



Library Board Forms

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THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY should be an agency for determining, and then satisfying, the library needs and desires of the community. Its means of doing so is the transformation of public funds and facilities into administrative action and service. Historically, the authoritative library board has been the overwhelmingly dominant form of government for the American public library. Today the authoritative board still governs the majority of our public libraries, but it is getting an increasing amount of competition from other governmental forms, namely from the city manager in council-manager cities.

In almost all of our fifty states, municipalities and counties are granted statutory permission to create public libraries and to appoint library boards to govern them. Those states in which statutory permission is not granted have an implied permission. In most cases, the statutes spell out the methods by which the library board is to be appointed or elected, the number of members the board is to have, and the length of their terms. Many statutes also have stipulations that provide for certain local officials to be *ex officio* library board members, and a few set a minimum or maximum for the number of board members of a particular sex or political affiliation.

It is impossible to get a precise picture of library boards by merely reading statutes. Most library statutes are permissive rather than mandatory, and many of them are vague. Then, too, home rule charters in many cities negate the statutory provisions. Nonetheless, the general image of the American public library board can be fairly accurately drawn from the statutes.

There seems to be a considerable amount of disagreement between the statutes of various states as to what constitutes the most desirable size for a library board. The majority of states set the number of

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board members between five and nine, although some cities have as few as three or as many as twenty-five. In 1935 the average authoritative library board had eight members.¹ Since 1935 a number of states have given cities permission to decrease their board size, and the professional opinions of both librarians and political scientists generally favor small boards. These factors indicate that the size of the average library board today is probably a bit smaller than in 1935.

The overwhelming majority of public library trustees are appointed by local government officials. In only a few cities are trustees elected. They are usually appointed by the mayor or by the legislative body. In some cities they are appointed by the school board or the city manager. In a very small number of cities, library boards are legally self-perpetuating, although a large number of boards are self-perpetuating in practice, by means of recommending candidates for appointment to the appointing power. When trustees are appointed by the chief executive of a city, the approval of the legislative body is usually required by law.

The term of office for trustees also varies widely from state to state. In most states it is set by statute, but in some it is left to the discretion of the appointing power. Statutes vary in setting the length of term from one to ten years. Most commonly, trustees serve terms of three to six years, with the five year term appearing most often. Almost always, the terms of trustees are staggered in order to promote continuity in library government. Rarely does a state or city limit the number of terms a trustee may serve. This generalization is well proved by the large number of library board members in America who have served twenty, thirty, or even forty or more years.

Another set of stipulations for library boards to be found in many states and cities pertains to individual board members. It is a widely held maxim of library government that it is undesirable for the library to be dominated by, or even closely connected with, the local government. Many states stipulate that neither the mayor nor any member of the legislative body may be a member of the board. Many more states provide that no more than one councilman be on the board at any one time. A few states, however, take the opposing view, and fix the mayor, or one councilman, as an *ex officio* board member. In some states other local officials, such as a school board member, the school superintendent, or the county judge, are made *ex officio* board members. A final type of regulation that a few states

make is to insure some measure of diversification on the board, usually in the form of preventing the board from being unduly dominated by a single sex or political party.

It is desirable that individual trustees be appointed rather than elected, except in the rare cases in which library boards have power to levy taxes. Although an elected library board would clearly be a violation of the short-ballot principle, an even greater disadvantage is that the elected board is completely separated from the revenue-appropriating body. Through the power of appointment and removal, a city council has a small measure of control over the library, and an appointed board is in a better position to communicate with the council. Both of these conditions are conducive to a library's budget request being considered more thoughtfully and favorably by the appropriating body.

The size of library boards in America tends to be too large, but it is encouraging to note the number of libraries that are having the size of their board decreased. There is no reason that a library could not be governed well by a five-man board. Certainly a board of over nine members is apt to be unwieldy as an instrument of government. Individual trustees in large boards are apt to lose their sense of involvement and importance.

Cities would do well to limit the number of terms an individual board member could serve. The extremely long tenure that is so common among library trustees has sometimes served to deprive whole generations in a community of the opportunity to govern their public library. Besides promoting rigid and inflexible policies, overlong tenure keeps libraries from being infused with fresh ideas, and can be responsible for community apathy. If a citizen has the capacity and desire to be a valuable contribution to the library and the community, ten years as a library trustee would give him ample opportunity.

