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To: Toronto Public Library Board – September 26, 2005  
From: City Librarian  
Subject: **Youth Incentive Program – Teen Forgiveness Fines and Fees Waiver Pilot Project**

Purpose:

To seek Toronto Public Library Board approval of a teen forgiveness fines and fees waiver pilot project.

Funding Implications and Impact Statement:

The implementation of this project can be accommodated within the existing operating budget.

It is anticipated that any lost revenue from fines and fees not collected during the pilot project will, to some degree, be offset by the recovery of long overdue material. In addition, long overdue teen fines and fees may not be recoverable.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Toronto Public Library Board:

- (1) approve the implementation of a three-month teen forgiveness fines and fees waiver pilot project beginning in October 2005; and
- (2) request that staff report back to the Board on the completion of the pilot project with an analysis of its success and a proposal for continued incentives to encourage use of the Library by youth.

Background:

The Library's Key Priorities as set out in its Strategic Plan include reaching youth by reducing barriers that discourage teens from reading, serving newcomers and low-income neighbourhoods. As well, the Board passed a motion at the April 4, 2005 meeting requesting that staff consult with teens regarding incentive options to encourage teen use of the Library including the possible provision of an overdue fines waiver for teens.

Beginning September 7, 2005, the Library also introduced a reduced fine structure for teens, ages 13-17. While this will encourage teens who do not already have significant fines to use the

Library, it will not help teens whose borrowing privileges are suspended and have not returned to the Library because of this. There currently are 20,585 inactive teen borrowers with outstanding fines and fees; half of these teens have their borrowing privileges suspended.

Comments:

Branch staff are actively involved in adding teen services and programs and promoting them to youth. The suspension of borrowing privileges resulting from overdue charges is counterproductive to our efforts to get teens to read and take out items from the Library. Staff frequently find that teens are unable to borrow library material due to fines incurred, especially during their early teen years (13-14). Parents often won't allow their children to use the Library once they run up high fines.

Teens often cite fines as a big deterrent in their library use.

“... I forgot to return my books, and when I returned them, they told me I had to pay a lot of money. I did not realize that I was paying a lot more than when I was 12. Now, I can't borrow stuff because I can't pay the Library back, and I'm afraid to tell my parents.” (*Shanta, age 13*)

“... It's so unfair that we have to pay \$.30 once I turned 13, just like what my older sister would pay and she is like 20. But we don't have a job, and we can't afford it. That's why my friends don't like to use the Library. I know that we should return books on time, but sometimes shit (sorry) happens, and because we can't afford to pay, we have to tell our parents and my parents just go crazy. Then it is better not to borrow books.” (*John, age 14*)

TPL High School Outreach staff report that fines are a great impediment to teen use, a problem that was cited repeatedly when our librarians demonstrated the Virtual Reference Library in schools.

TPL Teen Parenting program staff report that young mothers often don't go back to the Library because they have fines. They said that they were afraid to go back into a Library. Even if staff told them we might work something out or waive the fines, they said that they felt too intimidated to come in.

TPL youth focus groups reported that fines are a great barrier to use. Teens often don't have the money or can't approach parents to pay off debts.

Consultation with TPL's Youth Advisory Groups (YAGs) across the city echoed these sentiments and supported the introduction of a fine forgiveness voucher or coupon. Responses from the YAGs strongly supported an amount exceeding \$10 to successfully draw teens back into the Library. They also suggested considering different formats or approaches, such as value-added cards, or a bonus or reward system for returning items on time. The effective use of media, in promoting both the program and the Library, was also stressed as crucial in attracting youth.

At recent meetings, both the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board reported that a teen amnesty program of some kind would be extremely helpful

and welcome. Teachers report that teens definitely consider fines a barrier to using the public library. They strongly encouraged TPL to move forward with an amnesty initiative, as using the public library is key to the success of their students.

A survey of other library systems produced examples of many types of amnesty programs, from “food for fines” programs to “clean slate” programs offering teens one chance to have their entire overdue fines waived. The proposed Toronto Public Library program will build and expand on the experience of some of these other programs.

It is proposed therefore that the Library proceed with the introduction of a teen fines and fees waiver coupon for 13 – 17 year olds, in the amount of \$20 for a three-month pilot project, as a component of our efforts to draw youth back into the Library. It is expected that the waiver coupon will especially assist teens from newcomer and low income neighbourhoods. A fun and friendly waiver coupon will be offered to teens giving them a chance to have their overdue charges waived. The coupon will be for one use only per teen and expire at the end of the three-month pilot project.

The coupon will be distributed through the high school outreach program, branch teen programs and outreach initiatives, teen parenting program, *ramp*, student media and community service agencies serving teens.

Wording on the coupon will also promote the new teen fine structure, encourage the return of library materials and briefly survey teens regarding library use.

The implementation of this initiative will coincide with the *2005 Ontario Public Library Week* and its aggressive campaign to highlight youth programs and services to attract young people into the Library.

The distribution, use and return locations of the coupons will be tracked, and benchmarks will be established to measure the success of the program. This will help determine the need for a permanent program and the form that such a program should take.

#### Conclusion:

It is recommended the Board approve the implementation of the teen forgiveness fines and fees waiver pilot project. The project will move the Library further toward meeting its service goals for teens. Based on an evaluation of the pilot, staff will consider the development of recommendations for an ongoing program.

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Josephine Bryant  
City Librarian

List of Attachments:

Not applicable.