

Libraries offer haven in tough economic times

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As the economy continues its nose dive, guys like Chris Estrella are becoming the new faces of library patrons. The barrel-chested airplane mechanic wasn't doing homework or checking out videos at the Union City Library on Monday, he was looking for work.

"Yeah, the library is a big help," said Estrella, whose laptop broke around the same time last year that he got laid off from a job at Oakland International Airport. "It's kind of hard to spend a lot of money on a computer right now."

For libraries, nothing brings in patrons like a recession.

Say what you want about the selection or the wait time, when money gets tight, the library beats the pants off of Netflix, Barnes & Noble, AT&T and Comcast.

Sure enough, circulation is up at libraries across southern Alameda County, and the rise started last fall — the same time the stock market tumbled and layoffs started piling up. Last August, libraries in Fremont, Newark and Union City actually reported lower circulation than in August of 2007. But by November, circulation rates far outpaced those of the previous year.



The Technology Center at the main branch of the main branch of the Hayward Library is packed with people using the computers last week. (ANDA CHU/STAFF)

Fremont's main library reported a circulation of 125,994 items in November compared with 121,206 items the previous November. In Newark, circulation increased from 22,421 to 24,135 and in Union City it increased from 34,116 to 36,675 comparing the same months.

In Hayward, circulation was up from 74,992 in November 2007 to 77,749 last November.

Fremont's circulation increased as the year progressed. The city's libraries reported that 765,474 items were checked out from July through December of 2008, compared with 726,299 during the first six months of the year — a 5.4 percent increase.

As circulation has jumped, so has computer usage.

All of the terminals at Union City's only library were busy Monday evening, and that frequently has become the norm during peak hours in Fremont as well, said Sallie Pine, the library's reference manager.

"We used to be able to freely give people extra time without worrying about it too much," she said. "Now we can't."

The biggest change in recent months has been the increase in job seekers, Pine said.

The most heavily used databases are those that have practice tests and study guides for civil service jobs, she said. Attendance is also up for job-search workshops and more people are putting holds on job guides and career books.

Job searchers are helping fuel the increase in Internet usage in Hayward, said Library Director Lisa Rosenblum.

"Jobs are online, and you need to have an e-mail address to search for one," she said.

Estrella has noticed the change in Union City during the past year, when he started coming to the library three days a week looking for work. "If you walk around, you see most people are on job sites," he said.

Job programs aren't the only ones that have spiked, Rosenblum said.

Hayward librarians have seen nearly three times as many people attending adult-oriented programs such as computer classes, ESL classes and book groups than in 2007. Children's programs have increased by 68 percent.

If there's a downside of increased patronage, it's that funding for libraries isn't tied to circulation. And with less money to go around, libraries, many of which have cut back on hours during the past decade, could wind up offering less at a time when demand is peaking, Pine said.

"We don't have enough to give people what they need," he said.