



City Council Agenda Item

City Council Meeting Date: November 16, 2021

TO: Jim Throop, City Manager

FROM: Sarah Bleyl, Library Director
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SUBJECT: Elimination of Library Overdue Fines to Facilitate Community Access to Information

Recommendation:

Staff recommends the City Council approve the elimination of Library overdue fines and eliminate and waive any existing overdue fines currently owed by Library patrons.

Background:

Overdue fines for library materials are currently 25 cents per day with an \$8 maximum. Fines for overdue DVDs are \$1 per day with an \$8 maximum.

When a library patron owes more than \$10 in fines or fees, his or her account is prevented from checking out additional materials until the items are returned and the fines are paid.

Collected overdue fines have decreased over the years. Over the twelve month period prior to the pandemic closure, the Library collected \$7,506 of overdue fines. The staff time to collect and process those fines was almost double, approximately \$13,260.

Overdue fines are distinct from replacement fees. The Library charges replacement fees to recover the cost of lost or damaged items. If an overdue item is lost, the patron must pay the replacement fee and any overdue fines in order to have borrowing privileges restored. The Library is only proposing to eliminate overdue fines, not replacement fees.

Discussion:

The Library is part of the Black Gold Cooperative Library System, which includes all of the public libraries from Paso Robles, San Luis Obispo County, Santa Maria, Lompoc, Goleta, Santa Barbara city, and Santa Paula. Currently, five of the seven jurisdictions have eliminated overdue fines, along with over 400 library systems in the country.

Library experts have found that charging overdue fines inhibits access to library materials and services. Studies indicate that even modest penalties deter people from registering

for a library card or using the library because of the risk of incurring fines. Rather than motivating borrowers to return items on time, fines act as an inequitable barrier to service, disproportionately impacting minors, students and community members with limited financial resources.

At this time, approximately 28% of all library accounts are blocked (prevented from checking out additional items) due to overdue fines (owing more than \$10). Of those accounts, 25% belong to youth and teens, preventing them from using the library at the age when access to information resources are the most critical.

Fines are not effective in getting materials returned on time and libraries that have eliminated fines have found that long overdue items come back and patrons who avoided the library for years start visiting again. It also leads to the return of more materials, thus reducing the need and cost of repurchasing items.

To sum up, the benefits of eliminating overdue fines include: increased access for all library users, improved patron relationships, increased efficiency of staff time, increase in cardholders and library users, and 95% of items still returned on time. Fine revenue represents less than 1% of the total library budget and the amount of staff time required to collect fines exceeds the revenue.

In December 2019, the Library held a “Fine Free Holiday” campaign allowing patrons to return overdue materials with all fines waived. This resulted in the library receiving three times as many materials than in previous months. Having library materials returned so they can be recirculated again is the top priority as it saves staff time and ensures that limited funds are not spent to repurchase items that have not been returned.

Since March 2020, the collection of fines has been suspended due to the COVID-19 closures and limited reopening; staff would like to make the change permanent moving forward.

Patrons would continue to be billed a replacement fee to cover the cost of lost or damaged items. In order to regain overdue materials, the library will mail notices to patrons at 30 days past due (item is billed and prevents any further check outs). If item is returned within the next 30 days, the replacement fee is waived. If the item is not returned, the patron continues to be prevented from checking out additional materials until either the item is returned or the replacement fee is paid.

In 2019, Paso Robles was one of the first library systems in Black Gold to eliminate fines. As a library with a similar number of library cardholders and annual materials circulation, staff contacted the library director, Angelica Fortin, to discover how the elimination of fines had impacted the Paso Robles Library. In an email, Ms. Fortin stated: “Often, libraries lose their most vulnerable patrons because they fear the fines associated with their late returns will be unaffordable. It creates a barrier to access and perpetuates the misconception that libraries are punitive. Removing fines has not resulted in the loss of more material or an increase in complaints about requests taking too long. Instead it has created good will, allowed staff to better focus on connecting users with resources and

encouraged users to come back, even after a challenge in life may have caused their items to be late.”

Blanchard Library in Santa Paula has a patron base similar in socioeconomic status to Lompoc and went fine free in 2019. Library Director Ned Branch said, “Blanchard Community Library has one of the lowest per capita income levels in Ventura County. Our patrons have expressed appreciation for the elimination of fines for late materials. We have anecdotal information that some families didn’t want their children to borrow books because the family couldn’t afford the fines. We believe that, by eliminating late fees, we are sending a message to our patrons that we value them more than the fines.”

At the September Library Commission meeting, the commissioners agreed with the elimination of overdue fines and recommended this be brought to the City Council.

Fiscal Impact:

Eliminating late fines has no significant fiscal impact as the cost to collect the fines is almost double of what is collected. Fees for replacement or damage will continue to be charged for materials that are lost or damaged. Patrons will continue to be ineligible to check out additional material if outstanding balances for lost or damaged materials owed exceed the \$10 threshold.

Conclusion:

Staff recommends the City Council approve the elimination of Library overdue fines to facilitate community access to information.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah Bleyl, Library Director

APPROVED FOR SUBMITTAL TO THE CITY COUNCIL:

Jim Throop, City Manager