



Library Board Report

To: Chair and Members of the Bruce County Public Library Board

From: Brooke McLean, Director, Library Services

Date: April 17, 2024

Re: Fine-Free Library Service

Staff Recommendation:

That the Bruce County Public Library Board eliminate overdue fines at BCPL for residents effective June 1, 2024, and;

That any existing overdue fines be waived.

Background:

In 2020, Bruce County Public Library eliminated fines on overdue materials due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Fines were reinstated January 2021. In December 2023, the Library Board directed staff to provide a new report to explore going fine-free. Currently, BCPL does not charge fines on materials borrowed by children 5 and under.

Propelled by the pandemic, over 200 libraries in Canada, including over 100 in Ontario, have adopted fine-free library service. Nearby libraries that have implemented fine-free borrowing include Wellington County, Huron County, North Perth, and the Owen Sound and North Grey Union Public Library. The experiences of libraries across North America have demonstrated that the positive impact of fine-free service outweighs any negative effects. A list of fine-free libraries can be found here: [Fine Free Libraries in Canada \(librarianship.ca\)](https://librarianship.ca/fine-free-libraries-in-canada/) Eliminating fines allows public libraries to reconnect with their core mission - ensuring that people have access to the information and resources they need.

Reasons for Eliminating Fines

Equity is at the core of eliminating overdue fines. Fines disproportionately affect families, children, seniors, and marginalized communities, punishing those who can't afford to pay the fines by removing their access to library resources. In Bruce County, 13.8% of those under age 18 live in low-income households, as do 9.8% of working-age adults and 11.5% of those over 65.¹

¹ Grey Bruce Health Unit (2023). 2021 Census: Income, Education, and Labour in Grey-Bruce. Owen Sound, Ontario: Grey Bruce Health Unit.

There is documented evidence that the existence of a fine can cause feelings of shame, embarrassment, and guilt, and results in people avoiding use of the library - in some cases for years². Typically, libraries prevent further borrowing when fines reach a pre-determined amount. A \$10 fine may have minimal impact on some borrowers, and a substantial impact on those in a lower socio-economic bracket. At this point, the library materials are returned and available for others to use. Rather than face fines they cannot pay, individuals avoid using the library and may not allow their children to use the library.³

When children are prevented from using the library's resources because of a fear of fines, it impacts their access to books that support their literacy and cognitive development. Research shows that early interactions with books and reading are indicators of future success at school. Libraries encourage discovery, growth, and education, and children who develop a positive relationship with their library are more likely to reap the benefits, including a life-long love of reading and learning. Assessing fines means that some children are missing out on the significant benefits libraries provide.

The core mission of the Library is to provide access to information and resources for all. Fines are actively hindering access to the essential services libraries provide.

Impact on returns

Although the intent of fines is to ensure that borrowers return materials, research shows that they are an ineffective tool. Fine-free libraries have reported no impact on hold times or late returns and have not experienced increased collection gaps.⁴

In fact, many libraries have reported an increase in the number of overdue materials returned. The month after eliminating fines, the Chicago Public Library experienced a 240% increase in the number of materials returned. The number of items returned late at the Salt Lake Public Library decreased from 9% to 4% after removing fines.⁵

Financial Impact of Eliminating Fines

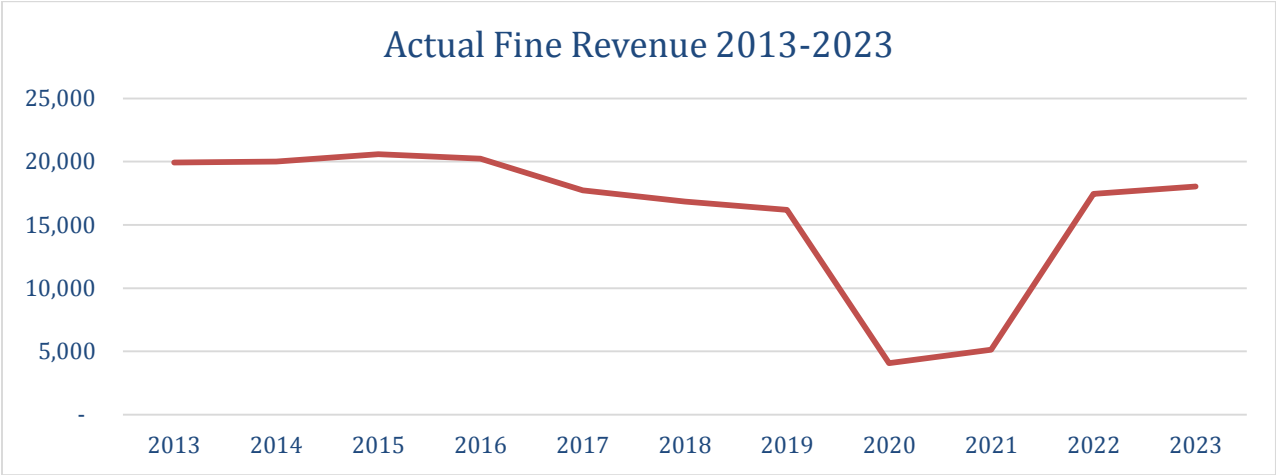
Fines revenue is not a significant source of revenue for the library. As the use of digital materials increases, fine revenue decreases. This is because fines do not accrue on digital items such as eBooks or streaming videos. Those who can afford digital devices and borrow electronically do not acquire fines while those who rely on physical items are subject to penalties.

