

The Oregonian

New library locations narrowed to Kenton

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Three sites have emerged as finalists for a new North Portland library -- all in the Kenton neighborhood. But residents -- still stinging from the last time a new branch was promised -- remain wary.

Plans call for Kenton, seeing growth since the addition of the Interstate MAX line in 2004 and planning to redevelop its small business district, to get a branch sometime in 2009. The three possible sites are all within a three blocks of one another and a short walk to MAX and bus stops.

At two sites, both across a street from Kenton Park, the library would anchor a new mixed-use project; one is under construction. The third site is a building at 8226 N. Denver Ave. owned by Craig Osbeck, who operated Pastime Memorabilia there until five years ago.

County Commissioner Jeff Cogen says he plans to ask the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners in December to authorize negotiations with more than one party to ensure the best deal.

Meanwhile, he and Multnomah County library director Molly Raphael got an earful at a meeting this month, the last of three they have held since September to talk about where the new branch should go.

Inside the brightly lit Kenton Firehouse, 34 people seated in folding chairs listened as Raphael, Cogen and other county officials reported on plans to open a third library in North. The mood seemed almost sunny when someone asked about putting the library in the nearby Dancin' Bare strip club.

Everyone laughed, but frustration and skepticism bubbled beneath the surface.

Later, a resident called the county's last attempt to open a new branch in North in 2000 a "charade." Cogen, whose district encompasses North, thanked the resident for bringing "the 800-pound gorilla into the room."

For about 50 years, North Portland residents had four libraries about 1.5 miles apart from one another. But budget cuts closed the Lombard Library in 1975 and the University Park Library in 1981, leaving the peninsula with only the St. Johns Library and the North Portland library five miles away in the Humboldt neighborhood.

In early 2000, a group formed to lobby for a new library. The Board of Commissioners approved one late that year. In 2001, the board decided it should be at Columbia Villa, a housing project since replaced by New Columbia. But no library was built.

Meanwhile, new libraries opened in Sellwood, Hollywood and Hillsdale from 2002-04, replacing older branches.

"We felt like we were sold out by the commission and libraries the last time," Ray Guimary, 78, said at the meeting. "It all got pushed back, and nothing happened."

Neither Cogen nor Raphael was serving during the last round in North, and both pledged that this time would work out.

"We're doing our best not to repeat mistakes of the past," Cogen said at the meeting, returning to the theme several times. "There's no secret agenda."

The county began its search by contacting 600 real estate brokers, developers and landowners. No site on North Lombard, a main artery, was deemed suitable. The three final properties were winnowed from about 12 to 15, said **Mike Sublett, who manages the county's acquisitions and leasing.**

The county, with \$1.85 million set aside for startup costs, plans to lease a building of 5,000 to 7,500 square feet that's at least two miles from the existing libraries. Operating expenses will come from a levy voters passed last year.

The branch's specific features won't be decided until residents get a chance to offer "hopes and dreams," Raphael said.

The youngest member of the audience, Quinn McCurdy, 12 "but almost 13," had a suggestion: It would, he said, be "great to grab a book on the way home from school."