

trustee tale

Newsletter for Public Library Trustees

The Times They Are A-Changin’

By Ken Hall

Ken Hall is the Director of the Fond du Lac Public Library and is the former co-editor of Trustee Tales. This article appeared in a slightly different form, in Communiqué, the quarterly newsletter of the Wisconsin Association of Public Libraries (WAPL)

I recently hit a milestone in my life. The kind of milestone you think is way off but suddenly hits you like a kiss from a Mack Truck. One day I’m cruising in my ‘Stang with nary a thought to the freight train of change coming up on my right when it hit me — I found myself agreeing with Doctor Laura.

Now what I was doing even listening to the daytime diva of AM radio is another story and frankly beside the point. Perhaps a random spin of the radio dial put me on my collision course with fate, but there I was; me and Dr. Laura, simpatico.

Lest you think I was delusional or Family Friendly Libraries had finally won me over, let me hasten to assure you that the good doctor was not on that particular rant. She was calmly dishing out advice to the usual wives of ne’r do well husbands, mothers of frustrating children, and other truth seekers. And shock upon shock, I agreed with most of what she had to say.

I was reminded one more time that change is inevitable. I got in my car firmly ensconced in my comfort zone, a world view that left no room for the tirades of right wing, self-aggrandizing, talk show queens, when I found that change had once again clobbered me from behind. Maybe I was wandering down an unfamiliar right wing path or maybe Dr. Laura had gotten up on the left side of the bed that morning. Either way, one or both of us had definitely changed.

It’s easy to become complacent with our lives, to wall ourselves up in our comfort zone and pretend the world is spinning along in some sort of never-ending status quo. Unfortunately, life isn’t like that. Our libraries aren’t like that either. (Bet you wondered when I’d get around to mentioning libraries. Well, here it is.)

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Legislative Update

This fall sees several bills before the legislature that would effect library operations and funding.

- **AB 483** would eliminate the 'Maintenance of Effort' (MOE) requirement for system membership. This is the requirement that municipalities and counties fund libraries no lower than the average of the past three years. Library supporters generally oppose this bill because of the potential adverse impact on public library services.

- **SB 258** would prohibit libraries from loaning "R" rated videos to minors without parental consent. Library supporters feel this is unnecessary as most libraries allow parents to limit their child's library use and fear it would add extra work and expense on already overburdened libraries.

- **SB 272 and SB 273** are a pair of bills that which are based on recommendations of the State Superintendent's Task Force on Public Library Legislation and Funding. Library supporters generally support these bills.

You can find summaries of these bills at the WLA's web site <http://www.wla.lib.wi.us/legis/BudgetStatusReport.htm>. Please contact your legislature to comment on these bills.

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As much as we talk about strategic planning, responding to our communities, and the technological revolution, many libraries seem stuck in some time warp. Here's a little test. Think about your own library. Are you still debating what can be learned from Barnes and Noble? Do you talk about your "automated card catalog"? (Have 50% of your customers ever seen a "real" card catalog?) Do your board and director believe that you can't add a new format without finding new money? Do you believe that you can't add a new service because it would mean putting a stop to something else you are doing now? Are you still congratulating yourself for having completed a strategic plan? (Strategic planning is never complete.) If you answered "yes" to more than one of these questions, change is passing you by.

Problem is, what our communities value may be changing without us. The time when we can safely say, "we are libraries, love us the way we are" is long gone. The kids we had in story hour ten or fifteen years ago are finding plenty of ways to fill their time without darkening our doors. These are the kids buying homes and starting to pay the property taxes that keep our doors open. Politicians are talking about ways of funding "essential services" and as far as most of them are concerned, we aren't on the list. For an extreme example of getting lost in a comfort zone take a look at British libraries. That is, take a look while you can. Many are simply shutting their doors. Change passed them by.

Are our libraries still relevant to our communities? Before we answer the question with an emphatic yes, perhaps we better look around for the evidence. We really can't answer the question from the inside. We have to get outside of ourselves, outside of our libraries, in order to see ourselves as others see us—and to see ourselves as others see us, we need the correct lens. What is it that the people in our communities value? Will they find those values in us? Do we share those values?

If our goal is to create good for the entire community and be relevant to the entire community, asking our customers doesn't help. User satisfaction surveys are singing to the choir. Most are little more than exercises in self-congratulations. Sure, there may be one or two things our users may like to see us change, but if they weren't mostly satisfied they wouldn't be using the library to begin with. It's the non-users we have to start thinking about.

Thinking about non-users means getting outside of our comfort zones. It means acknowledging that the cost of whatever services we are providing includes the cost of lost opportunities in what we are not doing. The times are changing and the way we look at ourselves needs to change with the times. If you haven't taken a look at your library lately, now is definitely the time. Like Dr. Laura says, "Now go do the right thing."

