

The Danger of Being Neighborly Without a Permit

All over America, people have put small "give one, take one" book exchanges in front of their homes. Then they were told to tear them down.



[Conor Friedersdorf](#)

Three years ago, *The Los Angeles Times* published a feel-good story on the [Little Free Library](#) movement. The idea is simple: A book lover puts a box or shelf or crate of books in their front yard. Neighbors browse, take one, and return later with a replacement. A 76-year-old in Sherman Oaks, California, felt that his little library, roughly the size of a dollhouse, "turned strangers into friends and a sometimes-impersonal neighborhood into a community," the reporter observed. The man knew he was onto something "when a 9-year-old boy knocked on his door one morning to say how much he liked the little library." He went on to explain, "I met more neighbors in the first three weeks than in the previous 30 years."

Since 2009, when a Wisconsin man built a little, free library to honor his late mother, who loved books, copycats inspired by his example have put thousands of Little Free Libraries all over the U.S. and beyond. Many are displayed on [this online map](#). In Venice, where I live, I know of at least three Little Free Libraries, and have witnessed chance encounters where folks in the neighborhood chat about a book.

I wish that I was writing merely to extol this trend. Alas, a subset of Americans are determined to regulate every last aspect of community life. Due to selection bias, they are overrepresented among local politicians and bureaucrats. And so they have power, despite their small-mindedness, inflexibility, and lack of common sense so extreme that they've taken to cracking down on Little Free Libraries, of all things.

Last summer in Kansas, a [9-year-old](#) was loving his Little Free Library until at least two residents proved that some people will complain about anything no matter how harmless and city officials pushed the boundaries of literal-mindedness:

The Leawood City Council said it had received a couple of complaints about Spencer Collins' Little Free Library. They dubbed it an "illegal detached structure" and told the Collins' they would face a fine if they did not [remove](#) the Little Free Library from their yard by June 19.

Scattered stories like these have appeared in various local news outlets. *The L.A. Times* followed up last week with [a trend story](#) that got things just about right. "Crime, homelessness and crumbling infrastructure are still a problem in almost every part of America, but two cities have recently cracked down on one of the country's biggest problems: small-community libraries where residents can share books," Michael Schaub wrote. "Officials in Los Angeles and Shreveport, Louisiana, have told the owners of homemade lending libraries that they're in violation of city codes, and asked them to remove or relocate their small book collections."

Here in Los Angeles, [the weather is so lovely that it's hard to muster the energy to be upset about anything](#), and a lot of people [don't even know what municipality they live in](#), so the defense of Little Free Libraries is mostly being undertaken by people who have them. Steve Lopez, a local columnist, wrote about one such man, an actor who is refusing to move his little library from a parkway. His column [captures the absurdity](#) of using city resources to get rid of it:

Having written previously about crackdowns on parkway vegetable gardens, I knew the city's argument is that you can't do anything that might block emergency vehicle access, obstruct motorists' views, impede pedestrians or make it hard to open car doors. But the Tenn-Mann Library, at the intersection of a four-way stop, does none of those things. And I can't help but point out that a city tree in front of Cook's house, on the parkway strip, has untamed roots that have lifted the sidewalk a few inches, posing a clear and obvious obstruction and tripping hazard. The city pays out millions of dollars in trip-and-fall settlements every year, and last time I checked, tree-trimming was on a 45-year cycle—no joke. But put up a lending library and the city is at your door in a jiffy.

The column goes on to note that a city spokesman "said that if there is no clear obstruction, it might be possible to keep the library where it is if Cook is willing to apply for a permit. And it's possible that city arts funds could be tapped to pay for the permit." This is what conservatives and libertarians mean when they talk about overregulation disincentivizing or displacing voluntary activity that benefits people. We've constructed communities where one must obtain prior permission from agents of the

state before freely sharing books with one's neighbors! And their proposed solution is to get scarce public art funds to pay for the needless layer of bureaucracy being imposed on the thing already being done for free.

The power to require permits is the power to prevent something from ever existing. This lovely movement would've never begun or spread if everyone who wanted to build a Little Free Library recognized a need to apply and pay for a permit. Instead they did good and asked permission never.

Radical libertarians who object to all zoning and building codes are told that they're necessary to keep refineries from operating next to day care centers and to ensure that houses don't fall down in earthquakes or burn up due to faulty wiring. And like most, I favor some zoning laws and building codes. One needn't even be a squishy libertarian to object when power ceded to government for such purposes is then used to interfere with a harmless activity to which almost no one objects.

In Shreveport, there was a community outcry and some much-needed civil disobedience.

The *Shreveport Times* [reported](#):

To protest the shutting down of a Little Free Library on Wilkinson Street, artist Kathryn Usher placed a stack of books on a wooden block outside her Dalzell Street home. A sign reading 'Free Range Books Take One Leave One' hangs above it. Her action was in response to a notice a Little Free Library's owners, Ricky and Teresa Edgerton, received from the Metropolitan Planning Commission's zoning division—a request they cease operating it because the book swap violates city zoning law. If not, they risked further action if the matter were sent to the city attorney. "I did it in solidarity with Ricky," Usher said. "I'm basically telling the MPC to go sod off."

Eventually [a reprieve was granted](#), and the city is at work on a new zoning ordinance. Alexis de Tocqueville would approve.

"I have often admired the extreme skill with which the inhabitants of the United States succeed in proposing a common object for the exertions of a great many men and in inducing them to voluntarily pursue it," he wrote, offering examples including attempts "to diffuse books." He posited that "the most democratic country on the face of the earth is that in which men have, in our time, carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desire and have applied this new science to the greatest number of purposes."

Americans with Little Free Libraries are acting in that venerable tradition. Those exploiting overly broad laws to urge that they be torn down are a national disgrace.