# Santa Monica Public Library
# Community Mapping
# Findings and Insights Report

# March 2026

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## I. Executive Summary

In the summer of 2025, the Santa Monica Public Library (SMPL) launched a Community Mapping Initiative to better understand community needs, values, and experiences and to inform the development of the Library's strategic priorities. The initiative occurred during a period of transition marked by post-pandemic shifts in library use, evolving expectations for public space, and broader citywide realignment and fiscal constraints.

The Library engaged the community through 1,147 survey responses, four formal Community Conversations, seven targeted focus group discussions, and more than 10 pop-up outreach events held across library locations and community settings.

Participants included residents, families, youth, tweens, teens, older adults, parents and caregivers, civic leaders, and frequent library users from across Santa Monica and the greater Los Angeles area. In parallel, the Library collected internal staff input, which was analyzed separately and not included in the community findings summarized here.

Across engagement methods, community members consistently described the Library as a trusted civic institution and valued public space that supports learning, connection, and belonging. At the same time, participants identified clear areas for improvement. These include expanded and more equitable access to hours, improved cleanliness and safety, renewed investment in youth and family services, greater cultural and linguistic representation, enhanced digital literacy support, and clearer communication about programs and services.

The findings presented in this report synthesize community input. They provide a data-informed foundation for strategic decision-making related to access, service design, facilities, programming, equity, and communication. The report and analysis complete the second phase of Community Mapping, "Phase 2: Assessment."


## II. Background and Purpose

The Community Mapping Initiative was launched to help SMPL better align its services, spaces, and priorities with the needs of the community it serves. Following the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid ongoing organizational and fiscal changes, the Library sought to engage directly with the community to understand how expectations of the Library have changed and where investments are most needed.

The goals of the initiative were to:

- Understand what community members value most about the Library today
- Identify barriers that limit access or participation

- Learn how different communities and distinct neighborhoods experience library services
- Clarify community priorities for the future of SMPL

The engagement process was designed by library staff and informed by community-centered planning practices, including structured conversation frameworks and targeted outreach to populations whose voices are often underrepresented in traditional surveys. The intent was not only to gather feedback, but to establish a shared understanding that can guide strategic planning and resource allocation over the next several years.

## III. Engagement Process

SMPL staff designed a multi-modal, place-based, and intergenerational approach to reach residents across neighborhoods, age groups, and lived experiences. Engagement activities combined quantitative and qualitative methods to capture both breadth and depth of input.

### A. Quantitative Engagement

Community Mapping Survey (sample size = 1,147)

The survey was offered online and in-person, in English and Spanish. It collected information on the following:

- Demographics and residency
- Library use patterns
- Satisfaction with collections, programs, safety, and digital resources
- Preferences related to hours, services, and communication

The survey provides a baseline understanding of community trends and areas of alignment or concern.

### B. Community Conversations (Four Total)

SMPL conducted four formal Community Conversations, each facilitated using a consistent question framework focused on values, experiences, and aspirations:

- Community Leaders Conversation – Main Library (July 9, 2025)
- Community Conversation – Montana Branch (August 12, 2025)
- Community Conversation – Main Library (September 27, 2025)
- Community Conversation – Pico Branch (September 27, 2025)

These conversations created space for participants to reflect collectively on the Library's role in their community and to discuss priorities in greater depth than the survey alone allowed.

## C. Targeted Focus Groups (Seven Total)

To supplement survey data and ensure broader representation, SMPL convened seven targeted focus groups:

- Familias Latinas Unidas (FLU) – Pico Branch (October 24, 2025)
- Virginia Avenue Park tweens and teens – Pico Branch (November 6, 2025)
- Virginia Avenue Park Advisory Board – Pico Branch (September 15, 2025)
- Neighborhood group leaders – Fairview Branch (September 17, 2025)
- Computer class participants – Main Library (March 12 and April 9, 2025)
- YMCA community partners – Santa Monica Family YMCA (October 8, 2025)
- Santa Monica Regional Consortium participants – Main Library (October 20, 2025)

These groups provided insight into language access, cultural relevance, youth needs, digital literacy, and neighborhood-specific concerns.

