



APPLETON PUBLIC LIBRARY
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TO: Members of the Appleton Public Library Board of Trustees
FROM: Colleen Rortvedt, Library Director
DATE: TBD
RE: Proposal to eliminate overdue fines for Appleton Public Library materials

I am proposing that the Appleton Public Library (APL) stop collecting fines on overdue materials. Should this proposal be approved:

- APL will stop assessing fines on late materials.
- Staff will clear existing fines on patron accounts.
- There will be the following exceptions:
 - We cannot waive billed items, or some select fines incurred at other libraries.
 - We cannot waive bills for lost or damaged items so there will still be an incentive to return materials in good condition.

Library overdue fines are generally \$.10 per day/per item. Each item can accumulate up to \$5.00 in fines and patrons are blocked from checking out materials after accumulating \$5.00 or more in fines. The library's fine revenue has declined over the past decade for several reasons. In 2021 the projected fine budget is \$30,000 however the library has not been collecting overdue fines during the pandemic and expect to not achieve this revenue even if we would reinstate fines.

Overdue fines have a long history and communities that consider going fine free tend to have similar questions about the cost/benefit relationship to overdue fines. Below I will address the most commonly asked questions.

1. If we get rid of fines, won't materials come back more slowly or never come back?

There is a lack of data to support this fear. Research and experience from fine-free libraries show that libraries that have gone fine-free are experiencing either the same return rates, or improved return rates because patrons do not have to have the embarrassing conversation with staff about fines.

Some libraries have experienced an increase in circulation since patrons are no longer worried about checking out books out of fear of getting a fine. This can be an especially empowering to children, teens people who have lower incomes or fixed incomes. Chicago Public Library experienced a 240% increase in returned books when they eliminated fines in September 2019.

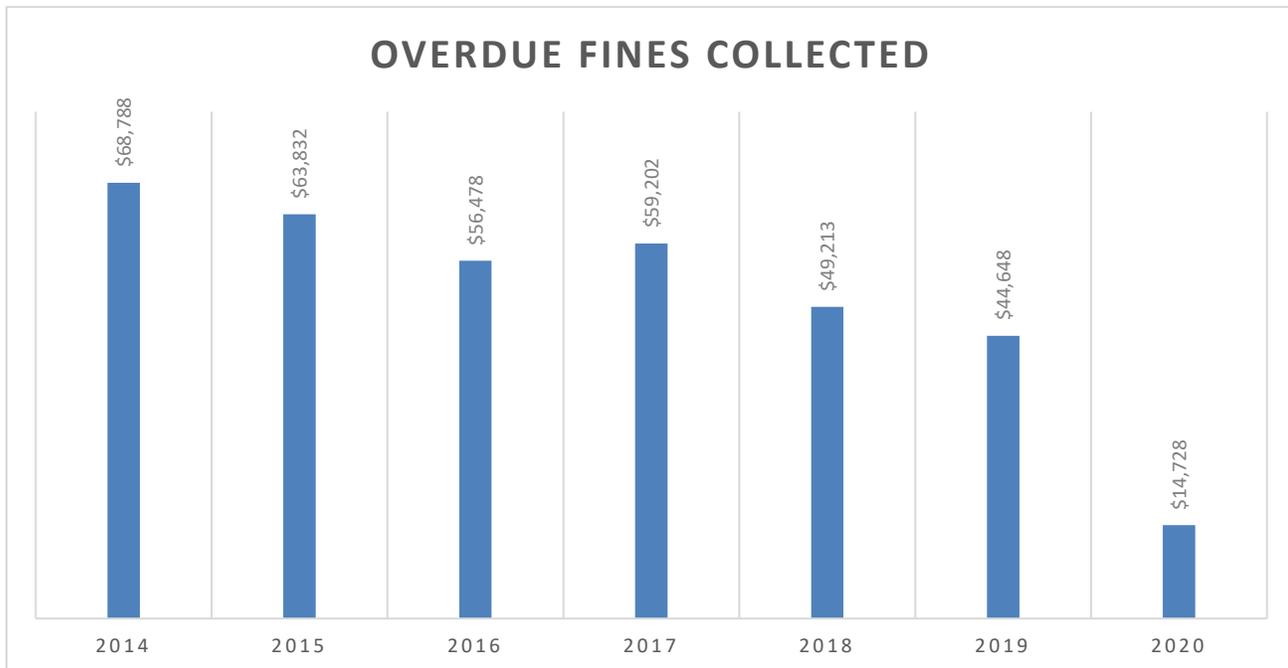
It is important to remember that the library is not going to stop billing patrons for long overdue, damaged or never returned items. Eliminating library fines is different from billing. There will still be due dates and timelines for initiating the billing and collection process.

