Northwest Survey & Data Services

Summary of Results
Alameda Library Survey

By Stephen M. Johnson, Kim Langolf
& Christine McCaslin
April 2008

Introduction

Alameda, California is an island city located near the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay. The city of Alameda has three libraries, including a brand new centrally located main library and smaller libraries on the west end of town and on Bay Farm Island. As part of a current effort to assess library services, in particular use patterns among the three libraries since the opening of the new main library, Alameda hired library consultant Ruth Metz to conduct a library services and needs assessment. In close association with Ruth Metz Associates, and with representatives from the Alameda Free Library, Northwest Survey & Data Services (NSDS) planned and implemented a March 2008 survey of Alameda residents. The survey was designed to poll all residents of Alameda and to be large enough to allow for investigation of the results from three different geographic regions of Alameda, the west end; central Alameda; and the east end and Bay Farm Island.

Because of the desire to learn about the opinions of residents of specific urban areas, the survey sample size (660) was larger than a typical residential survey, in order to insure that there were sufficient respondents from each of the three areas. When looking at the survey results for Alameda as a whole, the margin of error for any result is $\pm$ 3.8% at the 95% confidence level. Since only 469 of the respondents use any of the Alameda libraries, the margin of error for any question asked only of library patrons is $\pm$ 4.5%

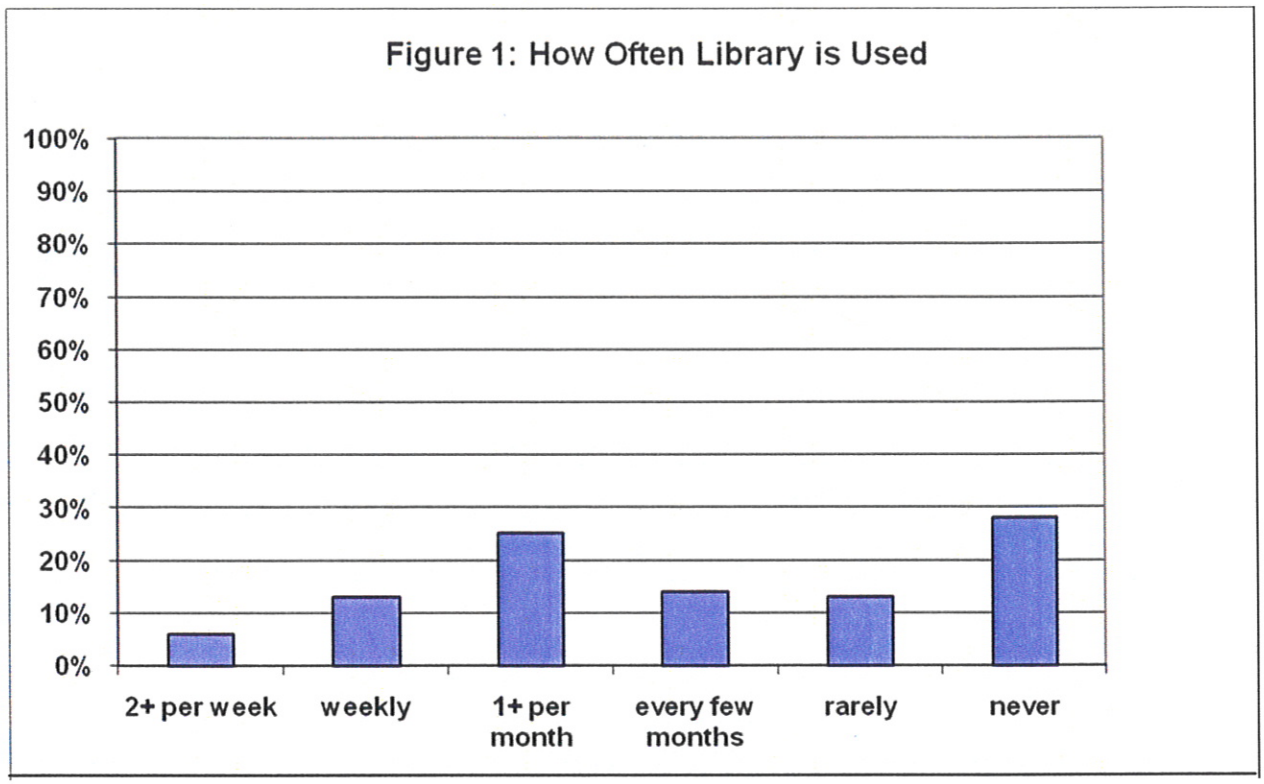
Survey Results

This report summarizes the major survey results. Readers may refer to the 70 tables in the Banners section of this report for more detail. There they will find cross-tabulations of each question with a wide range of demographic information and responses to the questions related to use of the library, library services and features, the desire for materials in languages other than English, the library website, and the willingness to support a special library tax. Readers can also look at the Topline Frequencies section for the summary responses to each question. In addition, the Narrative section of the report has the exact question wording and the narrative responses to any open-end question.

Use of The Alameda Free Library System

After identifying where in Alameda respondents lived, the survey first questioned people about their use of public libraries, starting with how often they or family members used an Alameda library. Nineteen percent of Alameda residents use one of the libraries at least once a week and an additional 25% use an Alameda library once or more a month.

