



LIBRARY COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION 20200622-3a: Support for Equitable Access to Austin Public Library Resources

Date: June 22, 2020

Subject: Support for Equitable Access to Austin Public Library Resources

Motioned By:

Seconded By:

Recommendation

Support for Equitable Access to Austin Public Library Resources

Description of Recommendation to Council

Requesting that the Austin City Council use their budgetary authority to make access to library resources more equitable by eliminating late fees for the return of adult library materials and non-resident library card fees for all Austinites residing in Travis, Williamson, and Hays Counties.

Rationale:

The Austin Public Library has a commitment to equity, to assure that all members of the Austin community have equal access to Library services and programs. However, as the American Library Association and numerous public library systems around the country have recognized, monetary fines present an economic barrier to access of library materials and services, especially among low-income patrons. In a Resolution passed on January 27, 2019, the American Library Association urged libraries to scrutinize their practices of imposing fines on library patrons and actively move towards eliminating them.

At a time when Austinites are both facing serious economic disruption and calling on the City to invest more heavily in social services benefiting communities of color, the Austin Public Library remains a place where Austinites can seek information, services and entertainment free of charge. However, the current City policy imposes a fine on adult materials returned after their due date of \$.25 per day / per item.¹ APL blocks access to library materials when a fine reaches \$10. This policy imposes a significant barrier to access to the population that needs these services the most. It is an inequitable policy.

¹ Since October 1, 2018, the Austin Public Library has not charged fees for late returns of children's materials. The Austin Public Library also imposes several other late fees, as reflected on the attached chart. This recommendation does not pertain to late fees on materials other than adult materials. In addition, the Commission does not recommend a change to the APL policy relating to lost or damaged items. If an item is lost or damaged, the account is billed the amount to replace it, as determined by the Library. The Austin Public Library does not accept replacement copies for lost or damaged items.

Studies have shown that fines and late fees do not impact rates of return and may in fact discourage the return of library materials. As the ALA Resolution recognized, “there is mounting evidence that indicates eliminating fines increases library card adoption and library usage.”

Fines and late fees contribute approximately \$250,000 per year to the City’s general fund. This relatively insignificant budgetary contribution is not worth the economic barriers that it presents to the citizens of Austin or the administrative cost of collecting these fines. The valuable staff time that is taken up with processing and collecting fines would be much better spent assisting library customers and developing library programs, including the critically important job of assisting persons experiencing homelessness.

It is time for Austin to join the numerous public library systems around the country, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Denver, and in Texas, including Dallas, Plano, Frisco, Fort Worth, Abilene, and New Braunfels, in abolishing fines for late materials.

Another other major barrier to equitable access is the non-resident, annual card fee of \$120. Currently, only Austinites living in Austin’s “full purpose” jurisdiction are entitled to receive a library card free of charge. This non-resident fee affects people who live in Austin’s extra-territorial jurisdiction as well as those who work in Austin but live in the surrounding areas, including many former Austinites of color forced to relocate due to ongoing gentrification. As with fines and late fees, the general revenue provided by non-resident cards is relatively insignificant. In FY ‘17, the revenue was \$101,002 and in FY ‘18, it was \$135,681.

The non-resident card fee is another barrier to access, which does not recognize that the community of Austin includes many people with addresses outside of Austin’s full purpose jurisdiction. Libraries strengthen communities in uncertain times; our community members who live in Travis, Williamson and Hays Counties should have equal access to the library.

Vote

For:

Against:

Abstain:

Absent:

Attest: