



City of Homer

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Homer Public Library

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Memorandum

TO: Library Advisory Board

THROUGH: Renee Krause, City Clerk

FROM: Ann Dixon, Library Director

DATE: October 5, 2015

SUBJECT: Issues Associated with Charging Non-City Residents for Library Cards

During upcoming budget discussions, charging non-city residents for library cards may arise as a suggested revenue source, as well as an issue of taxpayer equity. However, numerous issues are associated with charging non-City local residents for library cards, including:

- Library Advisory Board and City Council approval will be required to change the current library service area boundaries to include only the City of Homer.
- Credit card capability and online payment ability will be essential. (We don't currently have these capabilities and there will be some cost associated.)
- Public support will be stronger if revenue from library card fees is dedicated to the library budget, preferably materials. The City lawyer has determined that this is allowed by law.
- The workload involved in requiring approximately 9,091 card holders to provide proof of physical residence and assisting them in identifying boundaries will be significant and time-consuming (estimate of 5-10 minutes per currently registered patron). As well, staff and the LAB will have to revise current policies to decide what documentation is acceptable for proving physical residency. Depending on how many cards are paid for, the fee may not amount to more than the cost of paying staff to deal with the workload.
- Front desk staff, already stressed by staffing and budget cuts, will bear the brunt of any ill will, frustration, confusion, and misunderstanding engendered by this change.
- We will be asking patrons to pay for a service they are accustomed to receiving for free at a time when service levels may be reduced to fewer open hours, fewer books and other media, and fewer programs, i.e. pay more, receive less.
- Charging for library cards will create barriers to service for low-income and fixed-income residents.

- Reducing access to information resources and reading materials will have long-term negative impacts upon school readiness, educational achievement, literacy, lifelong learning, economic development, citizenship and quality of life in the community.

From a standpoint of library service, the most serious concern is that some people will be unable to afford access to library materials. Such a situation impoverishes our community at large and is at odds with the core mission of a public library.

Yet if we do not charge non-City residents for library cards, additional staff may have to be laid off, resulting in the following serious repercussions:

- If open hours fall below 40, the Library will no longer meet guidelines from the State of Alaska for public libraries in communities of 3,000-10,000 to qualify for annual Public Library Assistance grants. These grants average \$6,500 per year and are spent directly on books.
- Reducing hours below 40 per week may jeopardize qualifying for other grants, as well.
- Such reduced hours would fail to serve the community at a minimum benchmark level. The Library would move from its current status as a “Star Library” nationwide to a library that doesn’t meet minimum state guidelines.

Though difficult to predict, a reasonable revenue prediction for library cards is \$17,500, based on the following:

- Of 9,091 current cardholders, 4,525 are City residents and 4,566 reside outside the City but within our service area.
- Of the 4,566 non-City residents, many are families with several or more members holding library cards.
- Some current patrons will choose not to pay for a library card; others will be unable to. Many families will choose to pay for one card only for the whole family.
- A conservative estimate of patrons willing to pay for a card is 500, perhaps 1,000.
- Charges imposed by other public libraries in Alaska for out-of-service-area patrons range from \$10 to \$90, with \$20-\$50 being the most common range.
- A low-to-mid-range estimate of \$20 per card x 875 patrons, or \$35 per card x 500 patrons, yields \$17,500.
- Because there is no way to predict how much revenue would be received, the fee should be reviewed after the first year of enactment.

One further issue with charging for library cards is equity.

- City residents arguably pay more for library service through both property and sales tax, while out-of-City residents contribute only through sales tax. From the perspective of residency, a library user fee for out-of-City residents is reasonable and fair.

- Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, user fees create a different inequity, that of access based on ability to pay. Because literacy and access to information are cornerstones of the democratic process, as well as economic prosperity, public libraries play a vital role in equalizing opportunity for all citizens. Charging for access creates barriers for some patrons, which in the long run is detrimental to the entire community.

In reality, the Homer Public Library functions as a regional library, serving the needs of the entire southwestern Kenai Peninsula, from Ninilchik to Kachemak Selo and communities across Kachemak Bay. A broader or more robust base of revenue is clearly needed to maintain service at even a reduced level of operation. However, a better solution would address that need without creating barriers to information, informal learning, and literacy. If it becomes necessary to institute fees for out-of-City library cards in order to maintain minimum acceptable levels of service, it would be prudent to also explore options on a regional scale for long-term support and development of library services through mechanisms that provide equal access for all residents of our current service area, as well as the entire Kenai Borough.