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Lauren Zumbach

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Orland Park library OKs compromise on computer porn

Suburban library will continue to allow access to internet porn

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By Lauren Zumbach Tribune reporter

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Orland Park's public library will continue to give adults unfiltered Internet access, including the ability to view pornography on computers, but a policy change also would give librarians discretion if patrons complain.

Library trustees unanimously approved changes Wednesday to forbid "viewing of material which may be disturbing or offensive to others within viewing distance." Library director Mary Weimar said that could apply to pornography.

The change, intended to strengthen the policy against inappropriate patron behavior, also prohibits verbally or physically threatening or harassing staff, volunteers and patrons. In a 5-2 vote the same night, trustees also agreed to keep adult computers unfiltered.

"It is somewhat of a compromise," said library board President Nancy Healy.

The policy came under scrutiny in October after two patrons urged the library to adopt restrictions. Trustees defending the library's stance, which allows unfiltered Internet access in the adult computer lab as long as material is not illegal or obscene, said using filters on adult computers could limit patrons' access to information.

The new policy outlines specific disciplinary actions for repeated offenses, Weimar said, ranging from one-day suspensions to yearlong bans, with the opportunity to appeal to the board.

"We're making sure all computer staff are empowered and encouraged and trained to take care of things immediately on being notified," Weimar said.

Healy said she "wanted adults to be responsible for their own unrestricted access," and cited Illinois Library Association guidelines stating government may not prohibit expression of ideas society finds offensive or disagreeable.

"For me it came down to a constitutional issue," said trustee Diane Jennings. "It's not for me to judge what patrons should or shouldn't be looking at."

Trustees Julie Ann Craig and Catherine Lebert opposed unrestricted access. Lebert, participating by phone, requested the board delay the vote for further discussion and later said she believed the library could filter access while also protecting people's rights.

Filters that library staff could disable on a patron's request would cost between \$2,400 and \$5,384 in the first year, and \$1,500 and \$2,154 in following years, said Joy McFadden, the library's head of virtual services.

The library uses filters on all computers accessible to children under 18 and introduced new measures to limit children's access to unfiltered Internet over the past few months, said library spokesperson Bridget Bittman. Children under 18 are not permitted in the adult computer lab, where adults must show identification and all computers have privacy screens limiting what nearby patrons can see. Adults unaccompanied by children are not permitted in the children's area, and filters on teen computers cannot be removed even with a parent's permission.

After being sworn in at the special meeting, newly appointed trustee Elizabeth Gierach joined the majority in the 5-2 vote to uphold the current policy of unfiltered access on adult computers.

Library trustees had said they wanted to wait to vote on the Internet policy until filling the trustee position, which opened when former president Carole Hillman stepped down, citing health reasons, in October. But Gierach's vote wasn't needed to pass the measure.

"I believe in access and think that's the mission of a library," said Gierach, who has lived in Orland Park for 35 years. She is the fourth trustee on the library's board to be appointed midterm.

Gierach, who served on the District 230 school board for 10 years and recently retired as assistant vice president for admissions at Roosevelt University in Chicago, said she applied for the trustee position with "no agenda other than being a huge fan of the library." She will serve the rest of Hillman's term, ending in 2015.