However, a large number of the respondents (42%) rarely or never use an Alameda library. See Figure 1 below for a complete distribution of Alameda library use.



Frequent library use was greatest among mid-island residents, with 21% using the library at least once a week. West end residents were the least likely to be frequent users, with only 14% using the library at least once a week, but were more likely to be occasional library users. All residents of Alameda, independent of the geographic location of their residence, were equally likely to be infrequent users of the library, or non-users. See Banner Table 2 for more information.

In addition to asking about the frequency with which Alameda residents visit one of the libraries in the Alameda Free Library system, the survey also asked respondents about which branch or branches of the library system they had used in the last 12 months. If a respondent used more than one branch they were asked additional questions about which branch they used most and why they used a second library.

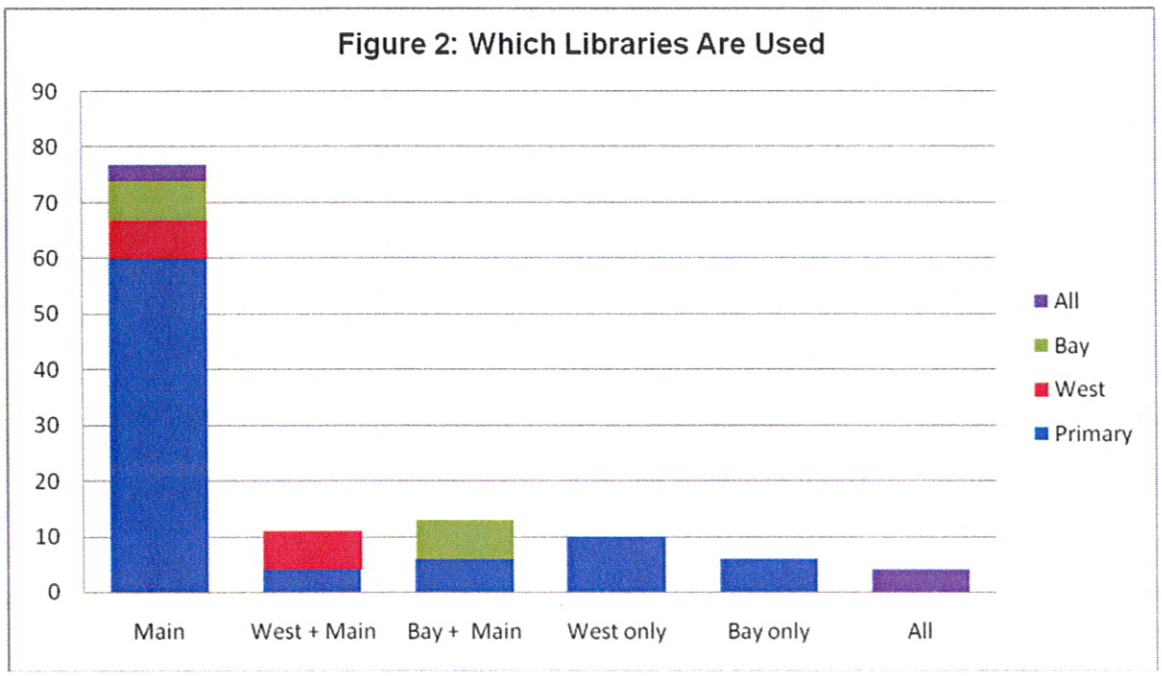
A large majority of respondents (60%) had used only the main library. Using only the main library was more common among mid-island residents (66%), but a majority of residents from the west end (59%) and from the east end and Bay Farm Island (51%) also used only the main library.

Very few respondents (12%) used only the west branch library or the branch on Bay Farm Island. For those who did use only these branches, the majority were residents of

the geographic area that the branch they used was located in. It was also very rare for a respondent (4%) to have visited all three libraries within the past year.

Many respondents (24%) had visited two Alameda libraries within the last year. It was most common (13%) for someone to have used both the Bay Farm Island and the main branches, although it was almost as common (11%) for someone to have visited the west end branch and the main branch. Less than 1% of respondents had visited only the west end and the Bay Farm Island branches. The majority of respondents (70%) who had visited the Bay Farm Island and main branches lived either on the east end or on Bay Farm Island. However, the majority of respondents who had visited both the west end branch and the main branch (66%) lived on the mid-island portion of Alameda. To a great extent this latter pattern of library use can be explained by the relatively small population of the west end, which has only half the population of the mid-island portion of Alameda. See Banner Table 53 for more information.

In order to learn more about library use patterns, the 28% of respondents who had used more than one Alameda library in the last 12 months were asked which branch they had used the most, in effect which was their primary library. The majority (62%) had primarily used the main branch, although 19% primarily used the Bay Farm Island Branch, while 11% primarily used the west end branch. See Figure 2 below for a graphic display of the library use patterns for Alameda residents.



As you can see from Figure 2, the main library dominates the library use pattern. Very few people use either the west end or the Bay Farm branches exclusively, and for those who use one of the small branches and the main library, the majority thinks of the main library as their primary library. When you add up those respondents who only use the main library, with those who use two or more libraries, but think of the main library as

their primary library, the percentage of library patrons who rely on the main library reaches 77%.

