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Niles library considers installing internet filters on adult computers

Igor Studenkov
For Sun-Times Media
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The Niles Public Library Board is considering adding internet content filters on computers used by teenagers and adults.

The library currently has filters on computers in the KidSpace area, but computers in teen and adult areas aren't filtered. However, a recent controversy over Orland Park Public Library patrons using computers to view pornography caused the Niles library to reconsider their policy.

After discussing the issue during the Oct 15 meeting, the board asked the staff to prepare a report about potential internet filters. It is expected to discuss the report during the Nov 19 meeting.

The Orland Park library controversy started in the fall of 2013. Orlando Park resident Megan Fox used library computers to homeschool her children. When she saw a male patron use a library computer to watch pornography, she complained to the library officials.

Library officials argued that it was a matter of First Amendment rights. As the materials weren't illegal or obscene, the library policy allowed patrons to use adult-only computers to look up anything, even pornography.

Since then, Fox and her friend, Kevin DuJan, waged a campaign to pressure the library change its policy. According to a Chicago Tribune report, as of Sept. 2, the library reported that the controversy cost it \$125,000 in legal fees.

Niles Public Library has public computers in three areas – the KidSpace area, which is meant for children up to ninth grade, the Teen Underground, which is meant for teenagers from grades 9-12, and the computer area on the lower level, which is used by teenagers and adults.

In her report to the board, Niles Public Library Interim Director Susan Lempke explained that only KidSpace computers have filter programs that block access to sites that feature nudity. Each computer has its own filter, Lempke said.

If a child wants to research medical issues, some perfectly child-appropriate results could be blocked, she said. If that happens, the current set-up allows librarians to turn a filter off without affecting other computers, Lempke said.

Lempke explained that the library does have a policy against using adult computers to watch pornography.

"If anyone watches porn, we have a way to remotely cut them off, and we can talk to them individually," she explained.

If a patron continues to get caught watching porn again, their computer access privileges would be suspended, Lempke said.

The library could implement a firewall-style filter, which would block porn on all computers, even patron laptops and e-readers patrons that use the building's public wifi network, she said.

However, Lempke argued that it might be going too far, since those kinds of filters tend to be far more restrictive than filters used in KidSpace – and that it's much harder to unblock websites that get filtered by mistake.

Board President Morgan Dubiel agreed

"The firewall seems a bit extreme," he said.

Trustee Danette spoke in favor of adding filters to adult computers similar to the ones already used in KidSpace. She asked Lempke how well the current policy against porn is enforced.

"It gets dealt with immediately," Lempke answered. "It isn't tolerated."

Library attorney Dennis Walsh advised the board to tread carefully

"Internet filtering of library computers for adults is complicated," he said. "I suggest we work with the staff to figure it out."

Dubiel surveyed the rest of the board to get their opinions.

Trustee Lynda Ryan leaned against filtering, especially if it involved a firewall. Trustees Chris Ball and Karen Dimond said that they were interesting in seeing the staff report on the library options. After a brief discussion, the board decided to ask the staff to do just that.

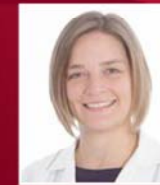
The board is expected to get the report during the next meeting, which will take place on Nov 19.

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