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Beth Burns: Proud to support Mayor Carter's fine-free library plan. Here's why



Rakeem Amerson shelves science fiction books in the Media Room at the George Latimer Central Library. (Jean Pieri / Pioneer Press)

By **BETH BURNS** |

PUBLISHED: September 20, 2018 at 12:43 am | UPDATED: September 20, 2018 at 2:22 pm

The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library is proud to support Mayor Melvin Carter's proposal to eliminate overdue fines in 2019. In fact, the community and business leaders who serve on The Friends' board of directors are actively in support of the proposal. The thoughtful, research-driven process that led to this proposal affirmed again and again that a fine-free Saint Paul Public Library represents good policy and good business.

False narratives about a fine-free library signaling the end of Personal Responsibility are just that: false. Our neighbors to the east in Washington County can tell us that, despite being fine-free for years, there are still books on the shelves and people do, in fact, return materials. Some cities that have gone fine-free have actually seen return rates go up.

People bring back books late every day and to every library branch in the City – from St. Anthony Park to Sun Ray. I have paid late fines. Librarians – who go to libraries every day! – will tell you that even they sometimes bring back books late. Because life happens. And we get that.

What is more subtle is that a financial penalty for a late return means something different from one person to another, and that depends on income.

For some of us, paying a \$10 balance is no big deal. We see it as a donation to the library. We pay our balance and continue to borrow items. Other families, however, are choosing between paying their fine and buying school supplies or groceries. They stop using the library altogether when the fine becomes a barrier too big to address. Some never step foot in a library in the first place because the fear of fines alone keeps them away.

Active library users know that the ability to check out new materials is incentive enough to return items. In this proposal, if you don't return materials, you will not be able to continue borrowing. You either bring it back or pay the replacement fee – you are responsible for the materials you check out.

Let's celebrate this proposal because it is going to get thousands of Saint Paul residents back into their library, and that's good for everyone.

More children will learn to love reading.

More new parents will learn the skills of raising healthy children.

More middle schoolers will get help with their homework.

More people will learn a new language.

More job seekers will gain workforce skills.

More entrepreneurs will find support for their Big Idea.

More teens will find a safe, supportive after-school environment.

More seniors will avoid isolation through engagement in this common space.

We all benefit when our libraries are full.

And, if you miss paying your fines as a “donation” to your library, give to The Friends! We spend every day working as a catalyst for the library to strengthen and inspire our community.

Beth Burns is president of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.

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