



Library Trustees Vote To Get Rid Of Overdue Fees

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by Ryan Bray

ORLEANS – Still fretting over that copy of “Moby Dick” that’s been overdue since high school? If you’re a patron of the Snow Library, you no longer have to worry about a late fee.

The library first suspended the issuance of late and overdue fees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The library’s board of trustees last week voted to officially do away with the practice.

“We just needed to put the paperwork in with the [Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners], because we never made it formal,” Joan Francolini, the board’s chair, said when reached by phone after the Feb. 7 trustees meeting.



The Snow Library board of trustees last week officially voted to do away with overdue fees for library materials. FILE PHOTO

The vote might be good news for those patrons who otherwise might still be facing overdue charges. But Library Director Tavi Prugno said that up until last week’s vote, Snow was an outlier among public libraries statewide when it came to doing away with the fees. He said 85 percent of public libraries across Massachusetts are already “fine free,” while 32 of the 38 libraries in the CLAMS network had already done away with fees ahead of Orleans.

City libraries were among the first to eliminate overdue fees, Prugno said, and the trend has been adopted by more communities in recent years.

Originally seen as a means of encouraging patrons to return materials on time, Prugno said the fees instead have served to discourage library use by people worried about what they might owe. By eliminating the threat of fees, the hope is more people of all ages and backgrounds will be enticed to visit the library.

“The emphasis is really on the service model, trying to encourage all people to come in, not just people who can afford to pay fines, but people who can’t,” he said. “Young people, seniors,

people who are low income. I think it levels off the type of people who are coming to the library. It broadens the population base of library users.”

And at a rate of 10 cents a day, Prugno added that the fees as structured weren’t a great source of revenue for the library.

“It doesn’t bring that much money in, and it’s not really a deterrent,” Francolini said. “When you do away with fees, it helps people take out more books.”

Getting rid of the fees doesn’t absolve patrons from replacing a book if it’s lost, Prugno noted. But in general, he said doing away with the fees helps create a more welcoming and positive atmosphere for all patrons, overdue books or no.

“All we want is to get the item back,” he said. “If it’s late it’s late, but we got the item back.”

But are library officials worried that patrons with overdue materials might be less likely to return them without the threat of a fee? Prugno said statistics show the opposite is true.

“In fact, libraries that have gone fine free are actually seeing more items come back rather than less,” he said.

The vote to get rid of the overdue fees comes as part of a broader review by the trustees of the library’s policies, many of which Francolini said have become outdated. Those include policies regarding naming and dedicating items in the library, what materials should and should not be accepted for donation and use of the library’s internet hotspot.

The policies are also being reviewed in light of broader issues facing public libraries nationwide, especially as more libraries are being met with challenges over materials they choose to make available to patrons. The trustees are considering a policy requiring that a person provide their name and address as a condition of challenging an item in the library. Francolini said many times, people who issue challenges are not residents of the community in which they file them.

“We live in this really progressive state, but there are places in Massachusetts that are having books challenged,” she said. “As mortifying as that is everywhere, when you live in a state like this and it’s still happening, it really made us make sure we have our policies straight. Because you don’t want to put your librarians at any risk whatsoever of being challenged.”

As for the overdue fees, Francolini said even when implemented, they only addressed a small number of the library’s patron base.

“Most people bring their books back on time anyway,” she said.

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