In order to learn something about why people exhibit this pattern of library use, the respondents who use more than one library were asked the reason why they used one library more than the other, and they were also asked why they used the secondary library. For respondents who had picked either the west end branch or Bay Farm Island branch as their primary library, essentially the only reason given was the proximity of that branch library to where the respondent lived. The typical response being, "it's closer."

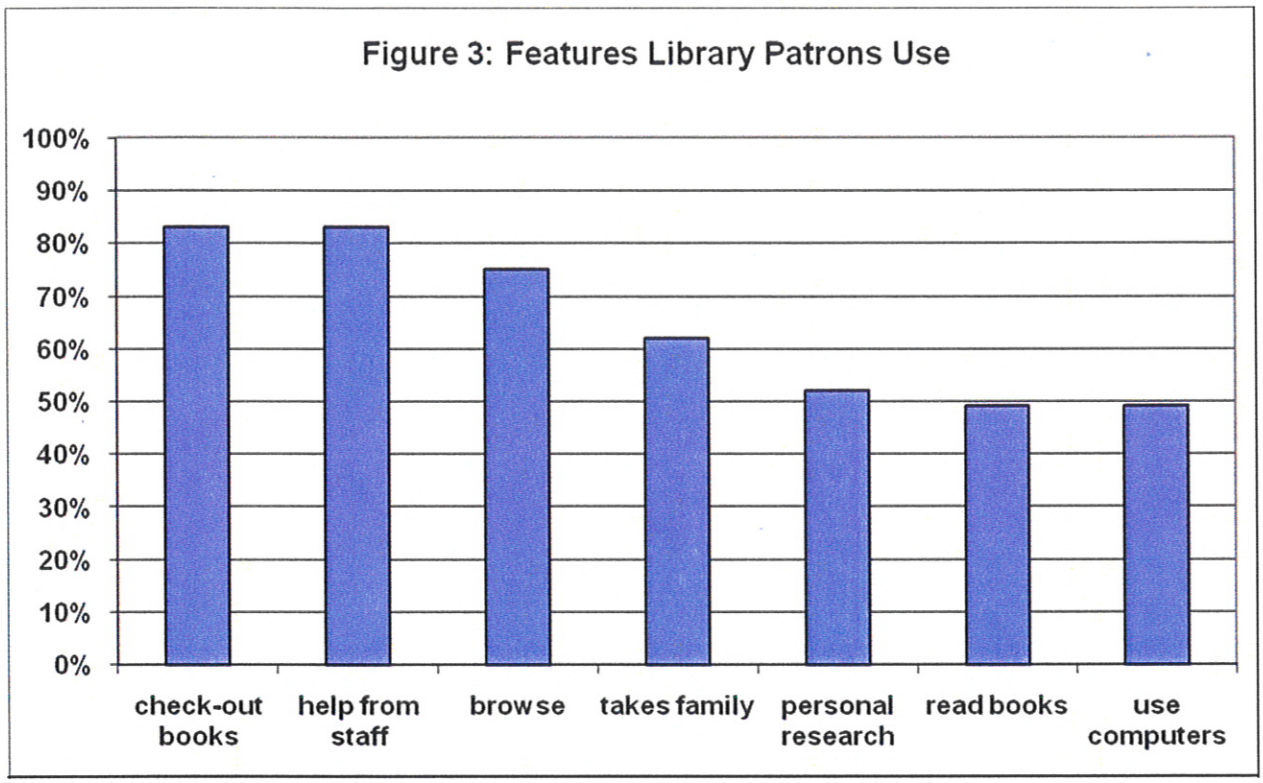
Many of the multi-library users who primarily used the main library also mentioned the proximity of the library to their homes, but an even larger number mentioned attributes of the main library, primarily the larger collection, the increased access to computers, and in some cases the fact that it is new.

When asked why they used a secondary library branch, almost all multi-library users cited proximity, although those for whom the main library was their secondary library also cited improved features of the main library.

Finally, respondents were asked what features, services, or characteristics they would like to see added to their secondary Alameda library. A large number of respondents were unable to offer any suggestion. For those who did have a suggestion, more space, longer hours, and improvements to the collection were the main requests. Of course, for the few respondents for whom the man library was their secondary library they generally were completely satisfied with it as it is. See the Narrative section for the complete narrative responses to these questions.

