs for the next 30 to 40 years. However, with McAllen's purchase and planned renovation of the Wal-Mart facility, the city could save as much as 40 percent off that initial estimate, said City Commission Scott Crane. "If we take over the entire building, that makes this the fifth-largest public library in the state of Texas," said Jose Gamez, who became library director June 19. It's uncertain whether that will happen, however. "If there's sufficient data that says that the need for 128,000 square feet is there, then we will probably approve it," Cortez said. "If we don't need to be the fifth largest library in the state, then we're not going to spend money to be that."

Wal-Mart's asking price for the property, which includes 864 parking spaces, was \$4.6 million, according to company marketing materials. Hidalgo County Appraisal District lists the assessed value at about \$6 million, including \$2.9 million for the land and \$3.1 million for the improvements. Cortez expects the city will take over the property in two years, after Wal-Mart Stores Inc. opens its nearby Wal-Mart Supercenter, which is under construction at the corner of North 29th Street and Nolana. The next step, he said, is to hire an architect to develop the design for the new library. There is no set opening date for the public. Located at 601 N. Main St., the existing main library hasn't undergone an expansion since 1975, when a three-story, \$650,000 addition doubled it to 40,000 square feet. Combined with the branch libraries at Lark Community Center and Palm View Community Center, the library system currently has a total of 62,000 square feet. "The downtown location is still city property," Cortez said. "We plan to keep kind of a satellite location there, just as you would find at Lark Community Center and Palm View Community Center, so there will still be a presence in that location for those that are used to going there." City officials project the new library will draw between 1,000 and 1,200 visitors from across Hidalgo County every day. But Stuart Klein, owner of S. Klein Galleries, adjacent to the current main library, has reservations about moving the library to the new location. "The downtown is going to lose that traffic," said Klein, who is vice president of Friends of the Library, and whose wife serves on the city's Library Advisory Board. "That will mean, too, that three libraries will be on the west side of town," he added. "I know they say that's the center of town now, but it is really the west side of town, and there won't be anything on the east side of town. That will also mean that the main library will be within a mile of the Lark library." "When we were thinking about places, this wasn't even on the horizon," said Gerard Mittelstaedt, who retired as library director in late February. He praised the Wal-Mart location as having "very good access" and said he knows of at least one precedent, in Kansas City, Kan., for converting a big-box store into a library. "It's an excellent location," he said. "I think it will serve the people of McAllen very well. The challenge now is just to do it right."

____ Marc B. Geller covers McAllen and general assignments for The Monitor. You can reach him at (956) 683-4445.

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