



TO: Mayor and Councilmembers

FROM: Allison Gray, Library Director

SUBJECT: Recommendation for a Fines-Free Library System

RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the discontinuation of fine collection for overdue library materials and shorten the time for billing lost items to 30 days after the due date for the Goleta and Santa Ynez Valley Libraries, effective July 1, 2021.

BACKGROUND:

Historically, libraries charged overdue fees in the belief that this would encourage borrowers to return overdue items more quickly. However, many years of experience and relevant studies have proved this does not work. In fact, it can reduce library use when patrons accrue fines and then just do not return to the library out of embarrassment and/or an inability to pay the fines. This leads to the people who most need the free public library not being able to use it. Additionally, it adds to the perception of the library and library staff as being punitive and judgmental.

One historical theory was that charging fines was an important way to teach children responsibility. However, parents generally must transport children to the library to return items. If parents do not or cannot do this, it is the children who are penalized for something over which they have no control. Many of these children are in lower socioeconomic groups and need the library the most.

The Goleta and Santa Ynez Valley Libraries system is currently one of only two library systems in Black Gold still charging overdue fees to patrons. Many patrons are aware of this and have asked if Goleta would consider joining the other five jurisdictions in going to a fines-free model. Many libraries across the country have taken this step and found that it not only increased their circulation but brought the people who most need the library back. Numerous studies indicate that eliminating fines increased goodwill between patrons and library staff and did not lead to an increase in late book returns.

DISCUSSION:

Like most libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Goleta and Santa Ynez Valley Libraries have not charged overdue fees for the past year for several reasons. First, the libraries were closed for three months, as were the book drops where people normally return their materials after hours. When staff started working at the library again, the book drops were only open for minimal hours each week. Following recommendations made by the Library of Congress and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), returned items were quarantined in the large meeting room of the Goleta Valley Library for seven days before staff checked them in on the circulation system. Finally, many people simply did not want to visit the library and other public places for fear of contracting COVID-19. Therefore, the timing is ideal to discontinue overdue materials fees.

There is a more effective way to incentivize the return of materials. The library currently waits until items are three months overdue before billing patrons for the replacement costs. Staff proposes instead to send the bill thirty days after the items become overdue. It is hoped that this will encourage the earlier return of materials that are not lost, and that it will not affect a patron's existing liability for replacing materials that are indeed lost. Patrons will not be able to use their library cards if they owe \$40 or more to the library until the materials are returned or the replacement fees paid. Most libraries that have taken this step have seen an increase in both returned materials and reimbursement for lost items.

At its meeting of February 1, 2021, the Goleta Library Advisory Commission voted unanimously to recommend these changes to the City Council. Should Council approve this recommendation, staff will forgive existing debts for overdue materials fines and bring amended fee resolutions for next fiscal year to the City Council for approval in order to implement the change effective July 1, 2021.

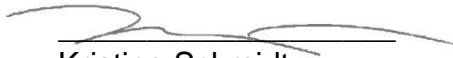
FISCAL IMPACTS:

In the last year before the COVID-19 pandemic (FY 19/290), the Goleta Valley Library collected \$12,667 in fines. This was less than 1% of the budgeted revenues for FY 2019/20. The reduction of these revenues may be partially offset by a savings from the return of materials that would otherwise not be returned, or from increased reimbursement for lost materials.

ALTERNATIVES:

The Council could choose to continue to charge fines for overdue library materials.

Reviewed By:



Kristine Schmidt
Assistant City Manager

Legal Review By:



Michael Jenkins
City Attorney

Approved By:



Michelle Greene
City Manager