2. Don't fines help fund the library?

The simple answer is that overdue fines have a very small impact on the library's operational budget. They are not sustainable or a reliable source of revenue.

The technical answer is that overdue fines are part of the city's general revenue and help offset our city's expenses including the operational cost of APL. APL's 2021 operating budget is \$4.7 million. Our overdue fine revenue budget is \$30,000.

Overdue fine revenue has been in decline for many years and reasons. This decline is a good thing. Today's automated systems provide convenient ways (email, text notification, online renewal, etc...) to help patrons avoid becoming overdue. Below is APL's recent fine revenue:



Notes:

2016/2017 – This increase resulted from starting to work with a collection agency in April 2016 for patrons who owe more than \$50. This tends to be for billed materials but at the time of initiating this, we experienced a temporary bump in fine revenue.

2020 – We initially suspended fines due to multiple complex public health reasons including the impact that quarantining had on our ability to have accurate return dates. In addition, we had an inability to collect overdue fines during periods where the building was closed to the public. Patrons have been grateful as many of them are experiencing economic hardships and this holiday from fines has allowed them to continue to access resources throughout the pandemic.

Fines are also a source of staff time that could be spent in better ways serving the public. The library's priority is to continue to offer a high-quality collection to the community. Every item we have has been purchased, labeled and cataloged so our priority is maintaining these items. Collection maintenance takes time, and the best-case scenario is that we can maintain these items as long as they are relevant, in demand and in good condition. Ordering replacements is less efficient and requires redundant efforts to reacquire materials. It results in delays in getting items into the next patron's hands while we wait for replacement items and creates backlogs of processing for new materials.

3. Shouldn't fines instill personal responsibility?

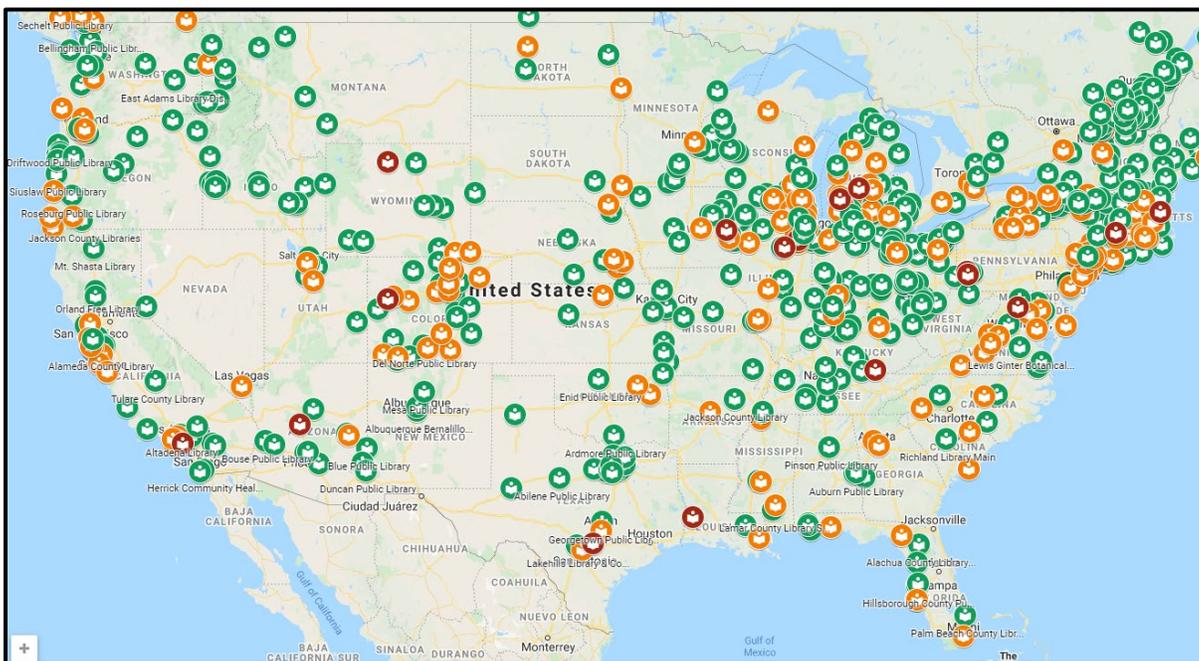
This is an interesting debate and there are people who think it is the library's job to teach this kind of personal and moral responsibility. Overdue fines were instituted at a time when libraries perceived that one of their roles was to instill personal and moral responsibility and fines were thought to be an incentive to the timely return of materials. Regardless of where people fall on this belief system, if overdue fines served as an effective deterrent, we would not collect any fines.

