

Del Norte County Library Eliminates Late Fees

December 19, 2020



Most Del Norters return their library materials on time. They understand that others may be waiting to use them. But many civic-minded book-lovers struggle to return books. They may not have reliable transportation. They may live in insecure housing. They may be dealing with domestic violence.

According to Library Manager Beth Austen, “Late fines were originally put into place to prevent loss of materials. But libraries are discovering that it isn’t that simple. A \$10 fine is significant to economically vulnerable people. The price of such a fine may represent food for their cupboards or gas to get to work. Over time, the patron may be so intimidated that they do not come back to the library to return their items at all. This creates a barrier to valuable resources.”

Library staff members have long been expressing concerns. They want everyone to feel welcome, even if patrons return items late. They recently advocated for a policy change, and the board supported it by eliminating fines for most late materials. Patrons will still receive notices to return materials on time, but fines won’t be levied if they can’t pay. The only exception is for late DVDs.

“Libraries were created to help people share resources and to make good on the promise of civil society,” said library district Trustee Ruth Rhodes. “Library fines should not play a part in the cycle of poverty. The very people who need libraries the most should feel welcome here.”

The American Library Association recently passed a resolution calling on libraries across the country to eliminate their fines. Del Norte joins many others in changing its fee policy.

“It was the right thing to do,” said Board President Angela Stanley. “The new board looked at the research and saw an opportunity to make things better for struggling Del Norters. We took swift action.”

Behavioral psychology backs up the board's policy change. People tend to associate libraries with places of punishment rather than community gathering places. Eliminating fines may create a greater sense of responsibility in patrons. They support their library by returning materials on-time. It sounds counter-intuitive, but many libraries say that the no-fines policies change the mindset of patrons who think about fines as user fees. Instead, they think of the need to be good stewards. On-time returns go up, the number of lost books go down and circulation and patronage increases. The most vulnerable can access the library without fear or shame.

"We can't be sure we won't lose revenue — we might lose a little, at first. But we're hoping the community will support our efforts," offered Austen. "It's the right thing to do, and we know they are behind us."