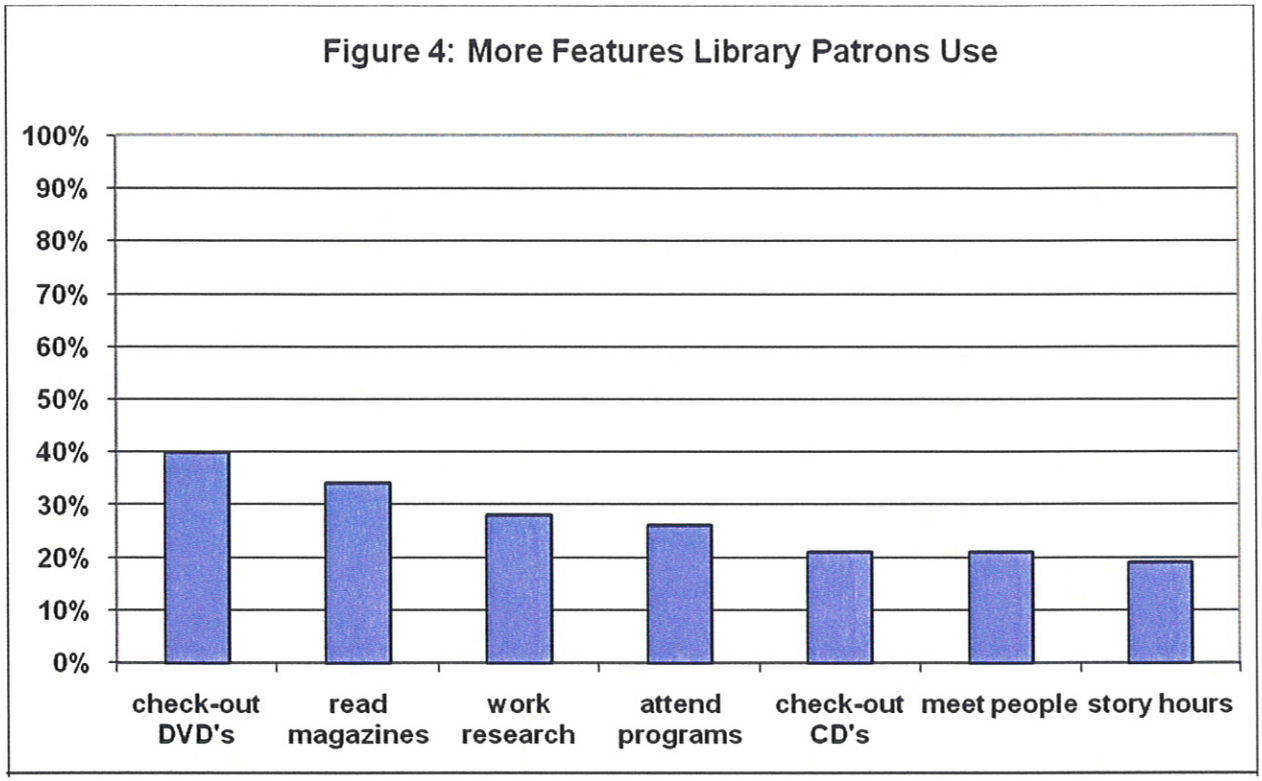
What Features do Library Patrons Use

Library users were asked about their use of 21 separate features, services, or activities associated with the library. The use rate for these features, services or activities varied from a high of 83% for checking out books, to a low of 3% for receiving tutoring services or working on one's taxes at the library. The following figure shows the seven most popular features, services, or activities at the library.



As you can see, these features, services, or activities are part of the library experience for half or more of all library patrons (actually from 49% on up). These items are all generally very standard and traditional library uses, and include at the top of the list library activities that have been part of the library experience for over a century, checking out books, getting help from the library staff, and browsing the collection. Even the last item, "uses library computers", is just the use of a modern technology to do the traditional activities of research at the library and accessing library materials.

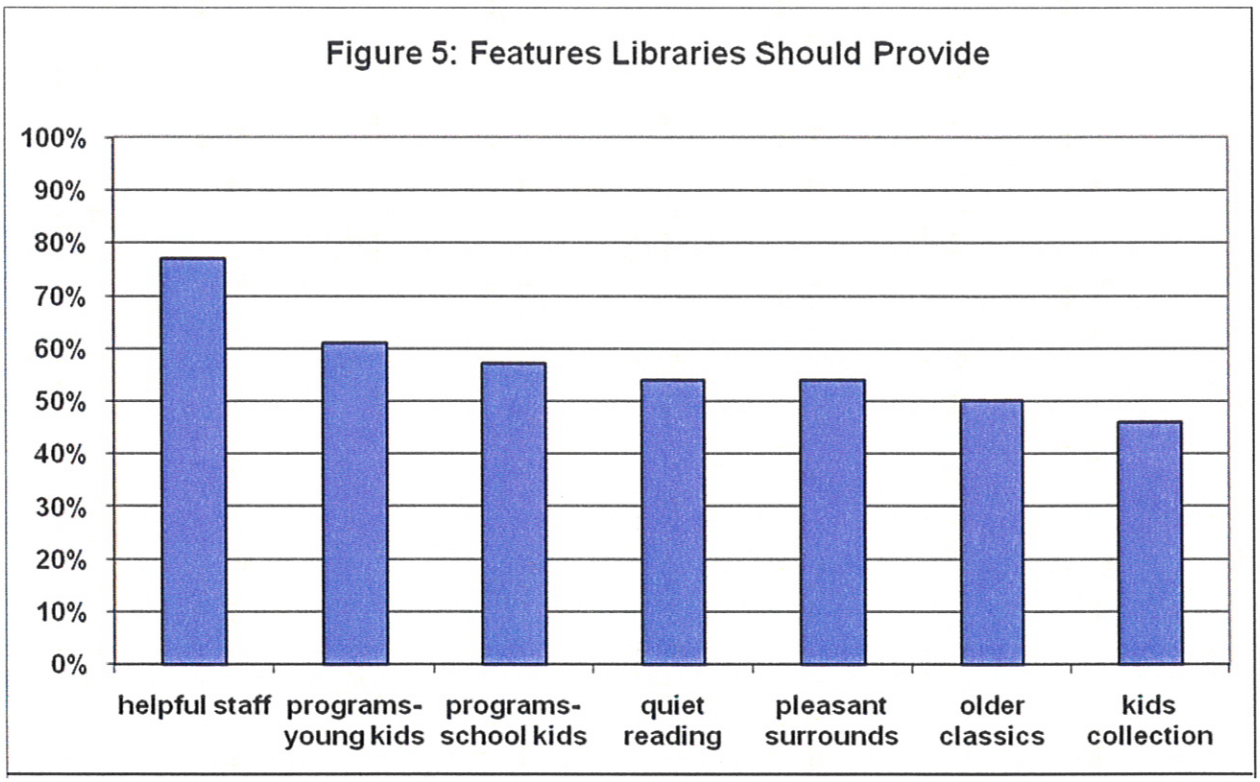
The next figure shows those features, services, or activities that between 20% and 40% of all patrons have as part of their library experience.



