

Meeting Room Use Policy FAQ



FORT WORTH
PUBLIC LIBRARY

Q: Why are we enacting a new policy for library meeting rooms?

A: City and Library leadership have worked this year to address some concerns that have arisen about the meeting room rental policies used in libraries and community centers citywide. In close collaboration with the City's Legal department, the decision has been made by City management to treat libraries and community center meeting rooms as "designated public forums" for First Amendment purposes.

Q: What is a designated public forum?

A: This is a legal concept established by the Supreme Court and defined by case law. It allows the government to designate a space for free public expression when that space would not otherwise be considered a traditional forum for free expression. Libraries' traditional purpose is not necessarily as a public forum for First Amendment expression, but making meeting rooms available for public rental places them into the category of being a place for public expression.

Q: Does this new "designated public forum" policy apply to other public areas in the Library, such as seating areas on the Library floor?

A: No. The policy only addresses meeting rooms; the rest of the Library is covered by our normal Behavior Policy. We can't regulate what people are talking about in those spaces, but we can deal with unreasonable volume, disruption, etc.

Q: Do other public libraries work like this?

A: Yes. This is the typical designation for public libraries that offer meeting room rentals to the public. Some libraries choose not to rent their meeting rooms to the public at all, so they are not considered designated public forums and may have very different meeting room policies in place.

Q: What is the meeting room philosophy within public librarianship?

A: As public institutions that exist to serve the general public, libraries are expected to provide open use of facilities and resources with as few restrictions as possible. Through the Library Bill of Rights, the field of librarianship upholds the First Amendment, which protects the right to free speech and the right to receive information. Access to library facilities as a place of free expression is seen as an extension of this key tenet of librarianship. You can learn more from the [ALA's Library Bill of Rights](#) and [best practices for library meeting rooms](#).

Q: How will this new policy affect our day-to-day work?

A: There will be very little change to how we previously handled meeting room rentals. The new policy will result in fewer denials and less staff time spent researching potential renters because library staff will not have to make these sorts of judgment calls.

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Q: What are the key points to know about changes to the policy?

A: Meeting room policy changes reflect the City's decision to recognize libraries and community centers as designated public forums for First Amendment purposes.

- **We will not grant or deny reservations based on the prospective renter's viewpoints.** When we approve a reservation, that does not mean the Library or the City supports or endorses the renter's viewpoints or activities.
- **Promotional/advertising materials for any rental must now include the following statement: "This event is not endorsed or sponsored by the City of Fort Worth."** If the renter does not include this statement on their materials, the reservation may be cancelled. Any exceptions to this rule must be approved in writing by the Library's Communications Manager, Theresa Davis.
- **Renters will now be limited to two (2) ongoing reservations for any one person or organization per calendar month, systemwide.** The renter can make no more than two reservations at one branch or one reservation each at two branches in any single month.

Q: What are key policy points that have NOT changed?

A: Most of our policies have not changed due to the new designated public forum status. For example:

- Library programs and City events still take precedence over public rentals.
- All renters must follow the Library's Rules of Behavior and comply with health, safety, fire, noise, and occupancy codes and ordinances of the City of Fort Worth.
- Attendance at meetings or events is limited to the capacity of the hosting Library's facilities. All events must be contained within the rented room (not in hallways, entryways, or adjacent spaces) so as not to disrupt library operations. Meetings and events cannot flow out onto the library floor or other areas.
- Participants and activities cannot interfere with regular library services or endanger FWPL employees, customers, or property.
- Nonprofit organizations will still receive a discounted rental with proof of IRS tax-exempt status. Homeowners' associations and neighborhood groups registered with the City will still receive rentals at no cost.
- Sales, direct marketing, and the like are still prohibited activities in Library meeting rooms.

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- Raffles, bingo, *lotería*, and other games of chance are still prohibited in municipal libraries according to state law.
- Non-Library and non-City fundraising is still prohibited.

Q: What if we get requests from organizations or individuals whose opinions we disagree with? What if they run counter to the Library's mission and philosophy?

A: They may still rent Library meeting rooms and should receive excellent customer service. As library workers and City employees, intellectual freedom and respectful political neutrality are the cornerstones of our work and highly valued by the communities we serve.

Q: The new policy says events that violate the law, or involve defamation or harassment are prohibited. What constitutes defamation or harassment?

