

Trust in Your Trustees

By Will Manley

Politicians prefer your board's views on library needs over yours

It frustrates me profoundly to have someone in the library profession approach me at a conference to challenge my credibility as a speaker—usually in view of the fact that I'm retired, out of touch, and behind the times. In other words, I'm no longer actively involved in library matters.

My defense is immediate. I explain that while I may be retired from the administrative wars, I now play an even more important library position: I am a trustee. Inevitably the response is both derisive and dismissive: "Trustees aren't really a part of our profession, are they?"

While that rejoinder really bugs me, I have to grudgingly admit that it does carry a certain element of truth. Quite frankly, trustees do not belong to the library "tribe." But that is precisely why they are the most important players in the public library arena.

Here's a quiz: What are the three main duties of a library board of trustees? If you answered (a) hire and fire the director, (b) make library policy, and (c) secure library funding, you are correct. Everything else they do, from attending meetings to approving minutes, is strictly secondary.

Of their three main duties, securing funding is by far the most critical. Trustees can be much more effective fundraisers than librarians, precisely because they are outside the library tribe. They don't know the secret library handshake, the litany of obscure library acronyms, or the meaning of the terms "autoregressive bibliographical interface," "triangulated title access," or "multipolycentric reference control." Heck, most of them haven't a clue what OCLC stands for.

Does that make them aliens from outer space? No, that puts them on the same level as the local politicians who control the library purse strings. Point one: Local politicians hate to be talked down to by professionals. It doesn't matter if it's the police chief, city engineer, or library director. Every profession has its mumbo jumbo jargon that makes laypeople feel stupid and out of the loop—something local politicians hate to feel. Point two: When library directors go hat in hand to the city council to ask for departmental budget hikes, what do council members see? They see special interest professionals who want to feather their tribal nests.



*"I am not out of touch!
Now, where do you keep
the record albums?"*

But when library trustees do it, councilpeople see constituents: bankers, salesmen, nurses, plumbers, and homemakers. They see their next door neighbor, their child's soccer coach, a congregant from their church, a high school classmate. They see registered voters—the folks who will determine whether they get reelected. And don't kid yourself: Getting reelected is job one for every politician.

Many years ago, I became director of a good-sized library, filling a months-long vacancy. Before I was hired, the board was forced to get very involved in the library budget process, and my first week as director happened to be budget week. The entire board of trustees appeared before the city council to plead for three new librarian positions. The next week was election week. The board was unsuccessful in getting the three positions—the council granted it five.

After the meeting, the police chief came up to me and asked, "How do I get one of those boards of trustees?"

This article has been reprinted with permission from the November/December 2012 *American Libraries* magazine, published by the American Library Association. Will Manley has furnished provocative commentary on librarianship for over 30 years and in nine books on the lighter side of library science.

(continued from page 2 - Planning for the Libraries Future)

Resources

This document was adapted from the following Department of Public Instruction, Public Library Development Team resources:

Wisconsin Public Library Standards, Chapter 2: Imperatives for Planning
Trustee Essential 11: Planning for the Library's Future
Administrative Essential 16: Planning for the Library's Future

FAQ

I've recently retired and plan to spend part of the winter where it's warmer. Can I participate in library board meetings online while I'm gone?

Nothing in statutes prohibits trustees from attending meetings via phone call or online communication if they can't physically attend, although there may be local ordinances or policies prohibiting or limiting such participation. Many libraries and library systems have access to "GoTo Meeting" software which allows easy voice communication and document sharing for meetings where attendees are not physically present in one place.

Note that a meeting conducted entirely by conference call or online is still subject to all provisions of the Open Meetings Law and must make provision for members of the public to observe the meeting. And you should always test any software well before the meeting to make sure that it is working properly.

Have questions?
Contact us and
we'll try to help.

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WAPL 2013

Spring
Conference
2013



Fifty
Shades
of Libraries

The 2013 Wisconsin Association of Public Librarians Conference will be held May 1-3 at the Grand Geneva Resort & Spa in Lake Geneva. At this time registration and program information has not been posted online but it should be there soon.

Watch <http://wla.wisconsinlibraries.org/wapl/conferences-events/wapl-2013-conference> for more information.

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