

Executive Summary

During the last several years, public libraries across the nation have moved toward a “fine free” model which removes overdue fees for late materials, but maintains patron responsibility for the timely return and condition of the materials they borrow. The “fine free” model has proved to be beneficial for a variety of reason. Library Fines and Fees are approved by City Council annually under the City’s Master Fee Schedule.

Background

Library Fines and Fees are approved by City Council annually under the City’s Master Fee Schedule. The Redondo Beach Public Library collects several fines and fees associated with Library services. Fines generally refer to monetary charges used as an incentive or disincentive. Provided patrons comply with Library policy, no fines are assessed. For example, overdue fines are implemented to help ensure patrons return materials in a timely manner and that materials circulate to avail themselves of more patrons. Fees generally refer to monetary charges used to recoup a portion of the cost of providing service. For example, copies made on public copiers are 20 cents per page. This is to help offset the cost of paper, cartridges, and machines. Fines and fees are established to balance operational need and public economic interest.

Library Fines:	
Adult Books, Magazines, Audiobooks, Music CDs	\$.35 per day
Juvenile Books, Magazines, Audiobooks, Music CDs	\$.35 per day
DVDs	\$1.00 per day
Interlibrary Loan Books	\$1.00 per day
Library Fees:	
Out of State Library Card Registration	\$10.00 per card
Lost Library Card Replacement	\$3.00 per card
Interlibrary Loan Request	\$3.00 non-refundable search fee per request
No Pickup Fee - Interlibrary Loan	\$5.00
No Pickup Fee - Holds	\$1.00
Lost Materials	Replacement cost plus a \$10.00 processing fee per item
Computer Use Fee	\$2.00 per two-hour session for non-cardholders, or cardholders needing additional time

Trends

During the last five years, nationwide major public Libraries began going “fine free”. These Libraries include Chicago Public Library, New York Public Library, Oakland Public Library, San Diego Public Library, and San Francisco Public Library. For purposes of definition, “fine free” means the elimination of overdue fines. It does not mean the abolition of personal responsibility for Library materials. In “fine free” Libraries, patrons are still responsible for the return of the materials checked out and any damage to the items that might occur during the loan period. After a period of time determined by the Library,

materials are considered lost and patrons are billed for the cost of the item and typically a processing fee.

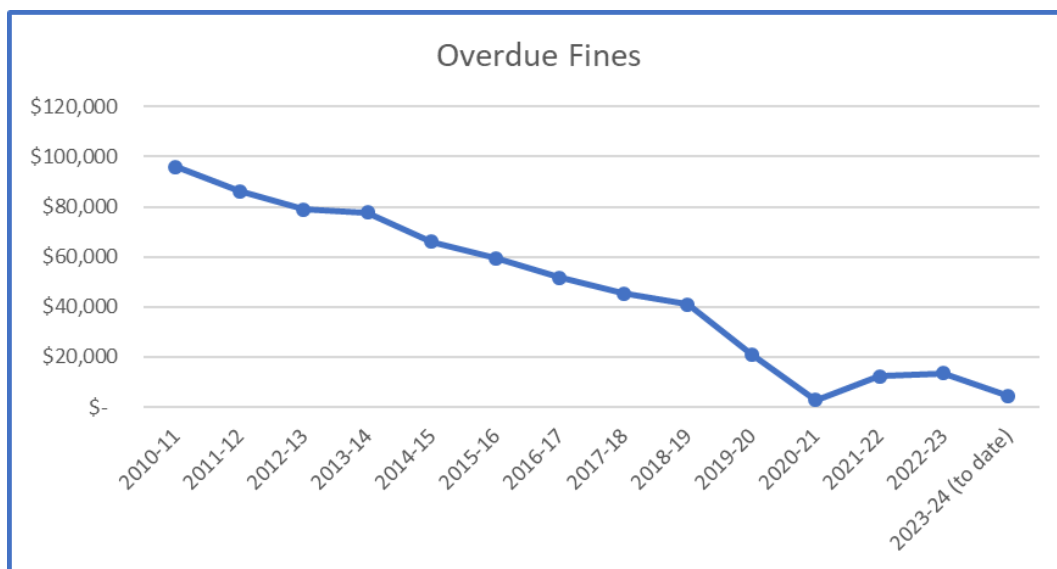
The Redondo Beach Public Library belongs to the Southern California Library Cooperative (SCLC), a consortium of 40 independent city, county and special district public libraries located in Los Angeles and Ventura counties. A recent survey indicated that 30 of the 40 member Libraries have gone “fine free” in the last 5 years. Of our neighboring five public libraries (Palos Verdes, Torrance, El Segundo, Hermosa Beach and Manhattan Beach) all have gone “fine free”.

Anlysis

There are several reasons public libraries go “fine free”. The most prevailing reason is based on equity. Fines present economic barriers to Library usage for vulnerable communities. Studies show that unpaid library fines disproportionately impact those socio-economic disadvantaged individuals with a higher percentage of suspended library cards. While overdue library fees represent a small fraction of a library’s operational budget, they disproportionately affect communities that have income insecurity or low income. Late fees add up and become insurmountable for some families when forced to choose between paying the fee or basic necessities.

Customer service is another reason public libraries have chosen to go “fine free”. Studies demonstrate that Library users, regardless of income, miss return deadlines at similar rates and that libraries that have gone “fine free” see little difference in late return rates. All libraries that have gone “fine free” report that staff and patrons are much happier which in turn improved customer service. Physical donations and circulation of materials increased and several libraries experienced an increase of returned items.

Because revenue from fines are diminishing, the cost to recoup those charges are often more than the return. In FY 2022-23, revenue collected from overdue fines at Redondo Beach Public Library was less than 1% of the Library’s overall annual operating budget. The overall trend of revenue from overdue fines is downward. In 2010, the revenue from overdue fines was \$96,021.83. Last year, the total was \$13,430.



Based on a study of other libraries that have gone “fine free”, it is estimated that going “fine free” would result in a reduction of the staff time it takes to collect and process overdue fines, as well as encouraging the return of library materials so that many items would not have to be repurchased. For example, the San Diego Public Library System eliminated late fees after an analysis by the city found that libraries were actually spending more per year on collecting fines (nearly \$1 million) than they took in from these charges (\$675,000). And, during the 2017–18 fiscal year, collections of overdue fines accounted for just 0.2 percent of the San Francisco Public Library’s total operating budget, one study showed. In contrast, library employees spent an estimated 1,100 to 3,500 hours per year collecting fines, which adds up to \$64,000 to \$191,000 in staff capacity. That’s time and money that could be spent serving patrons more effectively, that system decided.

Once implemented at the Redondo Beach Public Library, a “fine free” program is estimated to save hundreds of staff hours annually equaling a considerable soft savings. Public facing positions would no longer need to collect fines from patrons for overdue materials returned late and issue receipts, while accounting staff would no longer need to count and reconcile funds for these purposes. This task can be time-consuming and tedious, especially in light of the fact that many fines come in very small increments of 35 cents or a dollar at a time. In sum, Redondo Beach Public Library spent a considerable amount in staff time to collect \$13,430 in fines.

Challenges

One of the primary challenges regarding a “fine free” program is the concern that materials will not be returned in a timely manner or not returned at all. It should be noted that no Library surveyed has removed a patron’s responsibility for the materials they borrowed. Most of these Libraries established an acceptable loan period after which borrowed materials become overdue. There are no fines associated with these overdue materials, but the account is blocked. After a period of overdue, these materials then become “lost” and the patron is billed for the replacement of each item. A bill for replacement typically includes the cost of the item and a processing fee. The cost is assessed at the original purchased price. The processing fee covers the cost of things like book covers, labels, cataloging, and property stamps. Some Libraries allow patrons to replace a “lost” item with a new or like new copy, but still charge a processing fee.

Another challenge to going “fine free” are prior late fines. According to previous reports, there is currently approximately \$170,000 in late fines in the system. Many Libraries which have gone “fine free” have done so retroactively. The justification for this is that many of these accounts with languishing late fines are dormant because the individual has moved, is deceased, or can no longer use the Library. These fines are arguably unrealizable and a burden on the integrated library system (ILS) as patron records with fines are never purged from the system. The few patrons with dormant accounts that do return to the Library are often perplexed by the historic charges and contest them or leave without rectifying their account.

Another issue are fines for non-pickup of holds. Currently the Library does not charge a fee for the placement of holds. Instead, the Library charges individuals who do not pick up their request one dollar per item after 10 days. While it may appear minor, it is a component of “fine free” policy. Some Libraries

charge for hold placement, which is a service fee. The non-pickup of hold is a fine to ensure holds are picked up in a timely manner and not placed arbitrarily.

Summary

Fines can create a barrier to access that disproportionately impacts those that benefit the most from Library services. Fines are costly and, not necessarily, cost effective to collect. There is little evidence to suggest that fines achieve their intended goal. Eliminating fines would enhance customer service. Going “fine free” would be in line with other public libraries in the region.