## D. Pop-Up Outreach (10+ Engagements)

Library staff conducted more than 10 pop-up outreach activities at locations and events including:

- Toddler Tuesdays story times at multiple library locations
- Arts and Literacy Festival at Virginia Avenue Park
- Free Comic Book Day at Main Library
- Farmers Market at Virginia Avenue Park
- Branch-front tabling and community gatherings
- State of the City at Reed Park
- National Night Out at City Hall

These brief, informal interactions captured input from community members who may not have participated in longer meetings or surveys.

## E. Semi-Quantitative Engagement Tools

Engagement Boards (dot-voting) were placed at all five library locations and at select events to identify high-level priorities related to programs, spaces, and services. These tools provided quick visual feedback that reinforced patterns seen in survey and conversation data.

**F. Visual Documentation**

Four graphic recordings were created during select community conversations to visually summarize themes and priorities expressed by participants.

**IV. Who We Heard From**

The Community Mapping Initiative reached a broad cross-section of Santa Monica residents and library users through multiple engagement methods. While the survey captured a large sample of current library users, targeted conversations and outreach helped ensure that additional perspectives—particularly from families, youth, and multilingual communities—were included.

**A. Survey Respondents**

Survey respondents were predominantly active library users and Santa Monica residents. Key characteristics include the following:

- Residency: Approximately 79% of respondents reported living in Santa Monica.
- Library Use: The vast majority (96%) reported holding a library card, and most indicated visiting the Library at least monthly.
- Age: Respondents skewed toward older adults, with the largest groups identifying as ages 35–64 and 65+. Younger residents were underrepresented in the survey.
- Race and Ethnicity: A majority of respondents identified as White, followed by Asian, Latino, Black, and multiracial respondents. This distribution reflects known participation patterns in voluntary surveys but does not fully represent the diversity of Santa Monica.

These characteristics indicate that the survey results are most reflective of frequent library users, White, and older adults. Recognizing this limitation, the Library supplemented survey data with targeted qualitative engagement.

**B. Community Conversation Participants**

SMPL staff facilitated four community conversations—open, guided discussions where all members of the public were invited to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences about the Library. Participants in the four community conversations included the following:

- Residents from different neighborhoods and housing types
- Parents and caregivers
- Older adults

- Civic and neighborhood leaders
- Longtime residents and newer community members

These conversations provided space for participants to reflect collectively on shared values, lived experiences, and priorities for the Library's future.

## C. Focus Group Participants

Targeted focus groups were convened to elevate perspectives that might not be fully captured through the survey alone. These groups included the following:

- Hispanic/Latino parents and caregivers
- Middle school students
- Civic and neighborhood leaders
- Older adults participating in digital literacy programs
- Older adult service providers
- Students, adults, and other community members

These groups contributed important insights related to language access, cultural representation, youth engagement, digital literacy, and neighborhood-specific needs.

## D. Pop-Up Outreach Participants

Pop-up outreach activities engaged residents in informal settings, including families with young children, multilingual households, teens, and community members attending festivals, story times, and market events. These interactions helped capture perspectives from individuals who may not attend formal meetings or complete surveys.

## V. Survey Findings: Quantitative Highlights

The Community Mapping Survey provides a high-level view of community perceptions and priorities. The following highlights summarize the most relevant findings for strategic planning.

## A. Overall Satisfaction

Respondents reported generally high satisfaction with core library services:

- Collections: Approximately 88% of respondents expressed positive satisfaction.
- Digital Resources: Approximately 81% reported positive satisfaction.
- Adult Programming: Approximately 65% expressed positive satisfaction.
- Youth Programming: Approximately 67% expressed positive satisfaction.

These results suggest that collections and digital offerings are strengths, while programming presents opportunities for growth.