A: Texas law defines defamation of character differently depending on whether it is spoken or written. Spoken defamation, or slander, is a false statement about you that is spoken to a third person and is not protected by any privilege. Written defamation, or libel, is a false written statement that exposes you to "public hatred, contempt or ridicule, or financial injury." Texas law defines harassment as intentional behavior that is intended to annoy, torment, alarm, abuse, or embarrass someone.

Q: What do we do if renters or event participants harass or defame our staff or patrons?

A: Apply the Library's Behavior Policy as you would with any other member of the public. Renters may be asked to leave for noncompliance with the Behavior Policy and may be prohibited from securing future meeting room rentals at the discretion of the Library Director.

Q: At what point is an event disruptive to Library operations?

A: When it violates our Behavior Policy and/or moves outside of the confines of the meeting room. Branch or Regional Manager will make the call if a meeting is "disruptive" to Library operations beyond what is outlined in our Behavior Policy.

Q: If a staff member determines that a reservation should be canceled due to a violation of the policy, what is the next step?

A: The staff member should contact their branch manager and share their findings. The branch manager should then contact their regional manager to discuss the situation and make a final decision within five business days of the reservation being placed. The regional manager will then request the fee change via email to libraryactivenettrainers@fortworthtexas.gov and cc the Library's Assistant Director of Public Services. In the email, the regional manager will explain why the fee needs changed, including details (who, what, why). A member of the staff training group will process the refund and it will be returned to the Customer's original form of payment within 45 days in the form of a credit to a credit card or a paper check. If we cancel the reservation ahead of time, the renter will receive a full refund. However, if we have to stop an event in progress for violating Library policies, the renter will receive a 50% refund.

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Q: What about political events? How do we determine which ones comply with the policy and which ones do not?

A: We do not allow reservations to individuals or groups affiliated with a political candidate to rent space for a political- or election-related event. To comply with City policy, organizations hosting political events cannot endorse a specific candidate, law, or issue.

Political events may be permitted if they do not endorse a specific viewpoint or candidate and have invited all candidates running for a specific elected position to be involved.

Events held by currently elected representatives, such as current City Councilmembers, state representatives, or featuring those elected officials as speakers are permitted as long as they are not campaign-related.

- Example 1: A candidate running for Mayor wants to host a political rally or their election night party at your library. Response: This would not be an acceptable use for the library's rental spaces because it is an election-related event.
- Example 2: The local neighborhood association wants to hold a candidate forum for all the candidates running for Mayor to discuss their platforms. Response: This would be allowed as long as all candidates are invited to participate.
- Example 3: The local neighborhood association wants to invite their state representative to speak at their monthly meeting held at the library. Response: This would be allowed because it is not an election-related event. However, the candidate would not be able to campaign or electioneer at the event.

Q: What are “content-neutral time, place, and manner restrictions”?

A: Limitations based on how, where, or when expression can occur, rather than the content of the message being communicated. Examples would be content-neutral rules restricting the use of candles in meeting rooms, exceeding occupancy limits, limiting rentals to Library operating hours, or requiring renters to make reservations through the online system.

Q: Can renters charge admission to their event?

A: Yes, if they charge attendees ahead of time (for example, via Eventbrite). Charging admission to an event is not specifically prohibited by the meeting room policy, but participants cannot exchange money on Library premises, including paying admission.

Q: What documentation is required to prove tax exempt status?

A: Proof of an organization's nonprofit status. There are many types of nonprofit statuses besides 501(c)3 (list available from the IRS [here](#)), but they can all be confirmed using the [IRS tax exempt organization lookup tool](#).

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Q: How do we tell longtime renters that they are now limited to two meetings per month?

A: Explain that it is a matter of equity. The new meeting room policy will allow a much broader use of our meeting rooms and coupled with growth in Library programs that use those spaces, we will need to limit the number of individual reservations to ensure more people have access to these spaces.

Q: How do we talk to patrons who are concerned about the new policy and/or the content of meetings and events related to rentals?

A: Acknowledge the patron's concerns with phrases like, "I understand that you are concerned about the City's/Library's new policy." or "I understand that you are concerned about [group] using the Library's meeting room." If the concern is about the nature of the group or meeting content, let the patron know that the meeting/content is within the City's/Library's meeting room policy. Acknowledgment should not be affirming or disaffirming the patron's stance about the policy/group/content. Let concerned patrons know that the Library is considered a designated public forum which allows free speech from many diverse perspectives. If the patron's concern is about behavior exhibited by meeting attendees or presenters, then staff should refer to the Library's Rules of Behavior and proceed as normal for Rules of Behavior violations.