

Draft "Freedom to Read"

Recommendation to Council

Recommendation

Protect "Freedom to Read" at Austin Public Library.

Description of Recommendation

Requesting that the Austin City Council adopt a resolution that supports "Freedom to Read" and opposes book banning or undue book challenges at the Austin Public Library.

The Library Commission has adopted such a resolution and we offer that as an example.

Rationale

Background

Across the country and in the state of Texas, libraries are confronting aggressive challenges to materials in their collections. School libraries have been the primary target of these incidents.¹ While public libraries are a lesser target, these challenges are occurring there too.²

A list of 850 books, released by Texas State Representative Matt Krause, has fueled much of the book challenge activity in Texas.³ Although public complaints often cite pornography as the

¹ "Schools nationwide are quietly removing books from their libraries", *Washington Post*, published Mar 22, 2022, accessed Mar 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/03/22/school-librarian-book-bans-challenges/>

² "How the library wars have played out in one Texas county," *AXIOS Austin*, published and accessed Mar 24, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/local/austin/2022/03/24/library-books-wars-texas-llano-county-censorship>

³ "All 850 Books Texas Lawmaker Matt Krause Wants to Ban: An Analysis", *Book Riot*, published Nov 5, 2021, accessed Mar 24, 2022, <https://bookriot.com/texas-book-ban-list/>

justification for challenge⁴, most of the challenges revolve around issues of race and racism, sex education, and LGBTQ topics.⁵

We believe it is a core mission of the public library to provide quality information from a diversity of viewpoints, especially on these kinds of topics. We also believe book bans and these undue challenges are attacks on the open access and free inquiry that are essential to our democracy⁶.

The "Freedom to Read" is a constitutional right⁷ that we should act to protect in the event that such challenges do occur at the Austin Public Library.

Library Commission Action

Although the Austin Public Library (APL) has not received any such challenges at this time, it is a potential concern. The Austin Library Commission wants to take steps to ensure public access to library materials is not hampered by such challenges, should one arise.

At the Jan 24, 2022 regular commission meeting of the Austin Library Commission, APL Director Roosevelt Weeks presented a *Statement on Book Banning and Library Censorship*. It states the public has a "right to read" at the APL, and highlights the APL *Materials Selection Policy* to develop "responsive collections."⁸

⁴ "Texas governor decries school library books with 'pornographic or obscene material'", *NPR*, published Nov 2, 2021, accessed Mar 24, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/02/1051471236/texas-governor-abbott-calls-for-removal-of-obscene-school-library-books>

⁵ "These are the books most challenged by Texas school districts", *Houston Chronicle*, published Dec 17, 2021, accessed Mar 24, 2022, <https://www.chron.com/politics/article/These-are-the-books-currently-being-challenged-16703960.php>

⁶ "About Banned & Challenged Books", *American Library Association*, accessed Mar 24, 2024, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/aboutbannedbooks>

⁷ "The Freedom to Read Statement", *American Library Association*, last updated Jun 30, 2004, accessed Mar 24, 2022, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement>

⁸ p. 3, "Director's Report, January 2022", *Austin Public Library*, presented Jan 24, 2022, <http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=375264>

At the February 24, 2022 regular commission meeting, we received briefings from APL staff on their *Selection⁹ and Reconsideration¹⁰ Policies*.

At the same meeting, the Commission created a "Freedom to Read" working group to "report back to the Commission with recommendations for action to support public access to diverse library materials and to resist library censorship efforts."¹¹

The working group has met and identified four key actions that could help protect the library:

- The Commission should adopt a statement supporting "Freedom to Read".
- The City Council might adopt a statement supporting "Freedom to Read".
- The working group should continue to monitor the situation, to allow for rapid response to protect our library.
- The working group could make contact with other area entities such as schools, to coordinate on concerns and possible action.

Statements of support by both the Commission and Council are valuable because they send a strong message of our community values. They also signal to APL staff that we appreciate their efforts when confronting these difficult issues, and support the APL policies for handling such challenges.

Commission Recommendation to Council

The Austin Public Library commission has adopted a resolution of support for "Freedom to Read" at the March 28, 2022 regular commission meeting.

We recommend that the Austin City Council also takes action and adopt its own resolution of support for "Freedom to Read".

If the Council chooses to do so, they may wish to refer to our adopted resolution for suggestions for their own resolution language.

The working group stands ready to consult with any council offices that have questions or have interest in advancing some action.

⁹ "Austin Public Library Policy and Procedures Manual", *Austin Public Library*, last updated Oct 1, 2021, presented Feb 24, 2022, <https://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=377129>

¹⁰ "Request for Reconsideration of Library Materials", *Austin Public Library*, presented Feb 24, 2022, <https://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=377128>

¹¹ Not yet available. Minutes for said meeting will be posted when approved.