**B. Safety Perceptions**

Safety perceptions varied by location and context:

- Approximately 71% of respondents reported feeling safe in library spaces.
- Approximately 9.7% reported not feeling safe.
- An additional 18.9% reported neutral responses, often indicating that safety depends on time of day or location.

Comments associated with safety concerns were most frequently tied to the Main Library, with fewer concerns noted at neighborhood branches.

**C. Access and Hours**

Survey responses indicated moderate satisfaction with the then-current hours:

- Approximately 34% reported being satisfied with existing hours.
- Approximately 25% expressed interest in later weekday and weekend hours.

These findings align with qualitative feedback emphasizing the importance of access for working families, students, and youth.

**D. Program Interests**

Respondents expressed interest in a range of program types, including the following:

- Arts and cultural programs
- Author talks and lectures
- Youth and family programming
- Technology and digital literacy classes

Interest patterns varied by age group, reinforcing the need for varied programming.

**E. Communication and Awareness**

Respondents reported relying primarily on these communication tools:

- Library website
- In-library signage
- Email newsletters

Open-ended responses frequently cited difficulty finding timely or complete information about events and programs, suggesting opportunities to improve communication and user experience.

## VI. Community Findings: Qualitative Themes

Qualitative input from community conversations, focus groups, pop-up outreach, engagement boards, and open-ended survey responses revealed a set of consistent themes across neighborhoods and demographic groups. While priorities vary by location and population, the themes below reflect broad areas of alignment.

### A. Shared Community Values

Across all engagement methods, participants expressed a common set of values that shape how they view the Library and what they expect from it:

- Access: the ability to use library services regardless of schedule, language, age, or circumstance
- Belonging and Welcome: feeling comfortable, respected, and included in library spaces
- Clean and Safe: environments that are orderly, well-maintained, and predictable
- Learning and Literacy: opportunities for lifelong learning across ages and formats
- Community Connection: libraries as places to gather, socialize, and build relationships
- Representation and Cultural Relevance: collections, programs, and staff that reflect the community's diversity

These values form the foundation of how community members define an "ideal library."

### B. The Ideal Library (Community Vision)

When asked to describe their ideal library, community members emphasized both physical environment and service experience. Common elements include the following:

- Clean, bright, well-maintained spaces
- A welcoming atmosphere with visible, approachable staff
- Distinct zones for different needs (quiet study, youth, tweens, teens, social and collaborative areas)
- Comfortable seating and flexible layouts
- Strong, up-to-date collections, including multilingual and culturally relevant materials
- Programs that support learning, creativity, and social connection
- Integration with outdoor spaces for events, reading, and informal gathering

Participants often described the Library as a "third place"—a public space distinct from home, work, or school. These spaces are where people of all ages can spend time productively and comfortably.

## C. Access and Hours

Access was one of the most frequently raised issues across qualitative engagement.

Here is what community members said:

- Current hours do not align with the schedules of working adults, families, students, and youth.
- Morning programming can be difficult for caregivers who work.
- Limited staffed hours at some neighborhood branches restrict use.
- Self-service access is appreciated by some but not viewed as a full substitute for staffed service.

Access is not only about physical proximity but also about time, staffing, and predictability. Expanded evening and weekend hours were commonly cited as a priority for increasing equitable use.

## D. Clean and Safe

Cleanliness and safety emerged as closely connected concerns.

Below are the emergent themes:

- Cleanliness, lighting, and maintenance strongly influence whether people feel safe.
- Restrooms, entrances, and exterior areas were frequently mentioned, particularly at the Main Library.
- Disruptive behavior can discourage use, especially for older adults and families with children.
- Many community members want safety measures that are visible, consistent, and compassionate.

Focus group participants further described safety as closely tied to physical comfort, accessibility, and predictability of space, rather than solely the presence of enforcement or security measures. Participants emphasized the importance of adequate seating for different bodies and mobility needs, clean and well-maintained restrooms, clear lighting, and the ability to understand how library spaces are intended to be used. For many participants, feeling safe meant feeling physically comfortable, respected, and able to remain in the space without uncertainty.

## E. Youth, Teen, and Family Services

Youth and family needs were emphasized across multiple engagement formats.

Key themes include:

- Concern that youth programming has decreased in recent years.
- Desire for dedicated tween and teen spaces designed for middle and high school-aged users.
- Strong interest in collections such as manga, anime, and graphic novels.
- Requests for tutoring, homework help, and academic support.
- Interest in social and creative programs (gaming, movie nights, festivals, content creation).

Parents and caregivers emphasized the importance of consistent, predictable programming that supports literacy and positive social development. In addition to youth- and family-specific services, some focus group participants emphasized the value of intergenerational programming and shared spaces.

Participants described the Library as one of the few remaining public spaces where people of different ages can learn, create, and socialize together. Suggested activities included shared learning opportunities such as crafts, sewing, mending workshops, and informal mentoring, which participants viewed as ways to strengthen community connection across generations.

## F. Cultural Representation and Language Access

Cultural relevance and linguistic accessibility were especially prominent in engagement with Hispanic/Latino families and Pico Branch/Virginia Avenue Park community members.

Here is what community members said:

- More Spanish-language programs and services are needed.
- Bilingual staff help families feel welcome and comfortable asking questions.
- Collections should reflect diverse cultures, histories, and lived experiences.
- Programs that celebrate culture—such as author talks, storytelling, and history-focused workshops—build belonging.

Cultural representation is not a niche interest but a core component of inclusive service delivery.

## G. Technology, Digital Literacy, and Information Skills

Technology support emerged as a cross-generational need.

Community input highlighted the following needs:

- Demand for beginner-level technology classes, especially for older adults.
- Interest in Spanish-language technology instruction.

- Youth interest in creative technology, including filmmaking and digital storytelling.
- Concern about misinformation and a desire for classes that teach how to evaluate online information.

Digital literacy is increasingly viewed as an essential public service, with the Library positioned as a trusted provider.

## H. Communication and Awareness

Many participants expressed appreciation for library offerings but noted challenges in finding information.

Common themes included:

- Difficulty locating accurate or up-to-date event information.
- Desire for a clearer, easier-to-navigate online event calendar.
- Need for improved signage and promotion within library buildings.

In addition, focus group participants also expressed a desire for greater transparency about how the Library operates, including how decisions are made about hours, collections, holds, and available services. Participants noted that understanding the rationale behind library decisions helps build trust and manage expectations. In addition, participants requested clearer communication about behavioral expectations within library spaces—such as where quiet study, conversation, or group activity is appropriate—viewing predictability as an important factor in comfort and shared use.


## VII. Place-Based Insights

While many themes were shared citywide, community input varied by location and population group.

### A. Pico Branch / Virginia Avenue Park Area

- Strong emphasis on cultural relevance, bilingual service, and Spanish-language programming.
- Pico Branch viewed as a neighborhood hub connected to the park and Farmers Market.
- High interest in tutoring, youth programs, and family-oriented events.
- Strong engagement from Hispanic/Latino parents and youth.

### B. Main Library

- Highest concentration of cleanliness and safety concerns.
- Desire for extended hours and consistent programming.

- Interest in lectures, cultural programs, and technology classes.
- Importance of keeping the Library clean to maintain trust.

## C. Montana Branch

- Residents value a calm, predictable environment and curated collections.
- Continued interest in intergenerational programming and community events.
- Less emphasis on safety concerns compared to Main.

## D. Fairview and Ocean Park Branches

- Mixed reactions to self-service access.
- Some residents appreciate flexibility; others feel uncomfortable or unsafe without visible library staff.
- Desire for some level of staffed service, even if limited.

## VIII. Alignment and Tensions Across Community Input

Community input revealed a high degree of alignment around the Library's value and role, alongside a smaller number of tensions that reflect competing needs, resource constraints, or differing experiences across locations.