It is axiomatic that the quality of library service in an area is not going to be determined as much by the size of the library board or the number of years its members serve as it will be by the skill, enthusiasm, and amount of influence possessed by the individual trustees. It is here, rather than on the mechanics of the board, that any evaluation of a particular board or the entire authoritative board form of library government must be based.

Who are the people serving on our library boards? What are their backgrounds? To what extent are they capable of determining the needs of their community and formulating the policy of their library?

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How well are they able to gain the necessary financial support for their institution? These questions are, in large part, impossible to answer. Even if the answers were known, the composite picture of the typical American library board would not adequately describe many existing boards. The relatively few facts about library trustees that are known, however, can be useful in judging the effectiveness of the authoritative board form of government as a whole.

The best recent survey of library trustees was done by the Pacific Northwest Library Association, and reported in their *Library Development Project Reports*.² Their findings on library board members in their area are probably very close to what a nationwide survey might bring out.

The educational level of trustees in the Pacific Northwest was found to be quite high—considerably higher than the general population. Of all trustees, 23 per cent were high school graduates, 58 per cent were college graduates, and 17 per cent had some graduate training.³ Of those that were college graduates, 68 per cent had majored in the liberal arts or social sciences, 7 per cent had majored in the sciences or engineering, and 24 per cent had professional training.⁴

The vocational and professional background of trustees as brought out in the PNLA survey is especially interesting. Housewives comprised 45 per cent of the total number of trustees. Nineteen per cent were in business, either as owners or in an executive capacity; 11 per cent were in education; 7 per cent in law; 6 per cent were clerical or blue-collar workers; and 12 per cent were classified as "other." The latter classification included those who were retired.⁵ The occupations of these trustees are not representative of the population as a whole, nor do they correspond very closely with the occupational status of library users.

Many public libraries in the United States originated as women's club libraries, and the influence of women is still strongly felt in their government. This is especially true of smaller communities where books, libraries, and all other types of cultural endeavors tend to be thought of as women's activities. Many smaller communities have library boards composed entirely of women. As a general rule, not until communities reach the 10,000 population size is the influence of men significantly felt. It can be generally stated that the larger the library, the greater the percentage of male members on its library board. In cities of over 50,000 inhabitants, library boards are predominantly male.

Persons of middle and advanced age are a majority group on library boards. Again, this phenomenon is more often found in smaller communities. Joeckel notes that in 1935 the median age of library trustees was fifty-six years. There were more trustees over seventy years old than there were under forty.⁶ Undoubtedly, the average age of board members is closely related to the exceedingly long tenure they often enjoy. There are a number of indications that as the status and backgrounds of trustees have slowly broadened to be more representative of the community, the average age of board members has decreased four or five years.⁷

The reasons that certain individuals are chosen to serve on library boards are many and diverse. In all fairness it must be said that a great many are selected because the appointing power feels that they are well qualified to regulate the library's policies and are able to make their library an effective and influential institution. Many trustees receive their appointments as minor political rewards, or because they or a member of their family has given land or money to the library. Often a trustee is appointed to represent a particular community group such as the clergy, organized labor, the Chamber of Commerce, or a service club or fraternal organization. Others are chosen solely because they have an interest in and love for books, education, or culture. Some trustees are appointed for their special interest or ability in a specific aspect of library management, e.g., finance, law, buildings and equipment, literature, or public relations.

To a person seeking a high status in his community, membership on the library board is not a particularly attractive "plum," except in the very largest cities. The job carries good tenure, but there is little glamour or publicity, and library trustees are not responsible for supervising the expenditure of very large amounts of money. Since they receive no salaries, their only satisfaction is that of rendering service to the community. Trustees are usually well educated, fairly well informed, and "very middle class in their social status and identification . . . [but] Rarely are they members of whatever groups may be said to 'run' the community."³

In cities where the library is governed by an authoritative board, the relationship between the library board and the rest of the city government is a distant one. With the exception of the power to levy taxes, the board is practically an independent government. Within the framework of state and local law, it has almost complete control over the library. The one area in which the city usually retains control

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is finance. Funds are appropriated by a legislative body, and their financial officer (city clerk or treasurer) is invested with responsibility for the safe handling and legal expenditure of these funds. The result is that city hall usually controls the financial procedures and accounting for the library, but in no way controls the expenditure of funds as long as they are legal and honest. Governing boards have the power to engage and disengage personnel (often subject to civil service regulations), purchase materials and supplies, and regulate the policies of the library.

