

'Library on an island'

Parking spaces the city built for the College-Rolando branch are in contention as a developer plans a five-story building next door with housing and a hotel



A yearslong conflict over parking spaces at the College-Rolando Library has become complicated with adjacent building plans. (Eduardo Contreras U-T photos)





Restrictions in parking access have hindered users of the College-Rolando Library, just at a time when the library, a community resource and meeting spot, plans expanded hours. (Q)

“What the community’s concerned with is continuing to add substantial residential density and doing nothing to provide services,” said Julie Hamilton, a local land use attorney and College Area resident. “We’re not getting any parks. We’re not getting any libraries. We’re not getting anything to accommodate all the residential density that’s going into the College Area.”

As one of the only public meeting spaces in the College Area and Rolando neighborhoods, the library often hosts community group meetings, including ones where residents debate plans for the future of the neighborhood. Between that role and plans to expand its hours under [a new program](#), the library is poised to become a more valuable resource to a growing community.

“Our library offers more than books; it is our community hub,” said Jan Hintzman, a longtime Rolando resident and president of the Friends of the College-Rolando Library.

But she and other library advocates worry that changes next door will hinder access, as they have before.

Since the library opened in 2005, those 25 parking spots and an access driveway have been shared by the library and the adjacent property, then the longtime site of College Lutheran Church. Parking became a point of contention in 2016, when the church went up for sale and the shared driveway on Montezuma Road was chained off, blocking library patrons’ access to most spots.

Today, the church is gone, the chain is gone, and a parking agreement with the new owner of the property next door ensures access to those 25 parking spots.

Marcela Escobar-Eck, president and CEO of Atlantis Group — the land use and strategic planning consulting firm representing the property owner — said the developer is committed to honoring that agreement. “The 25 spaces will be made available to the library as per the agreement, and there’s absolutely no plans to change that agreement,” she said.

Library advocates, wary from what they say were the city's past botched access agreements, aren't so sure. They want the city to secure a new joint-use agreement for the library before it approves any building permit next door, and they're pushing for it whenever possible — including by packing a community council meeting last month to bring their concerns to Council President Sean Elo-Rivera.

“Six years later, we're about the same place as when we started, and we've been fighting so much,” Hintzman said. “But the window of opportunity to fix our problem is closing.”

Falling short of community expectations

The current library opened in 2005, replacing an older branch one-third the size — part of a citywide program to improve and expand dozens of libraries. But its parking woes predate even that.

In 1998, [the city had bought the land](#) to build the library from the church next door for \$485,000. Located at the corner of Montezuma Road and Reservoir Drive, the library would be nestled tightly between the church, homes and the busy thoroughfare.

Even then, the site's configuration left limited room for parking. So [in 2002, the city agreed to spend \\$156,000](#) to build parking on church property so it could share its access driveway and some of the spaces.

In total, the city built 131 parking spaces, including pavement, lighting and landscaping. Of those spots, 28 are on city property, and an additional 31 were agreed to be shared by the church and library, for a total of 59 spots available to library patrons. The other 72 spots were built for the church, but while the church was active, library patrons were free to use them as well.

The agreement also gave the city first rights to buy the property, in order “to provide a public benefit,” if it were ever sold.

For years, churchgoers and library patrons shared all 131 spots. But when the church closed and its property was put on the market in 2016, the city didn't buy it.

In June of that year, the church told the city it was ending the parking agreement early. In December, a chain appeared across the library driveway on Montezuma Road along with a sign that read “Private property — No public parking,” blocking off more than half of the parking lot.

Despite a banner on Montezuma Road that told patrons to enter via Mohawk Street, the library looked closed to most anyone driving by, Hintzman said. But it was still open, along with its 28 city-owned parking spots — that is, if people could find them.

With its computer lab, meeting room, seminar room and large children's area, the library had typically served more than 15,000 patrons each month, according to the Friends of the San Diego Public Library.

The abrupt driveway and parking closure led to an immediate drop in use, the group's then-president told the city's Planning Commission in [a February 2021 letter](#).

Within seven months, library circulation had dropped by two-thirds, patron visits had fallen by nearly a third, and children's programs were nearly halved, with only a third as many attendees, per the letter.

A new neighbor, a new deal

Current city officials aren't sure why the city didn't buy the church property in 2016.

Instead, the 1.8-acre parcel was sold in July 2017 for \$3.2 million to a developer with plans for a four-story, 125-room Hampton Inn hotel.

That November, the Planning Commission signed off on initiating a community plan amendment that would pave the way for a zoning change for the site, to allow a mix of large-scale, visitor-serving and residential uses. Planning commissioners agreed that in exchange, the developer should provide a public benefit, such as a parking agreement, and left that for city staff to carry out.

Meanwhile, the city agreed to a temporary access and parking license, and talks toward an official joint-use agreement began. The next month, as talks continued, the chain was removed from the library's driveway and the shuttered parking lot restored.

It wasn't until June 2019 that the city officially approved the property's rezoning and created an [overlay zone](#) to further restrict use and allow only for visitor accommodations of no more than 125 hotel rooms and 125 parking spaces.

