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Piedmont Avenue branch library in dire straits

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After weathering more than a 4,000-fold increase in rent, the fate of the Oakland Public Library Piedmont branch remains uncertain.

Options on the table: move to a permanent location somewhere near Piedmont Avenue; move to a temporary modular unit in a parking lot somewhere near Piedmont Avenue; close the library completely.

So far, no funds have been identified for the rent or purchase of another future building. But for the next year at least, the library will stay at its current location on 41st Street at Piedmont. The Oakland City Council approved the use of Measure Q funds to cover a year's rent to the tune of about \$50,000.

"Every day we hear, 'What's happening with the library?' "said children's librarian and acting branch manager Andrew Demcak. "It's frustrating because we don't have the answers, we don't know what's going to happen. But we do have a timeline, and we're going to run out of rent eventually."

Built in 1932, the library has long been a staple in the community. Many years ago, Citibank bought the building and agreed to rent the space to the library for \$1 a year. But last year, Citibank sold the property and the new owners are looking to collect \$4,250 a month in rent.

Staying and paying is really not an option, Demcak said. Though the Oakland Public Library system only takes about 3 cents to the dollar of the city's annual budget, a \$50,000-a-year lease is simply too much to ask in these economic times. After budget cutbacks took effect last year, the Piedmont branch reduced its staff from 14 to seven employees and shrunk its workweek by a full day.

On the upside, the imminent move may be a chance to modernize. The building doesn't have air conditioning, which means it must legally close whenever the indoor temperature gets too hot (which happens several times a year). It doesn't have public restrooms or drinking fountains and it isn't ADA-compliant, which can cause problems for wheelchair-bound library-goers. Library staff actually welcome a location change, provided they can still deliver the services the community has come to expect.

"I think this building would make a much better Italian bistro," Demcak said. "It's a beautiful building but not great for a library. Still, there are people who grew up in this library, who have been coming here for 70 years."

The branch is well-trafficked. It's the fourth busiest of 16 branches in the system, according to Oakland Public Library Associate Director Gerry Garzon. And business actually has been increasing. The summer of 2010 saw about 50 percent more new patrons per month than the summer of 2009 -- a figure Demcak attributes to the recession.

"It serves 11 schools around the area, it serves senior housing around the area," Garzon said. "People say, if we close it (patrons) can just go to Rockridge. But the reality is the children can't go to Rockridge; it's just too far."

The library is 1,700 square feet and holds 45,000 items including books, DVDs and games. The library also hosts toddler and preschool story time, a regular knitting group and neighborhood-watch meetings. If forced to move to a smaller modular unit, Demcak said the library will maintain its meeting space and more popular items while shrinking its less-used collections, making it the "Seven-11 of libraries."

Whatever happens, Demcak said he hopes the library can continue to stay relevant to the community.

"That old librarian 'shhhing' people with a bun on her head -- that doesn't exist any more," Demcak said. "This is where people come to drink coffee and watch 'Nurse Jackie.' We have PlayStation games and Xbox. We have free lawyers and free tax help from the League of Women Voters during tax time.