From Figure 4 you can see the importance to patrons of some of the more "modern" library uses, such as checking out CDs and DVDs and attending programs at the library. Although included are the very "traditional" uses of reading periodicals and doing work related research.

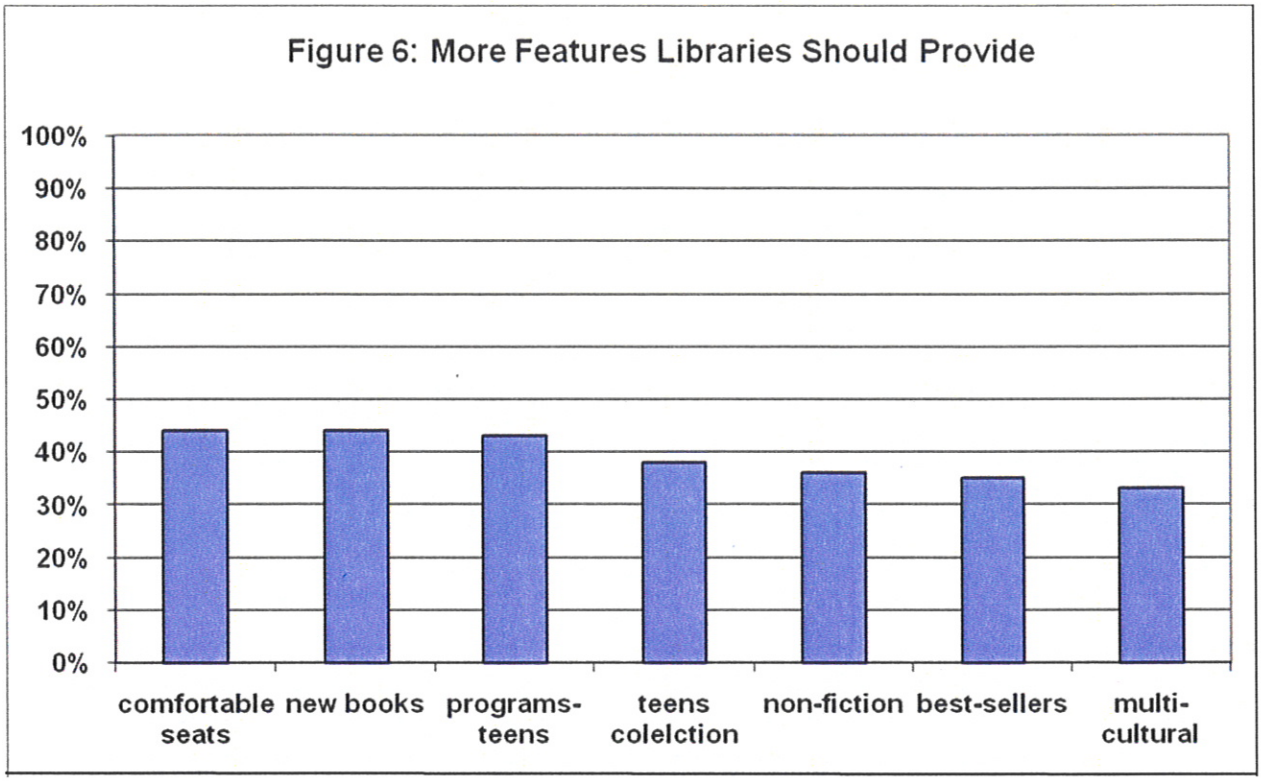
What Features are most Important for Libraries to Provide

Following the questions about the features library patrons use, respondents were asked to rate the importance of 23 different features that their library currently provides, or might add to their service. In all cases respondents were asked to think about the library they patronize the most. The following figure shows the top eight features or services ranked as "very important" by the largest numbers of respondents.



As you can see, the features people think are most important for libraries to provide are very similar to the features that they most commonly use today. Once again, the importance of a high quality staff, a collection of classic materials, space and services for children, and a quiet pleasant place to read with comfortable seating, all stand out.