Six months later, the city [reached a deal](#) with the developer on parking, agreeing to pay \$12,000 per year for 20 years to use the access driveway and 25 of the parking spaces it had built, with the option to extend for up to a decade.

City officials said a shared-parking pact made sense: The hotel's heaviest use of the spaces would be at night, while the library's would be during the day.

The [deal](#) allows "non-exclusive rights" to the shared parking spots during the library's "normal" operating days and hours — meaning the library cannot put up signs saying "library parking only," and available parking is not guaranteed. It also allows closure during construction.

Community leaders say the agreement is shaky at best and altogether inadequate. Hintzman worries it could be easily revoked. "The city has no real power," she said. "That is evident in the agreement."

She points to the library branch's [new program to stay open late](#), unstaffed, for library cardholders starting next month. The program will begin at the College-Rolando branch as a pilot during evening hours. She worries this could unravel the hours-based trade-off the parking pact hinges on.

Jim Jennings, president of both the College Area community council and the planning board, once had hopes for the library to become a larger resource center for the community. “But now, it’s bupkis,” he said. “I hope it’s not lost.”

‘We’re feeling a bit abandoned’

Library advocates now worry the parking may face a threat greater than a shaky deal.

The developer of the project next door has updated its plans for a hotel, adding another story and a 57-unit apartment complex to the building. No retail component is planned.

The added residential component is something library advocates say would surely bring far more traffic and a greater need for parking for non-library purposes.

In March 2021, [the Planning Commission voted](#) to initiate another community plan amendment to remove the overlay zone and allow residential, while commissioners again called on the city to ensure the parking agreement would protect library access.

Library advocates say they got no updates — until last month, when they learned the developer had recently applied for a building permit for a five-story development to include not just the hotel but also housing, with 57 apartments.

Six to nine of those homes will be for residents with very low incomes, no more than \$45,550 for a one-person household. The others will be market-rate.

In addition to the 25 parking spots shared with the library, the project includes plans for 170 more. During construction, the existing shared lot may close temporarily, Escobar-Eck said.

City officials confirmed that the project is currently under review by the Development Services Department staff.

The property is not zoned for residential, but the city’s density bonus program can allow developers to get around that by including housing that the city deems affordable. By adding the rent-restricted apartments, developers can often increase the size and scope of projects.

In this case, the applicant is proposing the low-income units in exchange for the city waiving the current zone overlay’s restriction barring a residential component, city staff confirmed.

Hintzman says she and other community group leaders are already scrambling to get the city or developer to present the plans to the community. “It’s happening fast, and we don’t have information,” she said. “We’re feeling a bit abandoned.”

City staff say they will work with the developer to protect the library’s parking. “We have had discussions with the developer, and they have stated they are open to any and all suggestions to make sure the shared parking is available for library patrons,” said library director Misty Jones.

Calling on city leaders for help

Library advocates have suggestions of their own. They are calling on the city to secure a new joint-use agreement prior to approving a building permit, and they want it to include parking access during construction, new enforcement measures and — most importantly — permanent, irrevocable access to parking, such as through an easement or deed restriction.

About 75 people packed into a gathering last month of the Rolando Community Council — about twice its usual size, president Doug Lister said — with Elo-Rivera, the area's council member, in attendance. They expressed frustration at the city's past decisions regarding the library, fears of what the future might hold for it, and determination to ensure their neighborhood wasn't forgotten.

“We love this neighborhood, we love the people here — but I'm really concerned about losing the resources in this neighborhood,” said Rolando resident Elena Mulvaney, who had her two young daughters in tow. “We matter.”

“We're going to end up with a library on an island,” said Sharlene Thompson, whose 94-year-old mother has been a library volunteer since 1998, then at the old College Heights Library.

“We should have done a better job of negotiating (the agreement), because I think we're up against it now,” Lister added.

Elo-Rivera said his office would work with the property owner to ensure the parking agreement is upheld.

He said his office is also looking into creating time-limited parking regulations on nearby streets and stepping up enforcement.

Library advocates say that won't be enough, as street parking on Reservoir Drive is monopolized by residents' cars and Montezuma Road has no street parking at all.

“I don't think he's in touch with the reality of the neighborhood,” said Jennings.

At the library, that reality was on display one recent Monday evening.

The parking lot was nearly filled just after 5 p.m., with all but five of the 59 available spots occupied, while a fence surrounded the remaining 72 spaces, which sat unused. Inside, the library was bustling.

Yolanda Ruiz-Punner was there with her two sons, whom she brings to the library weekly — sometimes before school, sometimes after soccer practice — for new books.

At least once a month, she's unable to find parking. “I have to find time to come back later that week, since there's really no other place to park nearby.”

Down the hall working in the computer lab is 67-year-old Don Wultz. With no computer at home, he comes to the library to check his email and read the news.

“There’s times even the handicapped spaces are all full,” Wultz said. “Then you look across the parking lot and see all those empty spots sitting behind the chain-linked fence and wonder why.”

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