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What had been temporary is now permanent: Hoboken Library Goes Fine-Free

Hoboken, NJ December 6, 2021 – Making permanent what had been a temporary suspension of overdue fines, in November the Board of Trustees of the Hoboken Public Library did away with overdue fines in an effort to make the Library more accessible to all.

“The Library first tried a ‘Fine-Free Summer’ in 2019” explained Library Director Jennie Pu, “and what was learned then is that late fees, as a motivator to return books to the Library on time was not really working. In fact, what did turn up was that late fines were actually a bar to some people being able to use the Library.”

The Hoboken Public Library is not alone in this decision. Fines for overdue materials are increasingly seen as counterproductive and out of line with the core library values of providing equal access to materials and resources. Recently the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Public Library, the Queens Public Library, and suburban libraries such as those in Union and Maplewood, have also gone “fine free.”

This is a nationwide trend. The American Library Association asserted, in a 2019 policy statement, “that imposition of monetary library fines creates a barrier to the provision of library and information services.”

In the case of the Hoboken Library, if a customer had a fine of \$10 or more, that customer could not borrow additional materials until the fine was paid down. Fines accumulated, increasing the burden to the customer, sometimes to an onerous degree. This was a challenge for the customer who could not borrow, and the Library that did not get the material back. Now as long as the material is returned, everybody wins.

Library administrators cautioned that borrowed library material must still be returned.

“We automatically renew items once or twice, depending upon the item and if there is someone else waiting for it,” said Library Assistant Director Rosary Van Ingen. “We send gentle reminders by email if an item is overdue. But if an item is not returned after 90 days, we will bill the customer for the item’s replacement value.”

When asked what the biggest fine ever was, one staffer remembered that a library in upstate New York had a book returned 42 years late, racking up a fine of \$3,106.20. But the library had a \$5 fine cap, and since the book was returned, the fee was waived.

About the Hoboken Public Library: Founded in 1890, the Library is a cultural and educational centerpiece of the City of Hoboken, NJ. Its mission is to connect people with each other, ideas, and opportunities, and to support lifelong learning, personal growth, and community development. Full details on the Library, its programs and services, and collections – including a renowned Local History Collection – are available at www.HobokenLibrary.org. The Library building is listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

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