A Big Thank You

Please thank your Legislators and the Governor for the increase in library spending approved in the latest state budget. Governor Doyle proposed, and the Legislature approved an increase of approximately \$2 million for library system funding. This would mean state funding at about 8% of local library expenditures. An increase in Badgerlink funding to maintain service at the current level was also approved.

To Share or Not to Share

by Greta Thompson
Outagamie Waupaca Library System

Most of us don't know much about Aristotle and Hegel, aside from their names, and have still managed to live good and productive lives. But they're the source for a couple of ideas that help define what good and productive lives are. Aristotle talked about the golden mean, the path between extremes that sooner or later most of us conclude is the best way to think and live.

Being human, though, we reach that conclusion over and over again after we've swung way to one side (think parent of newborn) and way to the other (think parent of adolescent) and finally settle back into the middle (think parent of adult child with a steady job). And that's Hegel's contribution: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, one extreme, the other extreme, and back to the path between. If I remember correctly, and I rarely do any more, Hegel was writing about the pattern of history, not the pattern of our individual lives.

It seems to me that our society is in one of those way-out swings, precipitated by the menace of terrorism. The government is invoking national security to move into areas previously thought private while simultaneously we're deluged with small-print notices of our right to privacy. There's something out of whack here. We're floundering in the extremes, and I at least find it comforting to remember Aristotle and Hegel. We'll find our way back to the middle ground, even if it's a new middle ground, even if it takes a generation or two or three.

That's the context in which I think we need to understand both the Public Records Law

and the Confidentiality of Library Records. Together, they point toward a carefully defined middle ground. We're hearing much more about the issues surrounding privacy these days than about open access to records. Even the arguments about surrendering information to the government are waged in the name of sacrificing confidentiality for the public good or defending confidentiality as a fundamental right in a democracy. But I want to remind you, and me, of the other side of that coin.

Wisconsin has a strong tradition backed by statute of making government records available to the people. If there's no compelling reason to deny access to records generated by public agencies, then we can ask and expect to see them. This tradition is spelled out in Wisconsin Statute 19.31, which reads in part: "In recognition of the fact that a representative government is dependent upon an informed electorate, it is declared to be the public policy of this state that all persons are entitled to the greatest possible information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts of those officers and employees who represent them....The denial of public access is generally contrary to the public interest, and only in an exceptional case can access be denied."

For libraries this means that the budget, board minutes, plans, policies, and more need to be available on request "as soon as practicable." The request does not have to be in writing, and it does not have to come from a patron or even a Wisconsin resident. The record can be in any format, handwritten, computer generated, taped, etc. And the records can be copied for or by the requesting person, although the library can charge a small fee for the costs of reproducing the requested records.

The law is clearly biased in the direction of opening records to the public, but there are procedures governing its availability

and limits placed on that availability. Three examples:

A public agency has to designate a legal custodian for the records. Generally the library board makes the director and/or board president the legal custodians.

Notes and draft documents, personal material that has no bearing on the work a person does, and records that have limited accessibility because of copyright, patent, or bequest are not covered by the Public Records Law.

Records that are generally open to the public may contain confidential information, in which case that information must be edited out before public inspection.

The Public Records law focuses on the vast amount of information that is and should be accessible to the public, but recognizes there are exceptions. The Confidentiality of Library Records law (Wisconsin Statute 43.30) focuses on the small but significant amount of information that is not available to the public, but recognizes there are exceptions. The goal is nicely summed up in the rule that the legal custodian of records "is required to balance the public interest in disclosure of a record against the interests that may weigh against disclosure." Starting from opposite ends of a continuum, the two laws move toward a common ground in the middle, which Aristotle noticed a long, long time ago is the best place to come to rest.





Welcome to WLA 2005 “GRAND RIVER, GREAT LIBRARIES” in La Crosse, the jewel of Wisconsin’s “west coast”! A “grand” selection of “great” programs and activities is currently being finalized that will entice and inspire a record number of conference attendees. Included in that selection are:

- an outstanding assortment of both pre- and post-conference sessions to help make the most of your attendance dollars
- a riverboat lunch
- a nationally-known news correspondent and commentator for a keynote speaker!

Looking to find or make opportunities for greatness? Learn how by attending this year’s Wisconsin Library Association conference, October 25-28, in La Crosse. See you on the grand river!

Check out <http://www.wla.lib.wi.us/conferences/2005/> for more information.

TRUSTEE SOAPBOX

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Arend@mail.winnefox.org

or phone Greta at 920-832-6194.

Graphic Artist: Renee Miller
and Mark Arend

Editors/Authors: Greta Thompson

greta@mail.OwLS.lib.wi.us

920-832-6194 or email

OwLS: Greta Thompson,

or email arend@mail.winnefox.org

Winnefox: Mark Arend, 920-236-5222

them to:

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trustee tale is written and distributed



Winnefox Library System
106 Washington Avenue
Oshkosh, WI 54901-4985