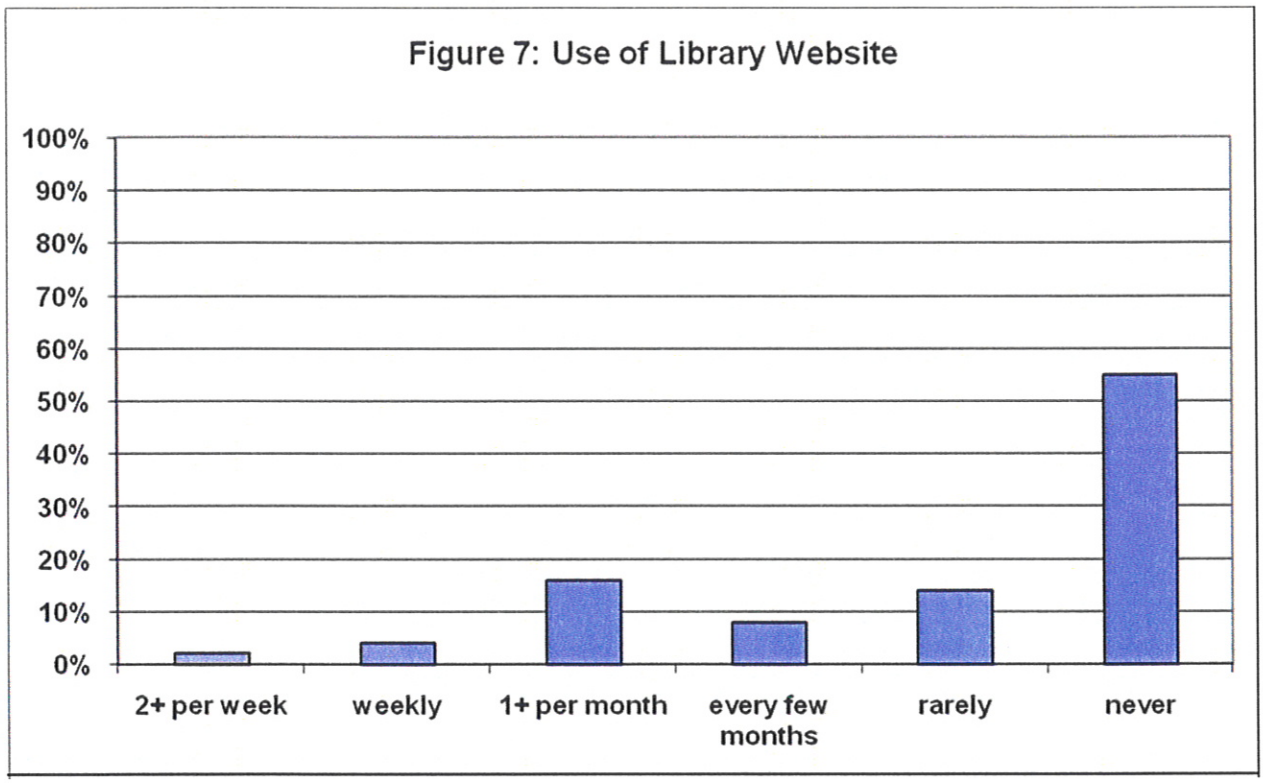
The next figure shows additional features that were also rated as very important by at least one-third of Alameda library patrons.



Leading this second set of features thought of as very important, are services for children and teens and collection characteristics such as non-fiction, best sellers, and new books. Following these items are broader community services, such as events information and multicultural exhibits. At the bottom of this list are computers with internet access. Here again the importance of traditional library services and services to children and teens stand out.

