

# trustee tale

## Newsletter for Public Library Trustees

### What New Directors Want from Library Boards

By Rick Krumwiede, Director  
Outagamie Waupaca Library System

A new director is a significant change for any public library, and it takes time work through such a major change. As one new director stated, "It took a full year before I felt I knew what I was doing, and even then I was not fully confident in the end results." While library boards put a lot of time and energy into hiring new directors, it's also important for them to help their new directors have a positive start.

Because we thought it might be helpful for trustees to know what new library directors would like from their library boards, Mark Arend and I asked the following questions to the newest library directors in the Outagamie Waupaca Library System and the Winnefox Library System:

1. What were the most helpful things that your library board did to help you get off to a good start as your library's new director?
2. What do you wish your library board would have done or told you that might have helped you get off to a better start?

This article summarizes the responses we received. It's interesting to note that while the responses came from only a handful of new directors, their responses were remarkably similar.

#### **Effective Communication:**

Clear and concise communication from the board is valued by new library directors. Good communication with a new director actually begins during the hiring process. It's important for library boards to clearly communicate information about salary, benefits, and conditions of employment to get off to a good start, and it's very helpful for the board to convey its specific expectations, especially about information it wants to receive at board meetings.

#### **Support:**

New library directors appreciate library boards that are positive, gracious, welcoming, patient, trusting, and supportive. It's important to have confidence in a new director's abilities, and it's equally important to support her in finding her own methods. One director reported that the library board has "been very supportive of letting me find the way that works best for me, and that trust has been very much appreciated."

The job of library director is a difficult one. It's not uncommon for new directors to be surprised by everything that is involved. It's sometimes a surprise to new directors that



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## The New Library Trustee's First Five

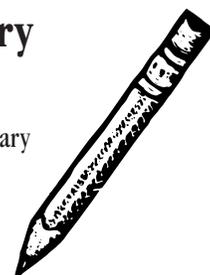
By Mark Arend, Assistant Director  
Winnefox Library System

A library trustee's first meeting or two can be confusing. Everyone else at the table will probably be an experienced trustee and any new trustees may feel as if they've been asked to participate and make decisions on issues they don't know enough about. Here are our recommendations for five topics new trustees should look into before their first board meetings. This needn't take a lot of time; a couple of hours should do.

1. **The library's bylaws and policies.**  
You should familiarize yourself with your library's bylaws (the rules that govern the board's organization) and review your policies (the rules that govern the library's operations).
2. **The library's planning documents.**  
Your library's strategic plan or long-range plan guide the library's service program.
3. **The library's budget and finances.**  
The library's budget shows how the library has allocated financial resources to meet the goals of the service plan. The financial reports show how closely library spending matches the budgeted amounts.
4. **The library building.**  
Have your library director give you a short tour of the building. Ask what works well, what areas need updating, and what may need major maintenance or repair in the near future.
5. **The board minutes.**  
Read over the board minutes from the last few months' meetings. This will help "bring you up to speed" on current issues & concerns.

## Library Board Checklist for a New Library Director's Orientation

This is a suggested list of meetings and tasks to help orient a new library director. It should be adapted for local needs and schedules. Some meetings can be done by one or two trustees rather than the entire board.



### In the First Week the Library Board Should:

- Introduce the new director to library staff and trustees
- Introduce the new director to key municipal elected and appointed officials
- Give the new director a tour of the library building
  - Note areas that work well or have been recently updated
  - Note areas of concern or that may need major outlay in the near future
- Review conditions of employment with the new director
  - Hours of work
  - Benefits
- Review job description with the new director

### In the First Month the Director, Assisted by Trustees, should:

- Become familiar with library policies
- Become familiar with the library's mission statement, long-range or strategic plan, and other documents guiding the library's public service philosophy
- Meet with System staff to learn about general system services
- Learn library budget and financial procedures
- Review library board meeting procedures
- Review with the board their expectations and evaluation criteria for the director
- Meet key members of Friends of the Library and Library Foundation
- Meet key members of the community

### In the First Three Months the director should:

- Review legal issues affecting libraries. A library director is not expected to be an expert on any of these legal issues. But they should be generally aware of their provisions to avoid violations.
  - Open meetings law
  - Public records law
  - State & Federal employment law, including the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and Family & Medical Leave Act (FMLA)
  - Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
  - Library confidentiality laws
  - Ethics and conflict interest laws
  - Copyright laws
- Review *Administrative Essentials: A Handbook for Wisconsin Public Library Directors*

