

trustee tale Newsletter for Public Library Trustees

Free Access to Ideas

By Mark Arend

Of all the difficult issues a library board and director deal with, those of censorship, free speech, access to information, and intellectual freedom tend to be the most difficult and cause the most public discussion. Difficult because they can be highly charged emotional issues. They touch on the protection of our children, political discourse, religion, obscenity, racial issues, and our most fundamental rights as Americans.

Free access to ideas and freedom of expression are bedrock principles of this country and these principles must be upheld for democracy to survive and thrive. As James Madison wrote: “A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.” Without freedom of expression—the freedom to write, to publish, and to speak publicly—there can be no free access to ideas.

Without free access to ideas and information there can be no true freedom or democracy.

Public libraries are dedicated to these ideals. The public library is the provider of access for all persons to a full range of ideas, including controversial or unpopular ones. Our selection policies state that we should choose materials giving information on all sides of issues. Our meeting rooms must be open to all groups, regardless of their political, religious, or social views. And all persons should have equal access to library materials and services.

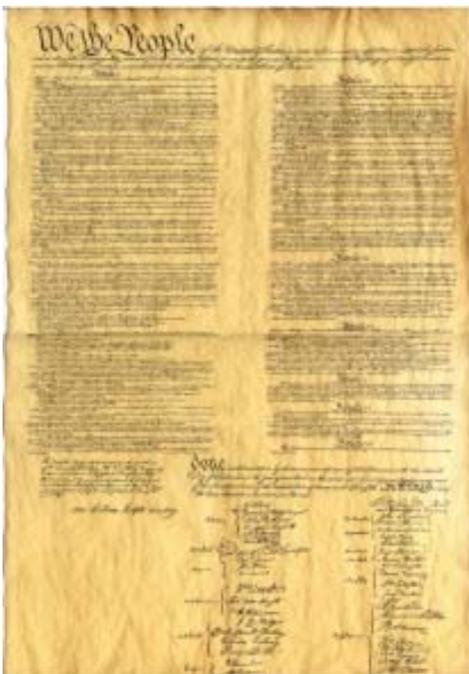
Sometimes having materials seen as promoting unpopular or unconventional viewpoints or allowing certain groups to use the library’s meeting rooms can cause problems. Supporting freedom of speech can be politically risky for both directors and boards if disputes become contentious and divisive in a community. However difficult, though, it is necessary to do so.

One key to dealing with these issues is to discuss potential problems before they occur and to adopt policies so your director and staff know what to do when incidents do occur. It is easier to discuss these issues coolly, think through the implications of potential actions, and develop policies & procedures when you’re not in crisis mode.

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The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.



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Policies you should have include:

- ♦ Collection development policy, including criteria for selecting and withdrawing materials, a challenged materials procedure, and an Intellectual Freedom Statement,
- ♦ Adoption of the ALA Library Bill of Rights as a library policy
- ♦ Circulation policy covering access to library materials by all patrons.
- ♦ Confidentiality of library records
- ♦ Internet use policy, including acceptable use, filtering, and access by minors
- ♦ Meeting room use
- ♦ Exhibits, displays, and bulletin board

You may want to have these policies reviewed by your library system staff, staff of the DPI Division for Libraries, Technology & Community Learning (DLTCL) or your municipal attorney to insure they are in accordance with current law.

Resources for more information:

- ♦ Trustee Essential 22: Freedom of Expression and Inquiry <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dlcl/pld/te22.html>
- ♦ Trustee Essential 23: Dealing with Challenges to Library Materials or Policies <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dlcl/pld/te23.html>
- ♦ ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom <http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=oif>
- ♦ Policies in the OWLS Links for Libraries <http://www.owls.lib.wi.us/info/links/policies.htm>
- ♦ Sample Policies for Small Public Libraries <http://www.owls.lib.wi.us/info/3ps/policies/samplepolicies.htm>

Does an M.L.S. Guarantee a Good Director?

Many small libraries cannot afford to hire a director with a master of library science degree. That doesn't mean, however, that they cannot get a talented director. Nor does having the M.L.S. automatically mean that the person would make a better director than someone without the degree. The unknown variable in the M.L.S. issue is what the library board wants its director to focus on in the job. Sometimes that focus falls outside the realm of an academic degree.

One such role involves building partnerships. This can be a critical function of the director, regardless of the size of the library. Someone with a wealth of library science knowledge may be extremely inept at building and maintaining partnerships. The person simply might not feel comfortable in this area.

Public libraries cannot grow if they are islands in communities. Nor can they maximize their potential to benefit the community if they are isolated. Potential library directors need to be able to confidently address this important issue with a well thought out plan to ensure that the library is fully integrated into the fabric of the community. Being adept at partnering will help the library director evolve into a community leader. This does not happen overnight. This is also something that trustees should be able to pick up on during interviews for the director's position.

A person who becomes a leader in the community will also be an extremely successful leader of library staff—regardless of the size of the staff. He or she will encourage the library staff to grow and maximize their individual strengths.

If the new library director is still relatively early in his or her career, the library can expect to lose the person to a larger library several years down the road. That's not as bad as it sounds. Such a director will leave the library a much better organization than when the person started the job. Too often library boards take the safe approach and hire a director the trustees think will stay around for a long time. That should not be a key factor in deciding which applicant to hire. The board should go after the best person for the job, regardless of whether the board thinks it will be a "forever job" for that person. And the best person will be the one who can effectively lead the library into creative relationships with many partners, yielding future dividends for the library patrons as well as the community.