The greatest revolution in twentieth-century local government is the widespread adoption of the council-manager form of city government. This form is also found in a few counties. The city manager plan was first used in the United States in 1908, and by 1934 it had been adopted by 418 cities. In only a small number of these 418 cities did the city manager control the library. In 1934, of the 69 cities with populations over 30,000 that had a city manager, only six libraries were administered by the manager, and five were administered by boards appointed by him.⁸ This practice was consistent with the concept that the public library should be separated from the local government as much as possible.

The number of cities that have the council-manager plan has grown rapidly since 1934. In 1961, of the 3,047 cities in the United States with populations of 5,000 or over, 1,114, or 37.5 per cent, were governed by this form.⁹ The number of libraries controlled by city managers today is not known, but the International City Managers' Association has recently taken a survey of libraries in council-manager cities, and is in the process of incorporating the results into a book on municipal library administration. A 1959 survey of Texas municipalities found that 46 Texas council-manager cities operated municipal libraries; and 20 of these 46 libraries were administered by a city manager.¹⁰ Some of the larger libraries that are governed by a city manager are those of Austin, Amarillo, Wichita Falls, and Abilene, Texas; San Diego, California; Miami, Florida; Norfolk, Virginia; Phoenix, Arizona, and Worcester, Massachusetts.

Librarians are usually wary of interference from other professional administrators, and recent writers have almost unanimously agreed that city manager control of libraries should be avoided. Karl Burg recognizes that the number of manager-controlled libraries is increasing, but he is skeptical about it. He is especially afraid that the manager will usurp a few of the librarian's sacrosanct duties such as

personnel selection and equipment selection, and that he will rob the library's budget for purposes which he considers more important.⁷

To be sure, there are many city managers who will interfere with their librarian's duties, but there are also many library boards that do the same. Two extremely important trends in the city manager profession will result in the gradual disappearance of this type of manager and the type of manager who ignores his library's budgetary needs. One of these trends is that the typical city manager is gradually being thought of less often as an engineer, and more often as a specialist in government and administration. At their professional meetings, managers are less concerned with sewage treatment methods, street maintenance and the like, and are more concerned with their roles as community leaders and with the total welfare of the city and its inhabitants.

The second trend is the rapidly growing professionalism of the city manager. More than ever before, city councils prefer their city managers to meet specified educational requirements. City managers' increasing professionalism will have two major effects upon their relations with libraries. One effect is that the city manager himself will be more likely to be a reader and to have an interest in books and education. The other is that he will be likely to have more respect for the librarian as a professional administrator.

When libraries are governed by city managers, library boards usually retain their existence, but they become advisory boards instead of authoritative boards. These boards may be appointed by the mayor or council, but they often are appointed by the city manager. Their function is to advise the city council, manager, and/or the librarian on matters pertaining to the library. Since the city manager has taken over many of the duties normally performed by an authoritative board, many advisory boards are characterized by a dwindling interest in the library. There is no reason, however, that these advisory boards could not fully apply themselves to the tasks of broadly determining the library needs of the community, recommending plans of action to fulfill these needs, and working to influence the city council and the community to adopt them. These tasks are often the very ones neglected by authoritative boards which are immersed in the overseeing of the librarian's administrative action.

Advisory boards in two other governmental situations deserve brief attention. A few of the 261 cities with populations over 5,000 which operate under the commission form of government have their libraries

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directly administered by a commissioner. Also, librarians in a few cities are appointed by and report directly to the city council. In cities such as these the function of the library board is substantially the same as it is in cities where the city manager controls the library.

The advantages and disadvantages of city manager control of the library can also be applied to commissioner control—with two exceptions. A commissioner, unlike a city manager, is an amateur administrator and is a politician. The fact that he is also a member of the appropriating body could conceivably be a tremendous advantage to the library controlled by him. In practice, however, commissioners are not usually elected for their administrative competence or interest in books and libraries. Moreover, the commissioner who is assigned the library, or to the group of departments that includes the library, is often the one who garnered the least number of votes, or who belongs to the minority party—even though the election may be nonpartisan. The commission plan has come into general disfavor since its heyday, and there is no really good reason that libraries would benefit from coming under its wing.

A development of the advisory board is the Friends of the Library group. Although this type of group enjoys no formal government status, it can act as an advisory board and do a good deal to influence the appropriating body and to publicize the library. Since neither advisory boards nor Friends govern the library, they need not be limited in size as is the authoritative board. Indeed, it is an advantage to have them large, because more elements of the community can be represented, and they can exert greater influence as a pressure group.