### In the First Six Months the director should:

- Review library system membership requirements
- Review requirements and expectations related to shared automation system membership
- Enroll in online library administration/management class, if needed for certification
- Review *Trustee Essentials: A Handbook for Wisconsin Public Library Trustees*

### In the First Year the director should:

- Attend Wisconsin Library Association (WLA) or Wisconsin Association of Public Libraries WAPL) conference

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library board members don't have a detailed knowledge of what directors do on a daily basis, but they soon come to appreciate that isn't the board's job. However, boards do need to understand that there is a significant learning curve for new directors. New directors appreciate boards that are respectful of the learning curve they must climb and are supportive of the training they need to attend. Being willing to allow a new director some extra time for difficult tasks and being respectful of a new director's family time are also highly valued by new directors.

#### **Guidance:**

Library boards sometimes defer to their new directors because they don't want to micro-manage or be intrusive. However, new directors often want more guidance from their boards. "During the first few months it's important that they convey a clear focus on the direction of the library," and this is most easily done when the library has a plan in place. It's also important for the board to convey any "unwritten" rules that are part of the library's organizational culture. For example, new director needs to know if books donated by someone in the community are never to be weeded.

Several directors reported that it would have been nice to know more about how things actually work in the community. Who presents the budget request, and what is the library's relationship with the village board? How are demographics changing the community's library needs? What are the community events where the library's participation is expected?

New directors would find it helpful for board members to drop in between meetings, at least for the first few months, to see how things are going or to answer questions. One director suggested that she would have liked the board to assign a "trustee mentor" that

she could contact with questions, e.g., who to contact about facility repairs.

#### **Open to Change:**

Several directors reported that their boards were open to change and respectful of new ideas, making their jobs easier and less stressful. Being open to relatively small changes may have a very positive impact. One director reported that "my library board also has been very willing to allow me to change the format of things I regularly report (e.g., meeting minutes, agendas, and statistical reports)."

While new directors want and appreciate guidance, they don't want to hear their boards saying "this is the way we've always done it" or "when a previous director tried that it didn't work." It's more helpful to a new director for board members to ask difficult questions than to veto a suggestion without discussion. Board members may be correct that a proposed change won't work, and a good discussion of the underlying issues is likely to be more productive for both parties.

#### **Time with Previous Director:**

Several of the new directors were able to spend time with the previous director, and they really appreciated that opportunity because it was "much easier than coming in on my own and having to figure everything out." How much time is enough? One new director started two weeks before the previous director left, and while there wasn't time to learn everything it helped considerably. Another new director stated that "a little more training from the former director would have been helpful." Directors who didn't have this opportunity wished they had. One said, "Ideally, I would also have liked to be able to shadow the previous director to see what a director's day to day life is like, especially in the areas of policy development and administration." One director shadowed an experienced director at a neighboring library, and while that experience was somewhat useful she

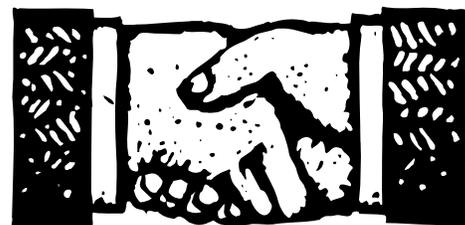
discovered that the two libraries were actually very different.

#### **Introduction to the Community:**

New directors would really appreciate being introduced to the community by their library boards. One director reported that a public announcement or introduction in the first week or so would have been helpful because "I did have people wondering why they hadn't heard anything about me." Her experience would have been much more positive if the board had made a public announcement.

On a more positive note, another director responded that the Board sponsored a social gathering "to welcome me and say good-bye to the former director! It was a great way to meet some of the people I would be working with and those in the community who have contributed to the library. I thought it was a nice idea and really made me feel at home."

It may not always be possible for a library board to do everything that a new director would like, but being mindful of what's important and appreciated should help boards help their new directors get off to a great start.



## UPCOMING EVENTS

### WAPL Conference 2010

*Great programs and great amenities on a Great Lake!*

April 28-30

Blue Harbor Resort, Sheboygan

### WLA Conference 2010

November 2-5

Kalahari Waterpark Resort & Convention Center, Wisconsin Dells

## Have questions?

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*and we'll try to help.*

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