

Summer 8-14-2014

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Recommended Citation

Zumbach, Lauren, "Orland library revotes to keep Internet policy permitting porn" (2014). *Orland Park Public Library (Illinois), 2013*.
3.
https://dc.uwm.edu/orland_park_library_challenge/3

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Orland library revotes to keep Internet policy permitting porn



Orland Park Public Library trustees discussed the library's Internet policy Monday before voting again to keep adult computers unfiltered. (Lauren Zumbach, Chicago Tribune)

By Lauren Zumbach, Tribune reporter

AUGUST 19, 2014, 1:27 PM

For the third time, Orland Park Public Library trustees voted Monday night to keep adults' Internet access on library computers unfiltered.

The revote was held after the Illinois Attorney General's Public Access Bureau determined that a previous vote on the policy violated Illinois open meetings law. The policy came under scrutiny in October after two people complained it gave patrons permission to access any legal materials — including pornography.

In a 4-2 vote, trustees again settled on a compromise: keep Internet access unrestricted in the adult computer lab while strengthening a patron behavior policy to make it easier for librarians to intervene if one patron's computer use disturbs another.

Board president Nancy Healy and Trustees Beth Gierach, Denis Ryan and Diane Jennings voted in favor of unfiltered access, as they did in a vote earlier this year. Trustee Catherine Lebert was absent.

Trustees who supported the policy cited the First Amendment and a desire to avoid restricting access to information along with illicit materials.

"If we could find a filter that covered only child pornography and things considered obscene by local standards, I'd have no hesitation. Unfortunately, no one has come up with that," Jennings said.

Trustees Dan Drew and Julie Ann Craig, who voted against the measure, urged fellow board members to consider filters a library consultant said would block 0.06 percent of an estimated 500 million to 800 million active websites and could be disabled at a patron's request within a few minutes.

But Gierach said she worried that if patrons had to justify a request to remove filters, it could be an invasion of privacy, while Ryan questioned making individual employees responsible for determining what is and isn't inappropriate.

The decision was consistent with the board's vote on Feb. 12, but after complaints from Megan Fox and Kevin DuJan, who initially raised the issue of pornography in the library and have aggressively pushed to modify policies permitting unfiltered Internet access ever since, the Public Access Bureau ruled that the meeting had been illegally held on Abraham Lincoln's birthday, a legal holiday in Illinois.

In March, trustees voted to ratify the policies, but after another round of complaints, the Public Access Bureau determined the board didn't do enough to explain its actions to the public prior to the vote and directed trustees to hold a third vote.

About 50 people attended this week's meeting, and those who addressed the board before the vote on both sides of the issue received loud applause.

Linda Nicolais, of Orland Park, said she was "appalled" that the library would permit pornography, while Virginia Williams, also of Orland Park and visibly angered by a flyer she'd received about the library's policies, said she "could not believe adults sitting here are worried about this library."

The library's most vocal critics, including Fox and DuJan, have accused library staff and trustees of covering up incidents of public masturbation and child pornography access and supporting policies that make the library unsafe for families.

Trustees and representatives of the American Library Association denied those allegations Monday.

"Providing Internet access is not presumed to be providing child pornography," said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, deputy director in the association's intellectual freedom office. "There is no child pornography crisis here."

A review of the library's internal incident reports between 2001 and April 2013 conducted by Orland Park police showed three complaints about patrons allegedly accessing pornographic sites, including one instance where a patron said another patron was looking at child pornography and police were not called. When questioned by library staff two days later, the man denied the allegations, according to the police report.

Police determined that incident — and another in which a man was allegedly masturbating in the adult computer area and police were not called — deserved police follow-up.

Library spokeswoman Bridget Bittman said the library director immediately recognized that police should have been called and reprimanded staff in an email shortly after both incidents, though she said she did not know why police were not notified after the man accused of viewing child pornography visited the library again two days after the incident.

In an interview, Bittman noted that accessing illegal materials on library computers is against library policy and that even nearby libraries that say patrons aren't allowed to view pornography but don't use filters, such as Tinley Park's, provide no additional barriers to accessing child pornography.

Even filters aren't foolproof, she said, though Drew and Craig said they'd support filters even if they only made access more difficult and made people feel safer.

When visiting the library, Drew said his first stop is checking what patrons are viewing in the adult computer lab. "You see some creepy looking people," said Drew, who acknowledged he'd never seen someone watching pornography at the library.

Jennings said a majority of more than 100 northern Illinois libraries that displayed Internet policies on their websites did not filter Internet access on computers used by adults, according to research by library staff.

The Orland Park Public Library does use filters on computers in the children's area that cannot be removed even with a parent's permission and has adopted additional safeguards since November, Jennings said.

In addition to adult and children's areas that are strictly separated — no one under 18 is allowed in the adult computer lab and no adults unaccompanied by kids are permitted in the children's section — the library now requires staff keep patrons' photo identification while they use computers in case a complaint is made and added walk-through checks of computer areas so staff can keep an eye on screens.

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