### A. Areas of Strong Alignment

Across survey responses, community conversations, focus groups, and pop-up engagement, residents consistently agreed on several core points:

- **The Library is essential civic infrastructure.**
  Participants across neighborhoods and age groups described the Library as a trusted public institution that supports learning, connection, and well-being.
- **Cleanliness, safety, and access are foundational.**
  These were not framed as optional enhancements but as baseline conditions for participation.
- **Youth and family services matter deeply.**
  There is broad support for reinvesting in programs, collections, and spaces that serve youth, tweens, teens, and caregivers.
- **Cultural relevance and language access are integral to equity.**
  Community members emphasized that inclusive service delivery strengthens belonging and trust.
- **The Library should remain a flexible, multipurpose space.**
  Residents value the Library's ability to support quiet study, social connection, learning, creativity, and community events.

These areas of alignment provide a strong mandate for strategic action.

## B. Key Tensions Identified

In addition to alignment, community input surfaced several tensions that warrant careful consideration during strategic planning:

- **Safety and Openness**
  Residents want libraries to remain welcoming and inclusive while also being orderly and predictable environments for families and vulnerable users.
- **Expanded Access and Operational Limits**
  Demand for longer hours and more staffed service must be balanced against staffing capacity and fiscal realities.
- **Self-Service Access and Preference for Staffed Spaces**
  Some residents appreciate the flexibility of self-service access, while others feel less safe or supported without staff present.
- **Citywide Consistency and Neighborhood-Specific Needs**
  While many priorities are shared, different branches and communities experience the Library in distinct ways and may require tailored approaches.

These tensions do not represent opposition so much as complex trade-offs that will shape implementation decisions.


## IX. Strategic Priorities Emerging from Community Input

The following strategic priorities translate community findings into actionable planning. They are intended to guide the development of programming and services, and support decision-making related to spaces, staffing, and partnerships.

## 1. Expand and Rebalance Access and Hours

Community signal: Access—particularly evening and weekend hours—was one of the most frequently raised issues across engagement methods.

Strategic focus:

- Explore opportunities to extend hours at high-demand locations.
- Improve consistency and predictability across branches.
- Reassess the balance between staffed and self-service access.
- Align program scheduling with the needs of working families and youth.

**2. Strengthen Cleanliness and Safety Through Environmental and Operational Improvements**

Community signal: Safety concerns are closely tied to cleanliness, lighting, and visibility, especially at the Main Library.

Strategic focus:

- Improve maintenance, lighting, and restroom conditions.
- Clarify and consistently apply expectations for shared space use.
- Increase visibility of staff or safety personnel where appropriate.
- Maintain a compassionate, trauma-informed approach.

**3. Reinvest in Youth, Teen, and Family Services**

Community signal: Residents expressed strong concern about reduced youth programming and a desire for spaces and services designed specifically for tweens and teens.

Strategic focus:

- Develop dedicated spaces for tweens and teens.
- Expand youth collections, including graphic novels and manga.
- Restore and grow tutoring, homework help, and family literacy programs.
- Offer social, creative, and culturally relevant youth programming.

**4. Advance Equity Through Cultural Representation and Language Access**

Community signal: Hispanic/Latino families and other community members emphasized the importance of bilingual service, Spanish-language programming, and culturally relevant collections.

Strategic focus:

- Expand bilingual and Spanish-language programs.
- Strengthen culturally representative collections.
- Partner with community groups to co-design programming.
- Ensure services reflect the diversity of Santa Monica.

**5. Expand Technology and Digital Literacy Services**

Community signal: Residents of all ages view the Library as a trusted source for technology support.

Strategic focus:

- Offer beginner-friendly technology classes.

- Expand Spanish-language digital literacy instruction.
- Support youth-focused creative technology programs.
- Address misinformation through media literacy education.

## 6. Improve Communication and User Experience

Community signal: Many residents value library services but struggle to find timely, clear information.

Strategic focus:

- Simplify and improve information about events.
- Strengthen digital communication and in-library signage and displays.
- Improve signage and wayfinding.
- Increase visibility of programs and services.

Together, these strategic directions reflect community priorities while acknowledging the operational considerations involved in implementation. The following section outlines recommended next steps for translating findings into planning, budgeting, and action.