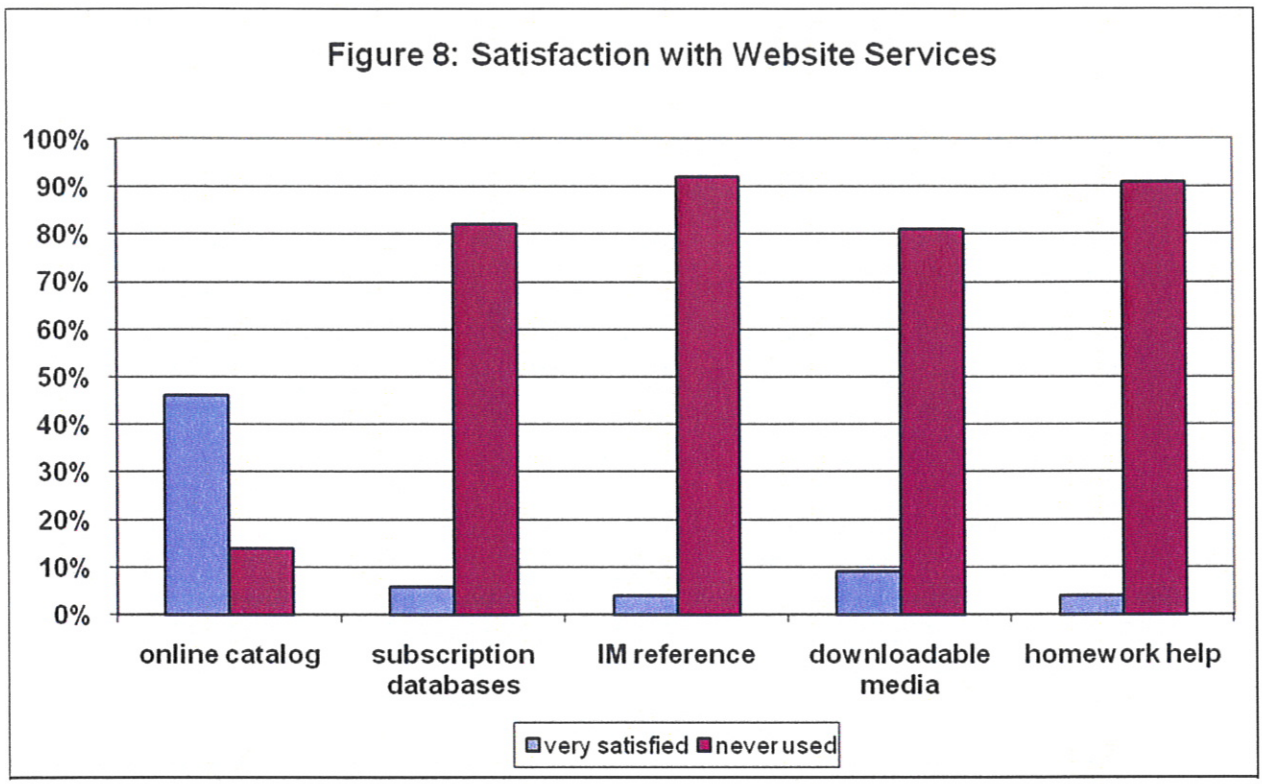
Use of the Library Website

All respondents were asked about their use of the Alameda Free Library website. Seven percent of respondents report that they or family members use the library website at least once a week. An additional 16% use the website at least once a month. However, over half the population (55%) has never used the website. See Figure 7 below for the complete use pattern for the library website.



In addition to the use pattern seen in Figure 7, it is interesting to note that almost all of the respondents (86%) who did not visit any of the Alameda libraries, also did not use the Alameda Free Library website. Clearly, the website is not acting as a substitute for the physical library and taking people away from visiting the library. See Banner Table 56 for more information.

Satisfaction with the Library Website
Respondents who used the library website were asked for their level of satisfaction with five different website services. Figure 8 below shows the percentage of website users who were very satisfied with each of the services, and the percentage of website users who had not used each of the five services.



As Figure 8 shows, with the exception of the on-line catalog, the on-line services were generally used by only a small number of people. For people who do use any of the services, about half of them were "very satisfied" and the other half were usually "somewhat satisfied." It was very rare for an on-line user to not be satisfied. The highest rate of dissatisfaction was 3% for the book and music download service.

Desire for Materials in Languages other than English
All respondents were asked if they would use library materials or services in languages other than English. Twenty-three percent of people responded that they would use materials in other languages. When asked which language that would like materials in, a large number of languages were mentioned. The most common language desired was Spanish, followed by Chinese and then by Vietnamese.

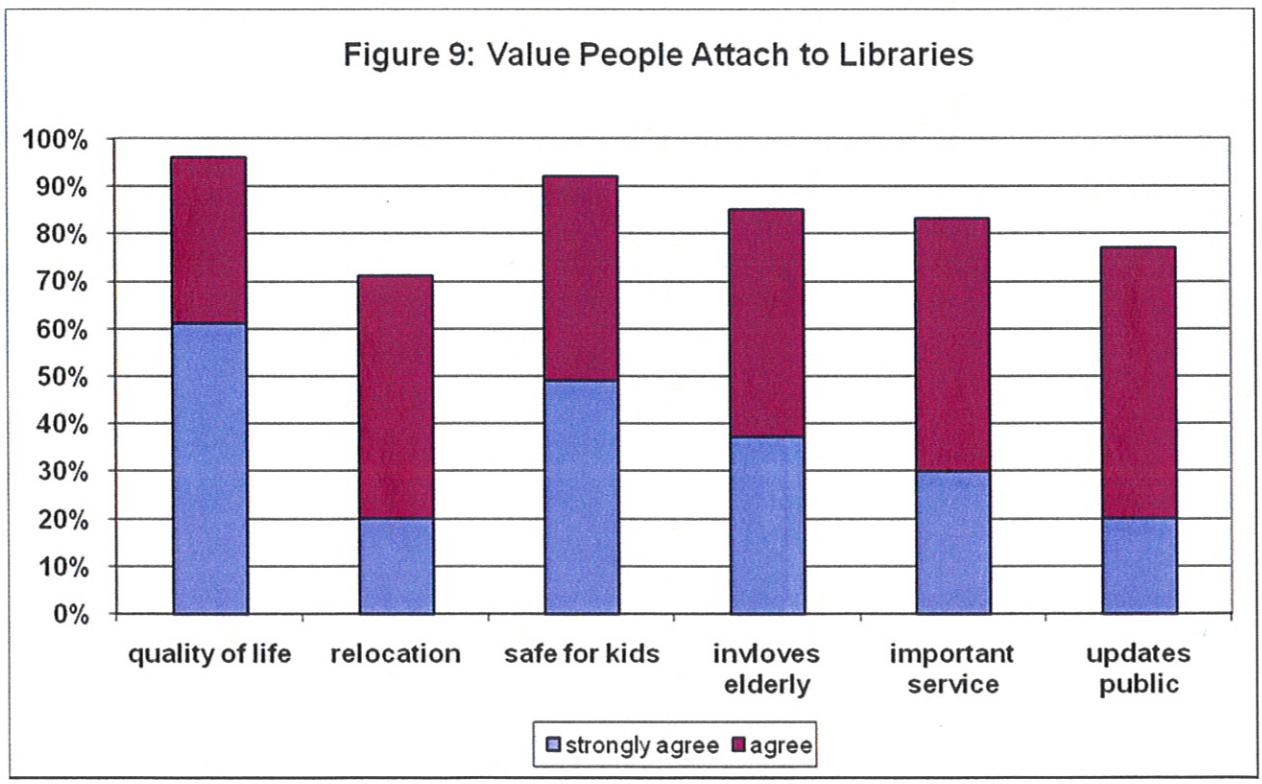
Interestingly, the desire for library materials in languages besides English does not play a factor in library use rates. Respondents who wanted different languages were primarily current library users (78%), and only 17% of the library non-users were interested in materials in languages other than English. See Banner Table 64 for more information.