^{2,3} Moore, O. (2021). [Libraries across Canada are eliminating late fees to help ensure their services are equitable for all - The Globe and Mail](#)

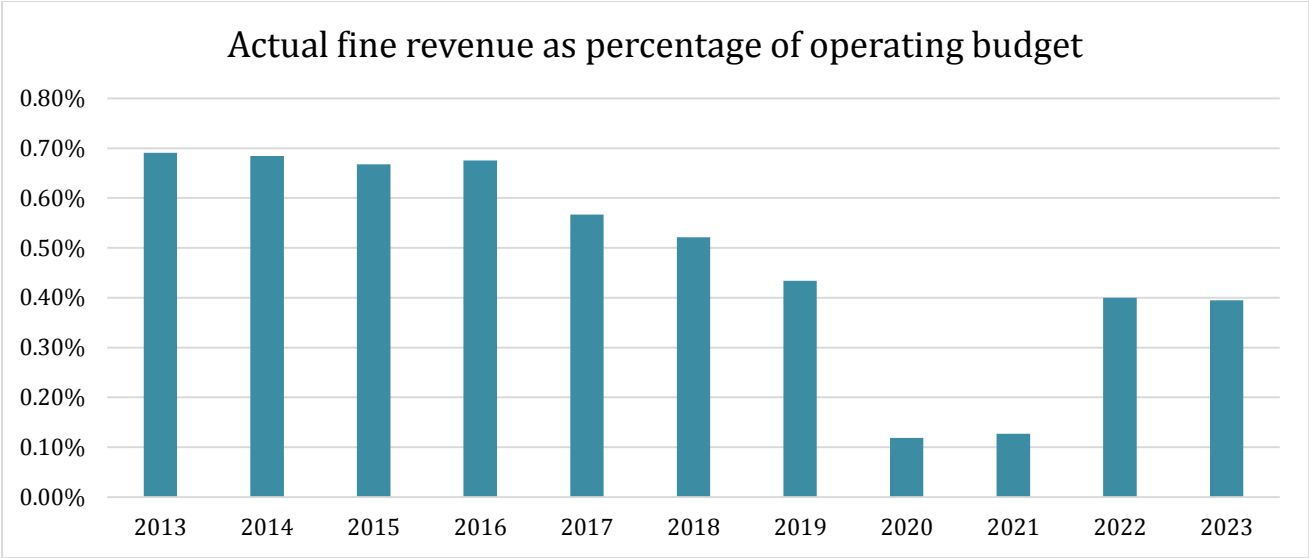
⁴ San Francisco Public Library. (2019, January). Long Overdue: Eliminating fines on overdue materials to increase access to San Francisco Public Library. Retrieved from <https://sfpl.org/uploads/files/pdfs/commission/Fine-Free-Report011719.pdf>

⁵ Unrein, Sabrina. (2020). "Overdue Fines: Advantages, Disadvantages, and How Eliminating Them Can Benefit Public Libraries." Syracuse, NY: iSchool Public Libraries Initiative at Syracuse University.

This chart shows the actual amount collected each year in fines between 2013 and 2023.



In 2023, 0.39% of BCPLs budget came from fines revenue. The following chart shows the actual amount of revenue collected from fines as a percentage of the Library’s actual operating budget.



The act of collecting overdue fines has a financial cost in terms of staff time, as well as a relational cost. Supervisors estimate that an average of 4-7 hours is spent weekly to collect fines. This includes interactions at the desk, calling patrons, and cash-handling. The Ontario Library Association estimates that for every \$5.00 collected in fines, the cost to an organization could be as much as \$5.95. In addition to the time of library staff, there is a lesser impact to County’s Corporate Services team, who track the associated revenue.

Conversations regarding fines can be fraught and require staff to instigate uncomfortable conversations. Fines create negative experiences between community members and library staff who are actively working to create welcoming and inclusive spaces. Removing that point of friction between the patron and staff allows for relationships to be built around positive interactions. Furthermore, staff can use the time previously dedicated to collecting

finer for higher-value work such as program preparation, promotion, and collection management.

Risk Mitigation and Collection Management

There is a difference between late fines and fees for lost or damaged materials. Removing late fines eliminates socio-economic barriers to access. Billing patrons for materials that are damaged or not returned promotes accountability and appropriately manages the collection. Replacement fees would continue to be assessed using the purchase price as noted in the catalogue record. If items are returned, patrons do not have to pay for them and will be able to borrow materials again.

Changes would be made to the current lending process to support fine-free library service including:

1. Remove fines from select materials for Bruce County residents. Non-traditional collection items or special collections may be excluded from the fine-free program. Items borrowed through Inter-Library Loan would still be subject to fines as lending libraries assess the fees to BCPL.
2. Explore implementing automatic renewals for items, and the potential to notify patrons.
3. Decrease the time required for an item to be considered “assumed lost” and bill users for the material. The assessed bill would prevent additional items from being borrowed until the items are either returned or paid for.

Financial/Staffing/Legal/IT Considerations:

The reduced revenue will be budgeted for in future years as part of the regular budget process.

Interdepartmental Consultation:

The Office of the CAO and Corporate Services were consulted.

Link to Strategic Plan:

BCPL Strategic Plan: Trusted Community Connector - ensuring the Library is welcoming to all through diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion strategies.

Bruce County Strategic Plan: Build a strong and inclusive community.