## X. Next Steps

The Community Mapping Initiative provides a data-informed foundation for shaping SMPL's strategic priorities and guiding near- and long-term decision-making. The following steps outline how findings will be translated into planning, implementation, and ongoing evaluation.

### A. Share Findings and Build Shared Understanding

SMPL will share the findings of the Community Mapping Initiative with key audiences, including:

- Library Board
- Friends of the Santa Monica Public Library Board
- City leadership
- Library staff
- Community partners and advisory groups

Findings will also be summarized and made publicly available to support transparency and continued community trust.

**B. Integrate Findings into Strategic Planning**

Community priorities identified through this initiative will inform the development of SMPL's next Strategic Plan, including:

- Strategic goals and service priorities
- Equity and access strategies
- Space and facility planning
- Program development
- Communication and outreach improvements

Findings will be used to align long-term vision with programmatic and operational planning.

**C. Align Budget, Staffing, and Operations**

To advance community priorities, SMPL will assess:

- Staffing needs related to expanded hours and programming
- Resource requirements for cleanliness, safety, and facility maintenance
- Training needs related to bilingual service, digital literacy, and youth engagement
- Opportunities to phase service expansion in alignment with available funding

This assessment will inform budget development and implementation sequencing.

**D. Strengthen Partnerships**

Community input highlighted the value of collaboration. SMPL will continue to strengthen partnerships with:

- Local community groups
- Schools and youth-serving organizations
- Cultural and nonprofit partners
- Neighborhood advisory groups
- Other City departments

Partnerships will support culturally relevant programming, outreach, and service delivery.

**E. Establish Measures and Monitor Progress**

SMPL will develop measurable indicators to track progress related to:

- Access and hours
- Cleanliness and safety
- Youth and family engagement

- Cultural and linguistic inclusion
- Technology and digital literacy participation
- Communication effectiveness

## XI. Recent Progress

Since the completion of community engagement activities, SMPL has begun implementing actions aligned with priorities identified through the Community Mapping Initiative.

In January 2026, the Fairview and Ocean Park branch libraries expanded from a self-service model to in-person, full-service operations three days per week. Full-service offerings include librarian staffing, technical assistance, library services, programs, and events. This milestone represents a significant step toward restoring equitable access to staffed library services at neighborhood branches.

Also in January 2026, new wayfinding and directional signage was installed at the Main Library to improve navigation and user experience. Aside from minor touch-up work, the project is complete. The City will continue to evaluate signage needs at the Main Library and branch locations as part of an ongoing effort to improve clarity, accessibility, and ease of use.

These actions reflect early progress in addressing community priorities related to access and usability and provide context for future phases of service restoration.

## XII. Opportunities and Considerations

While the Community Mapping Initiative engaged a broad range of people through multiple methods, several considerations should be noted when interpreting the findings.

Survey participation skewed toward frequent library users, older adults, and White residents. Younger residents, renters, and some communities of color were underrepresented in the survey sample. To address this limitation, SMPL supplemented survey data with targeted focus groups, youth conversations, pop-up outreach, and multilingual engagement and discussions with community-serving organizations and service providers. These additional engagements reinforced and deepened themes related to accessibility, intergenerational use, comfort-based safety, and the importance of clear communication and transparency. However, participation gaps remain.

The priorities identified through the Community Mapping Initiative reflect community needs and aspirations rather than immediate commitments. Implementation will require

alignment with staffing capacity, funding availability, labor considerations, and citywide priorities. The strategic directions outlined in this report should therefore be understood as guiding principles to inform phased planning and decision-making.

The future of the Santa Monica Public Library is bright and filled with opportunities for growth, innovation, and collaborative learning. As the Library embarks on the final phase of Community Mapping, "Phase 3: Co-Design and Planning," staff members are committed to finding ways to create programs and services with the community.

Together, we are building a library that truly reflects and serves the needs of the people who live, work, visit, and play in Santa Monica.