Library Non-Users

In every community there are a fairly large percentage of residents who do not use the public library. In this survey an effort was made to learn something about the reasons people do not use the Alameda Free Library and also about their attitudes to values a library brings to a community. To begin, all library non-users were asked for the main reason they did not use the library. Although many reasons are mentioned by respondents, there were three main reasons for not using the library: using the internet at home to gather information; buying one's own books; and issues related to age, disability, or the difficulty of getting to the library. In addition, a small number of people mentioned that they had stopped using the library after their children were out of school.

The survey also asked non-library users if there was anything the library could do, or any service it might offer, that would encourage them to use the library. Unfortunately, almost all respondents said that there was really nothing the library could do that would make them more likely to go to the library. A very small number of people suggested specific classes and three people mentioned improved parking. See the Narrative section for the complete responses to these questions.

Library non-users were also asked for their level of agreement with six value statements commonly associated as benefits a library brings to a community. Figure 9 below shows the level of agreement library non-users had with these six values.



Interestingly, a large majority of library non-users are in agreement with all six of the library value statements, and in many cases in strong agreement. This result fits well

with the reasons people gave for not using the library, which were generally a statement of their personal situation and not a statement opposing libraries.

Library Website Non-Users

Respondents who did not use the library website were also asked why they did not use the website. Far and away the main reason given was that the respondent had not been aware that the Alameda Free Library had a website. In addition, a small number of people mentioned that they felt that other websites provided them with all the information they wanted.

As a final question to website non-users the survey asked them if there was any service or feature that could be added that would encourage them to use the website. Similarly to the response from non-users of the physical library to a similar question, respondents had almost no suggestions. In this case many also added that since they had not ever visited the website they really could not say anything about what it should have on it. See the Narrative section for the complete responses to these questions.

Special Tax for Alameda Libraries

At this point in the survey, respondents had been asked all the library specific questions and were now all respondents were asked if they would be willing to support a special tax for Alameda libraries, if the city budget could not afford the library services a majority of residents desired. A substantial majority of respondents, 71% said that they would be willing to vote for such a tax, while the opposition to a tax was only 19%. An additional 10% had either no opinion, did not know, or refused to answer.

The level of support for a special library district was almost uniformly high among each of the three geographic areas surveyed. The level of support from both the west end and the mid-island areas was 75%, while the level of support on the east end and Bay Farm Island was 68%. All of these support levels are essentially within the survey margin of error from the overall support level and should be considered to be identical.

Support levels did not vary based on which library people used, but they did vary depending on how often people used an Alameda library. Respondents who used the library at least a few times a year all had generally high levels of support for the library tax, on average 80%. Those who had either used the Alameda libraries "rarely" or "never" had a support level of 60%.

Support levels also varied significantly among different groups of people based on their backgrounds. Support for a special library tax went up with higher levels of educational attainment, from a low of 56% among those with only a high school education, up to 81% among those with graduate degrees. Similarly, support levels declined with age, going from a high of 85% among respondents ages 18-34, down to 58% among respondents over age 65. Support was also much higher among those with children under age 18 living in the home (80%), than it was among those without children at home (66%). Finally, gender had no effect on support levels. See Banner Table 66 for more information on the demographics of library tax supporters.

The most important point from this examination of tax support level is that the support for a special library tax is very high, above 70%. Even among groups such as those with a low level of education, the elderly, or those who do not use libraries, there is a majority of supporters, with support levels typically around 60%.

Conclusion

Residents of Alameda generally use their public libraries in a manner that is consistent with the traditional role of a library, that is, as a place for reading, research, and specific types of education. In addition to the features they personally use at their library, they think that a wide range of library services are important and should be provided.

The new main library is used by the majority of library patrons and seems to be highly regarded for both its collection and services, and for it aesthetics. A large number of people continue to use the smaller branch libraries, and enjoy having a library close to their residence.

Finally, a large majority of Alameda residents are supportive of the idea of a special library tax, if such a tax is necessary to provide library services people want.