Patrons keep materials past the due date for a myriad of reasons. We are all human beings and juggle a lot of priorities and sometimes something other than getting to the library takes priority.

The effectiveness of overdue fines in instilling personal and moral responsibility has never been the outcome and consequences are ultimately in place as bills will still be assessed to ensure materials return.

4. Is this a trend?

This is a national long-term movement. Libraries across the country have been going fine free for years. Some have never charged fines. In recent years it has gained momentum. We have not identified any library in the nation that has returned to charging fines after going fine free and most regret not doing it sooner.



-  **Fine Free Libraries**
-  **Partially Fine Free**
-  **In Process of Going Fine Free**

Locally the following libraries are already fine-free:

- Kaukauna
- Menasha
- Little Chute

- Oshkosh

All local library administrations have expressed a desire to become fine-free or are actively pursuing it.

This is not about jumping on the bandwagon of a trend. Since we are in shared automated systems it is only a matter of time that the libraries that do not become fine-free will be at a disadvantage and may lose patrons.

APL staff began researching this issue in 2019 and began educating the library board on the issue. We have read research, interviewed fine-free libraries and evaluated our patron data regarding fines to understand the issue.

5. What does it matter? Who is it hurting to collect overdue fines?

APL's organizational values are as follows:

- Welcoming - Everyone belongs here
- Literacy - The City of Appleton is the city of literacy and learning
- Community - The library is essential to every person and organization achieving their goals
- Access - The library is accessible physically, culturally and intellectually

A core intent of public libraries is to provide equitable service to everyone in the community. Overdue fines conflict with this philosophy and the data shows that children are disproportionately disadvantaged by fines and that fines drive patrons away.

11.65% of the library's patron database is blocked from checking out materials due to fines. Concerningly, 16.47% of juvenile patrons are blocked showing that there is a disproportionate impact on children. Of those that are blocked for fines, they owe an average of \$15.20 for materials that have been returned to the library. These patrons have expired cards that were last used on average in 2014 showing that most of these patrons gave up using the library because of their fines.

Overdue fines impact those who can least afford them including individuals that are low-income or children. Both populations have unique challenges in getting materials back to the library on a specific date such as juggling jobs, family needs, no transportation and unstable housing. Many patrons have expressed relief during the pandemic that we did not charge fines.

Conclusion

To summarize, overdue fines:

- are cumbersome to collect for a nominal return
- are not an incentive to return materials and may be a disincentive to getting them back
- require staff to spend time on fine-related responsibilities rather than providing direct service to the public
- result in negative interactions with patrons
- create stigma for patrons who may not want to have a conversation about the titles for which they are being fined so they stop checking out materials
- serve as an economic barrier to information access for those who can least afford fines such as those who are unemployed, low income, or children

Eliminating fines will represent a loss of \$30,000 of budgeted revenue to the City's General Fund. In recent years we have not met our budgeted fine projection. In consultation with the City's Finance Director, to offset the reduction in

revenue the library will provide a four-year transition period shifting a portion of Lost and Paid funds to the City's general fund.

- 2021: will be offset by decreased expenses due to the pandemic
- 2022: \$25,000
- 2023: \$15,000
- 2024: \$5,000

Should this be approved, the Library's Financial Policy will be updated to reflect this variance until the four-year transition period is completed.

I propose that the Appleton Public Library eliminates the collection of fines, clears existing fines on patron accounts and welcome everyone back to the library with a clean slate and fresh start.