

Eating and Drinking in the Library – Update

Date:	January 19, 2009
To:	Toronto Public Library Board
From:	City Librarian

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide a one year review of the implementation of the new eating and drinking rule at Toronto Public Library. Customer and staff feedback, incidents and observations are reviewed.

The intent of the change was to create a welcoming public space, where customers could enjoy beverages and light snacks while spending time in the Library. This responds to the Strategic Plan 2008 - 2011 goal to promote participation in library programs and services. Areas are designated where eating and drinking are prohibited, e.g., to protect special collections. Overall, the change has been well received and the problems created minimal. Many customers have been observed enjoying food and drink in the libraries, with few problems. Relatively few complaints have been received from the public. There has been a general increase of daily housekeeping requirements in the branches, but nothing that was unexpected given the change in policy.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The report has no financial impact beyond what has already been approved in the current year's budget.

The Director, Finance & Treasurer has reviewed this Financial Impact Statement and is in agreement with it.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of September 17, 2007, the Toronto Public Library Board approved the new rule regarding food and drink as part of Rules of Conduct Policy revisions. The Board requested that staff report in one year on the implications of eating and drinking revisions to the Rules of Conduct Policy on Library facilities and staff.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

In September 2007 the Rules of Conduct were revised to allow eating and drinking in the Library. This change was consistent with the approach of many public libraries across North America. Allowing eating and drinking is in tune with urban practices and creates a welcoming space. Eating and drinking in the Library also responds to the Strategic Plan 2008 - 2011 goal to promote participation in library programs and services.

The revision allowed the Library to designate areas where eating and drinking would continue to be prohibited, to protect areas with special collections. The Library recognizes the importance of balancing the needs of individual users with maintaining a welcoming environment.

COMMENTS

Public Response

Many customers are now enjoying eating and drinking in the Library while studying, using resources or meeting with friends. For the most part, customers are bringing in bottled drinks (water, juice, pop) and hot drinks (coffee, tea) in cups with lids. In terms of food, it is mainly packaged snack foods. The widespread acceptance of the change can be seen in the number of customers taking advantage of the opportunity to eat and drink in the Library. One written, positive comment has been received.

A relatively small number of complaints (36) have also been received. Much of the feedback resulted from media reports about the new rule, specifically the Toronto Star and CBC coverage. Customer feedback was not related to specific incidents or direct impacts; rather it was related to the concept or philosophy of allowing eating and drinking. Once the media interest passed, customer interest in the issue also waned.

At its meeting of October 20, 2008, three members of the public made presentations regarding food and drink in Toronto Public Library branches, one speaking in support and two opposed.

Staff Response

When the change in policy was implemented, staff in several locations expressed concerns, particularly in relation to collections, cleaning, and customer relations. Some staff expressed their views in writing using the Health and Safety Concern Form. These forms are the internal mechanism for addressing health and safety issues and they are reviewed by both Management and the members of the Central Joint Health and Safety Committee. This process is a multi-step one and throughout the discussions, changes have been incorporated in the implementation of the changed policy to address staff concerns. In the Research and Reference libraries, for example, these include items such as: revised signage to clarify where food is not allowed, changing refuse bags nightly rather than reusing them; additional staff orientation and guidance on implementation; interim reports to staff on findings, etc. We have committed to a further response to the Central Committee following the January 19, 2009 Library Board meeting.

Areas where eating and drinking continue to be prohibited were identified with the implementation of the policy change.

Experience over the past year with the policy change has been generally positive with a relatively small number of problems. Staff has reported a general increase of daily housekeeping requirements in branches, e.g., there are more crumbs on the carpet, wrappers on the floors and tables and juice and coffee rings on furniture. There have also been some spills on upholstery and carpet. The level of housekeeping is what would be expected given the change in policy. There has been no increase in pest infestations or damage to furniture. A small number of keyboards have had to be replaced, but at a cost of \$13 per keyboard this does not translate into a budget pressure. Garbage cans have been made more available in public areas.

In general, staff has not had significant problems enforcing the new rule and ensuring that the opportunity to eat and drink in the Library is not abused. No serious Rules of Conduct issues have resulted from the change. While we have not been able to satisfy all staff concerns, we will continue to monitor the situation in our branches and also investigate the “best practices” at other library systems which have similar food and drink policies. The Library will also continue to develop communication strategies that support staff in applying the eating and drinking rule appropriately and helping customers to understand the aim of creating a welcoming environment for all.

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SIGNATURE

Jane Pyper
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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Rules of Conduct Policy