

# trustee tale

## Newsletter for Public Library Trustees

### Thoughts about Public Library Systems I

By Rick Krumwiede, Director

Outagamie Waupaca Library System

*I've spent many years working in public library systems and have come to know them intimately. In the next few issues of Trustee Tale, I'll be sharing some of my reflections on systems in the hope that public library trustees can gain a better understanding and appreciation systems and how they relate to local libraries. I want to start by reflecting on the structure of systems and the tensions created by that structure.*

Public library systems in Wisconsin, particularly multi-county systems, are strange beasts. The anomalous structure of systems makes them difficult to understand and complex to manage.

While you can look, you won't find other organizations in Wisconsin that are "joint agencies" of multiple counties, are funded by and accountable to the state, must deal with multiple constituents, and provide services to totally autonomous units. It's no wonder that we're not understood. This structure has its charm, but it also results in strange twists of logic like the potential for systems to be penalized for the misdeeds of their members.

The basic conceptual model for systems (i.e., a federation or federal model) is not a bad one. Federalism implies independent units coming together to create a common identity in order to do some things better. In a pure federation, the outlying units give the center its powers. The center does not have authority to control, but rather it coordinates, advises, influences, and suggests. This model fits together very well with local libraries that are autonomous, optional municipal services. It also seems appropriate for systems that are created by counties.

Obviously, federated public library systems in Wisconsin are not "pure" federated organizations. Systems receive state funding, are subject to state requirements, and seem to act as an "arm of the state" in attempting to equalize the opportunity for all state residents to enjoy a reasonable level of public library service. It is through systems that the state has chosen to implement its policy "to provide laws for the development and improvement of public libraries..."

Systems exist in two different structural environments, which is wrought with tension. There is a fundamental tension between a system's role as the center of a federation and its role as an

When I came on the Appleton Library Board, thirteen years ago, I was asked "Why do you want to serve?" I have stood beside and in the Statue of Liberty, toured Ellis Island, been inside the U.S. Capitol, held my hand on my heart and recited The Pledge of Allegiance. But nothing in the world reminds me more of what it means to be an American, living in a free society, as walking through the doors of a public library, which could just as well have Emma Lazarus' words from the Statue of Liberty written on its doors ... a huge sign saying "everyone is welcome here" with the emphasis on anyone

—Rev. Will Bloedow, Trustee,  
Appleton Public Library &  
Outagamie Waupaca Library  
System

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arm of the state. There is a tension between mandated requirements and local needs. There is a tension between a statewide equalization program and local control. A system's interests may never be exactly the same as those of its members or those of the Wisconsin Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning (DLTCL).

I don't think this structural tension is insurmountable; it may even be productive. However, it is important for public library trustees to understand and be conscious of the nature of the environment where systems operate in order to understand and appreciate how systems function and the relationship between systems and local libraries. Systems and their member libraries can easily get into trouble when they aren't sensitive to the tensions that sometimes exist between their roles.

## TRUSTEE SOAPBOX

*Do you have a question, comment or topic to suggest for a future TrusteeTale? Send an Email to Mark at: [Arend@winnefox.org](mailto:Arend@winnefox.org).*

### South Central Library System announces *Trustee Update* newsletter

In an effort to keep library trustees and members of county library boards better informed about library issues, SCLS has begun publication of a quarterly newsletter called *Trustee Update*. Issues are available at <http://www.scls.info/pr/trustee/>

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