

Charging Fees for Library Services

by Mark Arend

From time to time librarians get asked: “Why can’t the library charge for...?” or “Why can’t I pay extra and have...?” As budgets tighten this question is likely to come up more often. You, as a library trustee, need to be ready to respond to proposals that your library start charging for some services.

Because the Wisconsin Legislature has recognized “The importance of free access to knowledge, information and diversity of ideas by all residents of this state” for over 130 years state law has required that “Every public library shall be free for the use of the inhabitants of the municipality by which it is established and maintained” [Wisconsin Statutes 43.001(1)a and 43.52(2)].

Based on this law, Wisconsin’s Attorneys General have consistently ruled that public libraries may not charge for providing most library materials or services. It is permissible for a public library to charge for certain services which are not central to the library’s information providing role.

But why did our legislators think that free access to library services was important enough to put in statute?

There are several reasons why free libraries and library services are important:

- We are living in an ‘Information Age’. All Americans need access to that information.
- Charging for services could eventually divide our country into two groups: the “information-rich” who could afford access and the “information-poor” who could not.
- Residents have already paid for their libraries through their taxes. Fees for services could be considered charging them a second time.
- Access to free public library services is an important part of that upward mobility that has always been a cornerstone of American society. Most librarians can tell you stories of people who have used information from the library to get ahead.

(continued on page 2)

What you can and can’t charge for

You *cannot* charge for:

- ♦ Use of most books, video recordings or other library materials
- ♦ Interlibrary loan services, including shipping costs
- ♦ Reserving library materials, including postage costs for notices
- ♦ Access to the Internet or online resources
- ♦ Attendance at or participation in library programs
- ♦ Answering reference questions

You *can* charge for:

- ♦ Use of a meeting room
- ♦ Rental of AV equipment, such as video players, overhead projectors, and PA systems
- ♦ Photocopies and computer printouts

It is permissible to charge a rental fee for books, videos, or other materials if you also have available a “reasonable number” of copies of the same item which circulate without charge. The Attorney General has not specified what constitutes a “reasonable number”.

(continued from page 1)

Some people will ask: "Why not charge for the use of some items; maybe just for videos or compact discs". This ignores the fact that information now comes in all formats. The times when only books contained information and audiovisual materials were for recreation are long past. A student studying the Civil War is as likely to borrow a DVD documentary as they are a book; and the book they *do* borrow might be an e-book or a book on compact disc rather than a bound book.

Almost 200 years ago James Madison said: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives." These words are as true now as they were then. Free public libraries are a key source of that information we need to remain a free people.



Community Analysis

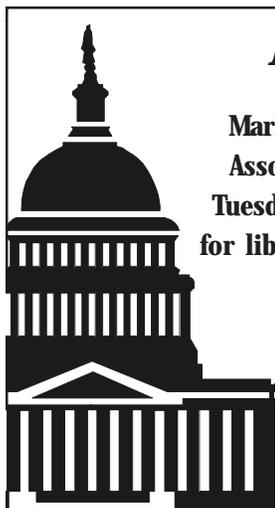
By Greta Thompson

One of the standard parts of a planning process is the community analysis in which the library seeks to develop a profile of the community it serves. The idea is to collect information about the community as it is now and the goals community leaders have. Then the library evaluates that information in order to determine which community needs it can and should address.

Whether or not your library is engaging in full-scale planning, you might want to borrow elements of this step. You can corroborate or revise your awareness of what's happening in your community. The more sensitive you are to community issues, the more likely the library is to be relevant to the needs of its present and potential patrons.

There are a variety of ways in which you can adapt elements of the community analysis step to your needs. Here are four possibilities that need not take a lot of time, but can yield some very useful information.

(continued on page 3)



Library Legislative Day 2004

Mark your calendars now for the Wisconsin Library Association's Library Legislation Day in Madison on Tuesday 3 February 2004. This is a great opportunity for library supporters to talk with their State Legislators about the importance of library support.

Ask your library director or go to
<http://www.wla.lib.wi.us/legis/day/index.htm>
 for more information.

1. One or two board members can interview a few community leaders.

How would they describe the community in a word, a sentence, or a few sentences? Has it changed in significant ways in the last 5-10 years, and if so, how? What challenges is it facing? Are there groups in the community whose needs are not being met?

2. You can ask someone from outside the community—perhaps from another library board, maybe from your system—to hold several small group meetings with people representing various sectors of the community.

For example, they could talk to young adults, the elderly, members of service clubs, newcomers, or teachers. It would be interesting to ask these groups the same questions that the community leaders asked and see how the responses compare.

These are both ways to learn more about your community. Some of the information may be well-known to you. Good. Then you know you're in touch. Some may be off the wall. Don't dismiss it too quickly; there may be a nugget of gold in it, if not about the present, then about the future. It may be an all too familiar

point that nobody can do anything about, so why keep harping on it? Well, it must matter, and that's worth thinking about.

You and the people you talk to may think that you should ask them about the library. Let me quote from Trustee Essential #11: "The real purpose of consulting all of these community representatives is to find out about *them*—... The library staff and board are the experts in the broad array of possible library services." They can tell you about themselves, their view of the community, and their experience. It's your job to translate this into what the library can do to address the interests and needs that are thus revealed.

Nevertheless, you may want to give them a chance to express their thoughts about the library, and you may benefit from listening to what others have to say about the library.

3. Perhaps the easiest option is for a representative or two from the board and the library director to hold an open meeting at the library two or three times a year for people to ask questions about library services and make comments or suggestions.

Maybe only a handful of people will show up, but they will be people who care and have a question or comment that's important to them. You may be able to identify small changes you can make that will lead to more satisfied patrons. You may discover that they value something the library does that you didn't realize was important. If you're receptive, who knows what you might learn? In any case, the fact that you're willing to listen will send them a positive message about the library

4. You can ask the library director to collect and graph statistics about the community based on the census, chamber of commerce reports, newspaper reports, and school records, for instance; and together you can study them to

(continued on page 4)



(continued from page 3)

see if there are trends (more elderly, more minorities, more drop-outs, loss of businesses, more young families, etc.).

Even if the raw numbers and percentages of change are small, do they tell you something about the community's likely future? Are there facts that you've overlooked?

The purpose of all these activities is to help the board, the director, and the staff direct their resources and energy to activities that the community will value and benefit from. And that, as John Madden would say, "is what it's all about."



TRUSTEE SOAPBOX

Do you have a question, comment or topic to suggest for a future TrusteeTale? Send an Email to:

Arend@mail.winnetx.org

You may also phone your questions to 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.winnetx.org

Winnetx: Mark Arend, 920-236-5222

them to:

If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future articles, send

funded by your home system.

System. Distribution to your board is

the Outagamie Waupaca Library

by the Winnetx Library System and

trustee tale is written and distributed



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