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WLA Annual Conference
Oct 25-28, 2006
Radisson Hotel &
LaCrosse Center
LaCrosse

WAPL annual Conference
May 3-5, 2006
Hotel Mead
Wisconsin Rapids

Some Tips for Taking Good Minutes

by Greta Thompson

Minutes are the official, permanent record of library business, and may be referred to by future boards and directors, by municipal authorities, or by the public to establish or clarify library policies and actions. In addition to the vital information they contain, they project an image of the library that can evoke respect and pride or frustration and contempt.

A few tips can help you take accurate, professional minutes that will serve the future well.

Be prepared by bringing necessary items to the meeting: pens and paper; the minutes of the last meeting; the agenda for this meeting; and so on.

Pass around a sign-up sheet that has the name of the organization and the date of the meeting written at the top. Add the names of those who are absent. Visitors should be identified as such.

Use the agenda to organize the minutes, moving from the call to order (record the time and place) through the approval of the minutes and financial report to old business items and new business items until you report what time the meeting adjourned.

The most important element in the minutes is the record of actions taken. You need to be clear and specific so that the reader knows whether the board took action and, if so, what exactly it approved (or voted down).

Informally agreeing on something is not the same as taking action. Here are some examples.

Don't write:

- ♦ The month's checks were presented.

Do write:

- ♦ Bill Conrad moved, Mary Bronson seconded, to pay the bills for March 10 through April 15 [See Appendix I]. The motion passed unanimously.

Don't write:

- ♦ Susie Rice is our new board member. We hear that Susie makes the best muffins ever (hint, hint).

Do write:

- ♦ Director Karen Greenwood reported that Mayor Clark has appointed Suzanne Rice, Vice-President of Commercial Bank, to complete Gregory Howe's term on the Board. Her term, effective immediately, will end December 31, 2006.

Don't write:

- ♦ The director said we needed to make some changes in the Circulation Policy, and after talking about it for awhile, we agreed, she was right.

Do write:

- ♦ Jane Williams moved, Bill Conrad seconded, to approve the revisions to the Circulation Policy as presented by the Director [see Appendix II]. A brief discussion followed. The motion passed unanimously.

Append copies of documents referred to in the minutes, e.g., new policies, a letter from the director of a neighboring library, a new agreement with the system. If the Director usually makes a report, he or she might contribute a summary that can be included in the minutes.

It isn't necessary to report the details of discussions, but including major points or the assignment of a task, either to a Board member or to the Director, is good practice. For example, "The Director reported that staff have been receiving complaints about the difficulty of locating large print books. After discussing the problem, the Board asked the Director to investigate the cost of new signage

and report back to the Board at the August meeting."

If the board goes into closed session, the minutes must reflect that and the roll call vote that is required for a closed session. The chair's announcement of the purpose of the closed session must be recorded as well. Generally only discussion will occur in a closed session, so the only minutes recorded are the motion and vote to return to an open meeting. The action then occurs as usual with a motion, second, and vote in an open meeting. The most common example of this is a closed session to discuss a personnel issue. If you are not sure what the Open Meetings law requires, be sure to find out before the situation arises; your municipality's personnel director or attorney or system staff are good resources.

Rewrite the minutes as soon as possible, using your original draft. If possible, do them on a computer and run a spell check. If you need to verify a point, consult with the library director or the board chair. When the minutes have been approved, they should be stored in chronological order in the library.

The emphasis in Wisconsin on open meetings for governmental agencies suggests that making the library's minutes widely available is an excellent practice. The municipality should have an official set, but you could also send copies to every member of the municipal board, post the most recent set wherever you post meeting agendas, send them to the system director, and keep a complete file on your library's website. Online files, incidentally, can make searching the minutes much easier and faster.

Writing minutes is not an exercise in creativity. One month's meetings should look and read very much like every other month's minutes, regardless of who wrote them; so that the reader can quickly find what he needs. Accuracy, clarity, availability, and organization in your minutes can project the kind of image you want your library to have.

Training for Trustees

In order to remain certified, library directors have to participate in regular continuing education. Even though there's no similar requirement for library trustees it's a good idea for trustees to participate in continuing education activities as well. You can learn about new trends in library services, find out what legal issues may affect your library, and discuss mutual concerns with trustees of other libraries.

Every year the Wisconsin Library Association and the Wisconsin Association of Public Libraries each hold annual conferences; WLA in the fall and WAPL in the spring. Programs are always planned with trustee interests in mind. Your library system sponsors regular workshops for library staff and the topics are often useful for trustees as well as staff. Many library systems also sponsor trustee workshops and in most cases you can attend programs or workshops, even if they're sponsored by a neighboring library system.

As you can see, trustees have many continuing education opportunities throughout the year. It's not necessary for every trustee to attend every workshop or conference; one or two can attend and report back to the whole board.

Check with your library system about continuing education funds for trustees; some systems will help pay for registration and expenses.

If there are program topics you'd like to see at a system workshop contact your system office or ask your director to do so. System staff are always looking for topics of interest.

TRUSTEE SOAPBOX

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