

Upper Skagit Library Wi-Fi Discussion

Input from WA State Public Library Directors 2018

A debate has arisen in our small community about our 24/7 public Wi-Fi service.

Many would like to see the library have restricted nighttime hours, primarily because of the correlation they see between “suspicious activity” and loitering at the library during those hours. How have other directors addressed this issue? Does anybody have a pros and cons list they can share with me?

Thanks,

Brooke Pederson, Library Director
Upper Skagit Library

Hi, Brooke.

Great question. We did have this problem arise a couple of years ago. We do, in fact, have a few library branches in Sno-Isle that have made the decision to limit Wifi hours. Sultan is one of these, and if you'd like, I can put you in contact with Jackie Personeus – she's the manager there and would have insight regarding the effects (or lack thereof) of restricting internet during nighttime hours.

When we had this issue in Darrington, we were experiencing a lot of suspicious activity and loitering (almost nightly) outside of our library. The police would be called, and when they would show up, the people outside of our building would claim that they were “using the Wifi” or “using the internet.” Additionally, we did not have “No Loitering” signs up outside the facility then, which the town has since installed. At first, I thought that the signs seemed unwelcoming, but I was told that it does allow the police to take action when loitering is occurring, when they could not before the signs were posted. We also used to have electrical outlets on the outside walls of the library, and I'm not sure if removing access to these (or posting the 'No Loitering' signs) was the catalyst in decreasing the “suspicious behavior” and loitering – although they did occur at almost the same time. If I'm honest, loitering seems to come in waves – problematic for a month or two, and then a non-issue for a blissful few months, repeat.

I also notice that when Darrington puts up our holiday lights around the roof line each year, we also see a decrease of suspicious activity around the facility in the nighttime hours. Our city maintenance crew did suggest that we have outdoor lights installed for year-round illumination, because the light did seem to deter unwanted behaviors from occurring on/around the property.

The decision was made not to turn off Wifi because:

1. When our IT department looked at Wifi usage during those hours when loitering persons were claiming their late-night presence as owing to the library's Wifi, our data showed that they were not, in fact, regularly using the Wifi. This was an excuse that they were giving to local law enforcement when confronted.

2. We do have community members that legitimately use our Wifi – for business, school, etc. Mayor Rankin and I discussed that limiting access because of the behavior of a few would negatively affect the many community members who needed this service – and yes, there are those that need it during strange hours – for international business transactions, last-minute assignments, those sorts of things. In fact, we heard more from these people, expressing the hardship that would befall them without late-night Wifi, than those expressing concerns about negative behaviors they were witnessing overnight outside the library.

This is why we decided to keep the Wifi on 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. I'm not going to say that we don't have loitering as an issue anymore, or that we don't still see suspicious activity outside our building – especially at night when we're closed. I will say that loitering seems to continue to come and to subside. This decision was made with careful consideration and community feedback. I wish you the best of luck in whatever you decide.

Please let me know if you have more questions, or if you'd like for me to put you in contact with Jackie in Sultan so that you might learn more about restricting access.

Regards,
Asheley Bryson
Darrington Library Branch Manager

We shut off our WiFi 9pm to 9am.

Isaac Huffman, Library Director
City of Mount Vernon

Hi Brooke,

Everett Public Library only has public wi-fi during operating hours. We did this for two reasons. The first was that people in the apartments next to the library were using our wi-fi instead of getting their own which significantly slowed down our wi-fi. We also wanted to deter people from loitering and camping out around the library overnight.

Abby
Everett Public Library

Brooke,

We are in that same boat here at Sedro-Woolley, but we have had a problem with homeless people climbing into our patio and using the wi-fi and sleeping. That wouldn't bother me so much but they are also urinating and shooting up back there, leaving needles and blood around the patio. We have had to call the police, and what they have told us is that when they catch them there at night, they are using the wi-fi and attempt to hide their phones so that they can't see what they are accessing.

From a library access standpoint, I want to leave the wi-fi on 24/7, however, the police have requested that we shut it down at least in the wee hours of the night. I acquiesced, but let them know that, if patrons let us know they need it, I will be turning it back on 24/7.

If it weren't for the problems we were having with the patio, I would not have considered it. We had an incident in SW about 5 months ago where one of our homeless men was beaten and put into a coma. As this problem developed, I also became worried for the safety of the patrons who might legitimately be using the wi-fi late at night. Right now the library is tucked away and out of sight, and I fear that they may be in danger in our parking lot. I do leave the wi-fi on at Metcalf 24/7 and we let our patrons know that it is available.

I don't really have a pros and cons list, but I did want to share with you our experience.

Hope this helps,

Jeanne Williams, Director
Central Skagit Rural Partial County Library District

My biggest concern with this issue is that there is nowhere else in 3/4 of our communities to get access if ours is turned off. I've been incredibly hesitant to make changes, but we have some community members that are sharing the same concerns around "undesirables" loitering.

Mandy Walters
Pend Oreille County Library District

We had a similar issue. Police were attributing behavior to WiFi. We consulted our security cameras and co-determined there was not a correlation.

Andrew Chanse
Spokane Public Library

Ours is on 24/7. We occasionally have problems, but I think it's worth it to provide that service, especially since businesses around here close up so early.

Laurie Orton
San Juan Public Library

Hi, Brooke:

I believe the City has the wi-fi network shut off between 10 pm and 6 am here. This was other City wi-fi networks as well, not just the library.

Chris Skaugset

Library Director

Same on Orcas (24x7), without any apparent problems related to that service.

We do get some very early-morning users in the parking lot and on our benches, with my theory being that some of the tourists get their internet/work stuff out of the way before heading off to do tourist things with the family.

Phil Heikkinen, Director
Orcas Island Public Library

Our situation is so touchy here and having the law enforcement not be at odds with us is important. But, if there is one single user who says they need it after hours, it goes back on 24/7 and then I would look at it the way that Andrew did--make them look at what is going on when problems arise and show that it is actually related to the WiFi usage.

Thank you,

Jeanne Williams
Director
Central Skagit Rural Partial County Library District

Lopez is 24/7 - similar to Orcas - tourists using it after hours

Lou Pray, Director
Lopez Island Library

Castle Rock is also on 24/7. However, we have a password that is changed every month. That seems to have stopped our bandwidth loss from nearby residences. If someone was determined, they could just come in and ask for the password but they don't.

Vicki Selander
Library Director

Brooke:

It depends on each location; in some places we've reduced the hours due to complaints (usually from City law enforcement) and in others I believe we're still 24/7 (in our Friends'-owned buildings, in more remote areas of the county). We keep adjusting; we haven't advertised the changes just people figure it out over time. I believe in one location we tried reduced hours for a while and then added some back.

We're trying to balance max access with being a good community partner.

Christine Perkins
Executive Director
Whatcom County Library System
