



TO: San Marcos Mayor and City Council  
FROM: Diane Insley, Library Director  
DATE: June 10, 2022  
RE: Library fines and a case for equity

Prior to 1992, the San Marcos Public Library did not charge overdue fines. In a manual system, the time spent on the overdue process in labor and materials outpaced the amount collected in fines. We moved into a new facility and migrated to an integrated library system in 1994. Once the automation process was complete, keeping track of fines and payments became easier and library fines were instituted.

Fines are charged at a rate of 10¢ per day with a maximum overdue charge of \$5.00 per item. Overdue library fines represent a very small fraction of our operating budget, yet disproportionately affect communities that have income insecurity or individuals with low incomes. Late fees add up and become insurmountable for some families when forced to choose between paying the fee or buying necessities.

#### Overdue Fines Collected

Fiscal Year	Total
2022 (through 6/10/22)	\$ 8,658
2021	\$ 2,355
2020	\$ 5,453
2019	\$20,753
2018	\$20,138

Patrons would still receive email and telephone reminders to renew or return items that are overdue and eventually they would be sent a bill to pay for damaged or lost items.

We are unique because we can compare fine and fine-free overdue data. When fines were not charged, a higher percentage of residents maintained a library card and patrons checked out more items per card and kept items for a longer period. At the end of the year, whether fines are charged or not, the loss rate remained the same at .02% of circulation. This number is well-below the national average.

An increasing number of public libraries have cancelled late fees and it isn't just that more people *can* use the library now, it's that they *are* using it. Going fine-free will allow a high number of patrons to regain access to the San Marcos Public Library. The Urban Libraries Council conducted a poll and determined that "fines impact low-income, minority, and non-college educated communities at a much higher rate." Because late fees impact specific populations at a higher rate, we are denying services whether we intend to or not. This is not equity. "While overdue fines do not significantly affect library access for wealthier patrons, they can seriously impact the library relationship for low-income users. Patrons across all libraries accrue fines at similar rates, but locations serving low-income areas have higher average debt amounts and more blocked users." Knowing the demographics of our City and San

Marcos CISD, it makes sense to welcome all cardholders regardless of their age, ability to pay fines, or obtain transportation to the library on the day something is due.

For libraries that have gone fine free, over 30% of cardholders that had overdue fines returned to the library and used their card, more children were able to get library cards because parents were no longer afraid that they couldn't pay the possible fines, and city residents appreciated the goodwill extended to all library customers.

Another advantage of eliminating fines is that it has made librarian's jobs easier and more enjoyable. "Fines are one of the less comfortable topics of discussion that library staff can have and eliminating them has improved staff morale."

Equity is one of the most important issues we face in society today, making it a crucial issue for cities and libraries to address. Cost should not be a prohibiting factor when it comes to public libraries. Eliminating late fees is one of those extra steps that brings our most vulnerable patrons closer to resources they need. Cities such as San Francisco and Chicago are at the forefront of "right-sizing" penalties and applying best practices to abolish unnecessary and inequitable fees." Austin Public Library announced their new fine-free policy in February 2022.

If the pandemic has shown us anything, it is that we need to take care of each other. Looking at our San Marcos Public Library policies "through a lens of equity" going fine-free is supported by the library staff and library board.