A final form of library government that should be mentioned, although it is not truly a library board, is the school board that operates the public library. A number of cities have libraries of this type, the most notable of which is Kansas City, Missouri. In some cases, the school board also serves as the library board, with the librarian responsible directly to it. In other cases the librarian is a subordinate of the school superintendent. In some situations of this type the public library tends to be neglected, especially with regard to its service to adults. In other cases, public libraries have been well supported financially as a result of the fact that school boards deal with larger budgets than do independent library boards.

With the exception of the relatively few school-district libraries, municipal and county legislative bodies are the ultimate controllers of public libraries. Even in the strongest of board-governed institu-

tions, the city council has the power of the purse and, except where boards are elected, has the authority to appoint and remove individual trustees. In cities that have governing boards, the legislative body has merely delegated its authority over the library to the library board. In cities in which the city manager controls the library, the city council has delegated its administrative authority to him and has retained the broad policy-making power for itself. In cities where individual commissioners administer libraries, the board of commissioners has still retained the broad policy-making power.

There is little agreement, of course, as to the dividing line between administration and policy making. In a small library governed by an authoritative board, the decision of whether or not to buy a typewriter might be construed as a policy decision, whereas in a library governed by a city manager it would probably be an administrative decision. In situations where the city manager or a commissioner governs the library, the legislative body might reserve for itself as policy decisions only those of a certain magnitude—e.g., the placement of a branch library, the amount of paid vacation for staff members, or the setting of a non-resident fee.

It has been an almost universal concept in library circles that the public library should be shielded from politics by a strong library board—the board to act as a buffer between the library and city hall. If we can assume that the major weakness of the American public library is its poverty, it is surely its separation from the appropriating body that has been an important contributor to this weakness. Appropriating bodies are often more concerned with the total amount of the city budget and tax levy than they are with the amounts allotted to individual departments. The very aloofness of the library places it at a great disadvantage when other departments that are competing for the same dollar are frequently in contact with the appropriating body. Too often, the only time a city council is in contact with the library is when the budget request is sent in or when a board member is reappointed. If public libraries are truly worthy of adequate public support, then repeated contact with the appropriating body, and an opportunity to have its purposes and policies aired, would be a tremendous advantage. At the very least, it would make the legislators aware that a public library exists in the community and that it is engaged in a number of worthwhile activities.

Probably the main reason that the control of libraries by the city manager should be more fully explored is to effect a closer proximity

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between the library and the appropriating body. In situations of this type, an advisory board or Friends of the Library group can be invaluable in recommending book selection policies to the council and in studying and recommending plans for increasing services and the use of services.

With the myriad of local governmental customs and preferences, no single form of library government will ever be universally recognized in practice, nor will any single form be a panacea for all library ills. The authoritative board has been the dominant governing force in American public libraries for many decades. While there are many truly outstanding library systems that have been created and governed by these boards, it must be admitted that the public library has lagged considerably behind other American institutions in growth, financial support, and public acceptance. Authoritative boards have not, on the whole, been very effective in supplying their communities with the quality of library service they need. In many situations, perhaps some other form of library government would do better.

Reprinted below are three recommendations of the Library Development Project sponsored by the Pacific Northwest Library Association:

1. State and provincial legislation should be enacted to permit, on a local option, the transfer of the library board's jurisdiction over policy to the city council (county court, in the case of county libraries).

2. In the place of boards of trustees, legally constituted Friends of the Library groups should be formed, with advisory prerogatives. These should be large groups generally representative of the community and, more specifically, the library users.

3. The professional competence of the librarian should be recognized in the law, and, where constitutionally possible, full administrative powers should be given to him.¹¹

The above recommendations, if adopted, would not mean the end of the authoritative board as an instrument of library government. It would, however, give citizens in every community, no matter what their form of local government, an opportunity to evaluate different governmental forms for their public library and to adopt any one of them. The board system for many governmental units has often been the first step in an evolutionary process leading to full integration with the central local government. This is especially true of municipally-owned utilities. There is no reason that public libraries could not be-

come a more integral part of their local governments, and benefit by doing so.

The authoritative library board has deep roots in statutory law. Most of these statutes were adopted in a period of time when public libraries were in their infancy and when local governments were noted for their incompetence and corruption. Both libraries and local governments have made considerable progress since this early period. At one time it might have been wise to shield the library and the librarian from politics, but it is unwise to do so today. The modern public library is definitely a part of the political process, and its increased participation in this process will work to its advantage.

References

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