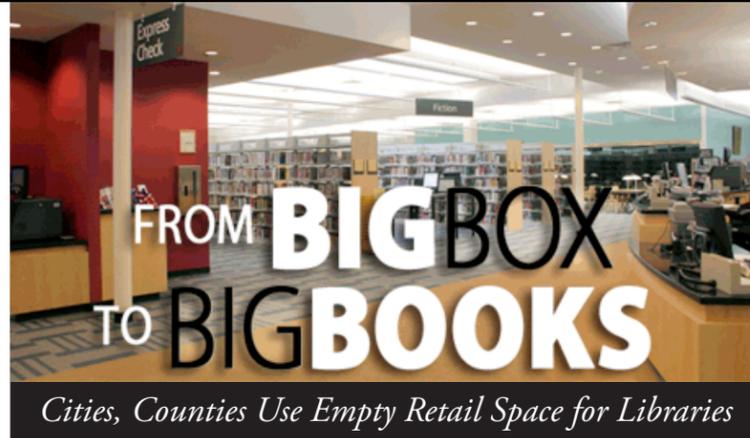


FISCAL NOTES

A Review of the Texas Economy from the Office of Susan Combs, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts



By Constance Matheny and Bruce Wright

In the midst of the digital revolution, Texas's public libraries are busier than ever, offering their communities access to computers with high-speed connectivity as well as educational, employment and entertainment resources in electronic and print formats.

With the rapid growth of the Texas population and the economic downturn, however, many cash-strapped public libraries cannot afford the new construction and expansion they need to serve their communities adequately. But some communities have found novel ways to take advantage of empty retail spaces to create new and inviting information centers.

Reusing existing space in this way has a number of advantages. According to Meyer Scherer and Rockcastle (MS&R) architect Jack Poling, whose firm has worked on such conversions, acquiring an empty "big box" store is generally less expensive than new construction, and the sites offer ample parking. The open layout and high ceilings also work well for a library's purposes, as do the reinforced slab floors.

This adaptive reuse is a great strategy for bringing new life to an area with empty storefronts, while stretching taxpayer dollars.

In Denton, a Grocery Store Becomes a Library

In 2003, MS&R helped turn a 32,801-square-foot Food Lion grocery store into the elegant Denton Public Library (DPL) North Branch. By using the existing structure, "I'd guess that the [construction] savings were in the neighborhood of \$10 per square foot," Poling says.

The \$5.6 million project also used the space to create a Friends of the Library bookstore, meeting rooms and reading areas with 68 public computers. Floor-to-ceiling windows replaced the store's old loading dock doors, and the area now functions as a quiet study zone. A distance learning center houses 21 training computers available to the public. Area businesses can rent the space and offer videoconferencing to communicate and train their employees.

The site, moreover, is near both an elementary and a middle school, allowing the North Branch to supplement the school libraries and provide a great place for children and teens to study or participate in youth programs after school.

"The North Branch Library is both beautiful and functional," says Kimberly Wells, the North Branch library manager. "Many would think of a grocery space as being a dark and stuffy space but skylights and glass walls have made the branch light and open. Customers mention how thrilled they are that the city used an empty retail space that would have been an eyesore in their neighborhood and turned it into a vibrant and welcoming library."

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In 2003, the Food Lion in Denton was transformed into an elegant Denton Public Library.





In McAllen, a Repurposed Walmart

McAllen Public Library (MPL) renovated a former Walmart as the nation's largest single-story library. The city of McAllen purchased the abandoned store, built in 1980, for \$5 million and spent another \$21 million on the project. MS&R, veteran of the Denton project, partnered with McAllen-based Boultinghouse Simpson Architects (BSA) to create the library, with MS&R handling the interior design and BSA handling the exterior and overseeing construction.

According to BSA partner Bob Simpson, using the existing Walmart building saved McAllen about \$70 a square foot, a not inconsiderable amount given the former store's 124,500 square feet of space.

The new MPL opened in December 2011, replacing an overcrowded, 61-year-old facility. The new property is three times as large as the old building, and contains 16 meeting rooms, 14 study rooms, 233 staff and public computer stations, a café, a "teen room" area, auditorium, used bookstore and art gallery. The new library also has 345 parking spaces even after adding landscaping, outdoor gathering spaces and several fountains. In June 2012, the International Interior Design Association named the library Best of Category for public libraries of more than 30,000 square feet.

"It's a bright and vibrant library serving a bright, vibrant community," says Dauna Campbell, the library's reference services supervisor. "This is the library of the future. It's high-tech and ever-evolving."

San Angelo Adapts a Department Store

In 2005, the overcrowded Tom Green County Library (TGCL) began to plan for an expansion or relocation. The county and the city of San Angelo agreed to use a former Hemphill-Wells department store for the new library. The city owned the three-story building, built in 1972 and vacant since January 1986. Tom Green County leased the Hemphill-Wells building from the city for a 99-year term at \$1 a year, with the proviso that some Tom Green County offices could move into the old library's space. After asbestos abatement, renovations on the building began in October 2008.

The TGCL's Stephens Central Library opened on April 4, 2011 with much excitement from the community. San Angelo-area citizens had raised \$17.5 million in private funds and grants to pay for most of the renovation and ongoing costs through the Beacon to the Future Committee, chaired by Steve and Pollyanna Stephens. The committee received more than a thousand individual contributions, including more than 140 contributions of \$10,000 or more, from families, businesses, organizations and foundations. Only \$500,000 in local tax revenues were used in the development of this project.



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Main Location



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The library's ground-floor lobby offers a gallery of local artwork and a café that features live music on Friday and Saturday nights. The building is designed so that the café and an auditorium on the third floor can operate independently of the library. The designers conserved water with native planting around the building and motion-sensor plumbing fixtures. On November 3, 2011, the Stephens Central Library won the Texas Downtown Association's 2011 President's Award for Best Rehabilitation and Renovation.

Librarian of Congress Dr. James Billington visited the new library on April 17, 2011. In a speech addressed to large donors, he said, "What was done in San Angelo is a stunning example of ongoing American frontier traditions — of putting a library as a unifying force at the heart of a community that includes many different ethnicities, types of business, places of worship and ways of learning. They are all drawn together into one central repository that is their shared entry point into our knowledge-based democracy."

"The new Stephens Central Library has been an economic 'shot in the arm' for downtown San Angelo," says Matt Lewis, chief executive officer of the San Angelo Area Foundation. "This investment is a classic example of the power of a creative reutilization of an existing vacant building by a governmental entity, which in turn encourages both new private and public investments in downtown." **FN**

