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## San Diego celebrates its long-awaited new library

*The first of 46 studies saying the city needed a new central library was done in 1971. At last, \$184.9 million later, here it is.*

September 28, 2013 | By Tony Perry

SAN DIEGO — There was a banner above Saturday's sneak-peak celebration for the city's new nine-story, ultramodern downtown central library: "The Story Begins. Discover Your Next Chapter."

That next chapter begins in full Monday when the \$184.9-million library at Park Boulevard and 11th Avenue, just east of Petco Park, opens to the public.

But the past chapters, more than four decades of them, have been rife with delay, frustration and yet a persistence at City Hall and among the city's bibliophiles.

"We are a big city," said acting Mayor Todd Gloria, who was emcee at the celebration. "We should do big things."

Perhaps, but doing big things doesn't usually happen overnight.

Gloria was born in 1978. The first study that concluded that the rapidly growing city needed a new central library was done in 1971, followed by 45 other studies that reached the same conclusion.

"San Diego is a very thorough city," said architect Rob Wellington Quigley.

Quigley said that when he moved to San Diego in the early 1970s, two projects were being discussed with great urgency: relocating the international airport away from downtown, and replacing the cramped central library.

The airport is still in the same location as when Quigley arrived.

And something always seemed to delay the library project: Other priorities (building a new baseball stadium, hosting the 1996 Republican National Convention), the need for more community meetings, rancorous disputes over locations and, always, the city's historical aversion to taxes.

It's not that the old downtown library, opened in 1954, was such a treasure that locals could not think of replacing it.

A squat three stories, with two basements, it was utilitarian and cost-effective, like many San Diego public structures of its era. Within a decade of opening, it was viewed as outdated, officials said.

"It was small and unattractive even by the standards of the 1950s," former Mayor Dick Murphy wrote in his autobiography "San Diego's Judge Mayor."

The library's roof leaked, Murphy noted. Water pipes burst, soaking books. Rooms that were supposed to be for the public were instead needed for storage.

"Simply put, the main library had become a civic embarrassment," Murphy wrote.

While Chicago, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Seattle and Los Angeles, among other places, built new central libraries or expanded old ones, San Diego seemed gripped by civic paralysis, although it did build numerous branch libraries in outlying neighborhoods.

In more recent years, the project was slowed by the city's loss of its once-sterling credit rating because of a scandal over a spiraling pension deficit. That made selling bonds virtually impossible.

Still, boosters pressed on with a novel funding plan that relied on grants, redevelopment funds, a deal with the school district, and private donations. One ironclad condition was set down by city officials: There would be no construction money from the city's general fund or city-issued bonds.

Qualcomm co-founder Irwin Jacobs and his wife, Joan, donated \$30 million; the late David Copley, publisher of the San Diego Union-Tribune, donated \$2 million; and more than a dozen families each donated more than \$1 million.

In all, about \$65 million for construction came from private donations — along with \$10 million for increased operating funds so the library does not become a drag on the city budget.

"This is unlike anything I've ever been through," said Jay Hill, chief executive of the San Diego Public Library Foundation, which did the fundraising. "We've had people who just refused to give up."

Quigley and the San Diego firm Tucker Sadler & Associates were chosen as architects. The general contractor was New York-based Turner Construction, which built the new Yankee Stadium and the world's tallest building in Dubai.

The nine-story library, with a three-story atrium, has a domed terrace, a sculpture garden, open stacks of books, dozens of computer terminals, an art gallery, an auditorium and a special-collections wing. Its collection of baseball books is said to be second only to the baseball Hall of Fame's in Cooperstown, N.Y.

A reading room on the eighth floor has a view of San Diego Bay. A charter high school takes up two floors. Boosters envision art shows, weddings, corporate confabs and political gatherings, among other things, in various spots in the library's 497,000 square feet of space.

The project remained slow and fraught with uncertainty almost until the July 2010 groundbreaking.

When Deborah Barrows was hired five years ago as the city's top librarian, she found the project at a standstill. With a financing deadline fast approaching, the city was in danger of losing a state grant.

A call went out to Jacobs and other donors. In all, about 3,000 provided donations large and small.

"If this hadn't been my city, I don't know if I'd have stuck with it for 17 years: start, stop, start, stop," said Quigley, whose firm had signed on in the mid-1990s.

At Saturday's hoopla, the long wait was spun as something to celebrate. The official theme: "A dream 30 years in the making."

Putting the process at 30 years shaves about a decade off the actual gestation. But such close attention to numbers seemed at odds with Saturday's exuberance about future possibilities mixed with relief that the long civic wait is finally over.

"San Diego is the eighth-largest city in the country," Barrows said, "and we're highly literate."

*tony.perry@latimes.com*

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*tony.perry@latimes.com*