

CPL to eliminate overdue fines and give all residents a fresh start

By Rob Paul

In an effort to support the social and economic recovery of Caledon residents and reduce barriers to library use, the Caledon Public Library Board has eliminated overdue fines.

Caledon Public Library (CPL) will also remove any outstanding fees to give all members a fresh start.

The suspension of overdue fines began during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and was extended through to the end of 2021, as recommended by the Library Board and the Town's Community Recovery Team.

The continued elimination of overdue fines was confirmed by Council's approval of the Library's 2022 budget.

"A fine-free service model fosters a positive customer experience where all are welcomed and library use is encouraged, rather than one where residents are hindered from making use of beneficial community resources and services," said Colleen Lipp, Caledon Public Library's CEO and Chief Librarian.

Though many libraries have long subscribed to the belief that overdue fines encourage patrons to return items promptly, it's now being recognized that this isn't actually the case and rarely do fines encourage those to return books.

"Recent evidence has demonstrated that fines can actually deter patrons from returning items at all and outstanding account balances can prevent residents from accessing beneficial library services," said Lipp. "As a result, there is a steadily growing trend within Canadian libraries to eliminate overdue fines."

Caledon Public Library believes that fines provide a significant barrier to many library-goers and eliminating them ensures that all residents are able to access the Library's physical and virtual spaces equally, and now, more than ever, as Caledon works to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the community needs access to its community library.

Library fines may seem like they have a meaningful impact on budgets, but CPL has found that this is not often the case and eliminating them won't have any substantial long-term affect.

"The proportion of our budget that was offset by overdue fines and fees has decreased over the last several years, declining from 1.2 per cent of our total budget in 2014 to 0.8 per cent of our budget in 2019. This fell off dramatically with the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020," said Lipp. "These figures include both overdue fines and replacement fees recovered when items are lost or damaged. We will be continuing to collect these replacement fees if items are not eventually returned or are returned in a condition that does not allow them to continue circulating."

There will be a slight decrease in funds by eliminating fees, but through CPL's budget, they will be balanced to make up for what is potentially lost.

"Our annual budget process includes an examination of any and all opportunities for efficiencies without negatively impacting service levels," said Lipp. "There were a number of areas of savings in our 2022 budget that helped to offset the reduced fines revenue."

Even with COVID-19 leading to the suspension of overdue fees, this was not a decision that came about simply because of the pandemic. Lipp says CPL and many other libraries have been trending this direction for a long time.

"Though no official business case or budget submission was developed in advance of the pandemic, the elimination of overdue fines

has been a topic of discussion and research amongst the Library's leadership team and the Board for some time," she said. "A move to fines-free services aligns with the Library's core values and commitment to reducing barriers to services. This is true of the broader public library sector and has driven the related trend in North American libraries moving to a fines-free model. This shift amongst Canadian libraries is tracked through an online list of libraries who have made the change (librarianship.ca/features/fine-free-libraries-in-canada/). You'll notice that the list has grown exponentially in recent months."

With overdue fees temporarily suspended throughout the pandemic, it was perfect timing for CPL to implement the long-term plan of eliminating fees all together.

"It certainly made sense to extend what had been a temporary change and to turn a very challenging time into an opportunity," said Lipp. "Many individuals, families and businesses have been struggling over the last two years and moving to a fines-free service model allows CPL to play a small part in supporting Caledon's shared recovery. We also know that there are some people who have not visited or made use of the library in many years because of an outstanding account balance. We've wiped the slates clean and are eager to welcome them back. The amount of money in your wallet should never be a deciding factor in whether or not you can access your local library."