



Sharon Upton, circulation supervisor at the downtown Yakima Valley Regional Library, sorts books from drop-off bin Thursday morning. Upton says so many books are

being returned because of the library's new overdue book fine policy that bins are filling rapidly. "We really have to keep an eye on them or they run over," she said.

The free read is over as library starts fines for late returns

By **GRAHAM BLACK**
YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

Librarians threatened to start imposing fines on overdue books almost four years ago. Now, they are going to deliver.

With the a new circulation system in place, librarians say they can now track where the books are and assess fines on overdues and, they hope, keep more of the titles available on the shelves.

"Now we are finally coming through on that," said Amy Ravenholt, library community services manager.

The board of directors of the Yakima Valley Regional Library decided four years ago to start fining, but it has taken until this spring to have the capability to do so.

Beginning July 1, late materials from

the regional libraries will cost borrowers a dime a day.

The move comes after a recent library inventory revealed almost half of all checked-out books, magazines and videos are overdue, some by as much as three years. This leaves library users often unable to get their hands on materials for months or longer, and having to settle for other titles while they wait.

It's good news for customers, frustrated by looking for long-overdue books, but it could put a bite on those who let due dates slip.

"We're going to have to be really conscious about it," said Trish Taylor of Yakima. She was helping her sons, Cole and Seth, pick out some summer reading material in the downtown Yakima branch Wednesday.

Cole, who will start sixth grade in the

fall, said he and Seth, who will be in eighth, visit the library often and usually get their books back on time.

They will have extra incentive to do so soon because mom says she is not paying for the overdues.

THE 19 BRANCHES in the regional system stretch from Naches to Mabton. All of the more than 340,000 titles in the system can be tracked with the new computer setup. Borrowers who wish to avoid fines can make returns to any branch regardless of where the item was checked out.

"We are not looking to penalize people or to make money," said Monica Weyhe, deputy library director. "We just want the materials back in the library so that other

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people can use them."

Most public libraries in the state impose fines of 10 to 15 cents a day for late books.

The North Central Regional Library that serves Wenatchee does not collect fines, though. Dan Howard, the system's assistant director, said that charging patrons money goes against the library's mission and that it could discourage people with late fees from coming back to check out books.

"It can be a barrier for folks," he said. "I don't want some small fee to keep kids from reading."

The regional library system mailed postcard reminders to

customers with late books last month, and that has brought a flood of returns. Staff in the Yakima branch are having trouble finding shelf space for all the books coming back.

However, quite a few of the cards were returned because borrowers had moved, Ravenholt said. Library staff hope that mailing notices will help get material returned sooner, before people leave the area.

Library users can expect to receive a notice in the mail next month if they have one of the 29,000 titles currently overdue. After an item is two weeks late, a borrower will no longer be able to check out materials until the item are returned.

There will be no fine on overdues returned by July 1.

The fines are capped at \$2.50 for each overdue book, and borrowers will be required to keep their library balance under \$10 in order to continue checking out materials.

The library used to collect overdue fines but stopped about 20 years ago when the cost of administering fines exceeded the money brought in, Ravenholt said. The new circulation system should be more efficient.

"Now we're completely automated. We don't have to have human beings doing this," she said.

The humans will, instead, be explaining to customers in the

days to come that they will have to pay their fines before they can continue checking out materials.

The fact that the library no longer collects fines came as a surprise to Anna Becker, who was working on her resume Wednesday in the Yakima branch.

"If they are not keeping the books in, it makes it hard for the people who are trying to find them," she said. "I don't mind them charging and, unfortunately, nothing is free in life."

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