



Some Political Aspects of Operating a Multiple Governmental Unit Organization

ROBERT H. ROHLF

IN THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT of public libraries in the United States the typical public library served only one political corporation, a city or a town. Under this singularity the librarian generally dealt with only one library board, and the library board dealt with only one city council. The more recent development in public library service has been the multi-unit library, that is, the district library, regional library, or multi-county library. Some libraries are all of these in one, depending on how the terms are defined, and as yet there is no nationally agreed-upon terminology.

This new form of library organization serving more than one city, town, township or county, or any combination, or even portions thereof, has given rise not only to new opportunities for library service, but also to new problems of administration and communication between library personnel and the governmental units and boards which pay for this library service. These problems, of course, are not uniform in all multi-unit libraries, but vary in degree and scope depending upon the legal basis of the library. The library which serves several local political units but with one consolidated board and with taxing powers of its own (some district libraries fit this pattern) has problems differing a great deal from a cooperative library system serving several local political units with a cooperative board but with no independent taxing power. Between these two extremes are found the majority of library systems which serve multiple units of local government. These are generally the multi-unit library with a separate board but no taxing power or the city library giving county service but again with no taxing power over the county.

The major problems in the political sphere concern the library which

The author is Director, Dakota-Scott Regional Library System, West St. Paul, Minnesota.

Operating a Multiple Governmental Unit Organization

serves multiple governmental units, each with its own separate taxing authority, and where the library board must approach each of these taxing authorities individually and secure from each of them the same tax rate. Suppose that there is a library system serving several counties, and the system was created by contractual action of three separate county boards of commissioners, but with its own separate library board of nine trustees, three appointed by each county. This library board has full jurisdiction over the operation of the library system but does not have the power to levy a tax. The library board decides that to secure sufficient income to operate the library at a satisfactory level of service the library tax over the three-county area must be set at $1\frac{1}{2}$ mills. In preliminary discussion with several county commissioners this level appears to be satisfactory to two of the three county boards which must legally levy the tax. The third board of commissioners, however, feels that this tax rate is too high and refuses to levy more than $1\frac{1}{4}$ mills.

What happens then? Do the two county boards proceed to levy $1\frac{1}{2}$ mills allowing the third county to levy less? This is rather unlikely. Do the other two boards of commissioners meet with the hesitant board and insist that they go along with them and accede to the library board's request? This is also unlikely. Does the library board pressure this reluctant county or even threaten it if it does not go along? This is also unlikely. Rather, the odds are that the library board will meet with the reluctant county board, plead with it, cajole, state its case as well as possible, and then probably have to step back and renegotiate its budget at a lower tax rate. This process may be repeated each year, and the reluctant county of one year may not be the reluctant county of the next year. In fact, there is even some suspicion that the county boards take turns playing this reluctant role, so that the tax may be kept low and no one of them will be the villain every year.

The obvious answer to this problem is to keep in constant communication with the tax-levying county boards of commissioners, to meet with them frequently, to supply them with all the facts and figures possible all year long, and to build personal rapport with the commissioners. This is actually what the head of every library must do whether the library serves a single city or a dozen cities, but the difficulties which many libraries have with only one appropriating body are multiplied when dealing with more than one agency; and the increase is not arithmetic but geometric, for you have the relationship not just of a library board with each of three appropriating bodies,

but also the relationship of each of these bodies with each other. Who is to know what boundary road dispute lurks in the background, or what one commissioner did to another at the last state political convention, or who opposed whose candidate for Congress in the last election? Everything said here regarding county boards applies equally to city council relationships.

This matter of budgetary control is perhaps the most frustrating of all the problems of a multiple unit of library service. Every year one hesitant unit can cause great pressures on the library board. Every year each appropriating agency must be sold so completely that it in turn helps convince any reluctant agency if by no other means than by example. Every year there is the possibility of one recalcitrant board forcing all of the others to back down, or at least giving them the opportunity to do so. Every year there is the probability that the more budget-conscious counties or cities will prevail over the less stringent ones, and that the lowest denominator will constantly keep the average down. The other counties or political units served can always go ahead on their own and in effect form a new unit excluding the penny-pinching member, but this defeats the intent of the multi-unit library system. Furthermore, one appropriating unit may be reluctant one year, and another unit reluctant the next year.

Budgetary support is not the only major concern in a political context when dealing with multiple political units. The location of service outlets, and particularly of the headquarters library, has definite political overtones, particularly when a new library system is formed in an area hitherto without service, with only marginal service, or on the other hand with libraries of equal size already in operation. Historically the county seat has usually been the location of the county library headquarters, but in some regional libraries there are two, three, four or even more counties. Imagine the problems when an already existing library is not chosen as headquarters because time and geography have by-passed the town and another location is much more logical as a result of new roads or population shifts. Perhaps even more difficult is the situation of many multiple-unit library systems in suburban areas where the county seat is relatively meaningless as a center, or where old, established communities accustomed to controlling the area find themselves surrounded and outnumbered by new communities which have arisen virtually overnight.

Again the answers appear obvious. Libraries should be so located and the headquarters designated where they will serve the most peo-

Operating a Multiple Governmental Unit Organization

ple, most efficiently, and be most convenient for patrons to visit. These locations are easy to arrive at in theory, but the political aspects of locating service points cannot be overlooked nor brushed aside. They are factors which can be handled by careful action and persuasiveness, but they cannot be ignored or relegated to a minor position because a scientific survey of possible library locations was made. Consider the pressures of neighborhood groups, to which many municipal public libraries have been subjected, in regard to the location of branches, and then enlarge these problems to fit service areas measured in thousands of square miles and including independent cities and towns. The location of the headquarters or of community service points must be assessed scientifically—but the political repercussions must also be considered in the final decision. One approach often employed is to have communities vie for the privilege of having the headquarters or a major branch by requiring the communities to finance the buildings locally. This is not without its dangers and its disadvantages, however; the poorer communities need good library service too, and they also have a voice in the political councils.

Another political factor is the place of residence of library board members. Fortunately, this has not loomed large in the majority of instances, but it is nevertheless a factor which was considered in almost every system with which the present author is familiar. Most library systems serving more than one political unit have managed to obtain library boards whose members feel that they represent the area at large, not just their home town or even county. There are rare cases, however, when a board member makes every decision in the light of how it affects his home area, not the system or area at large. On the other hand, the appointing authorities usually judge a person's fitness to be a trustee as much by where he lives as by his potential competence as a board member. It is often difficult to persuade people that not every city or county must be equally represented or that appointments should be made apart from the political debts of the last election or from any sectional rivalry based on non-library issues. The appointment of library trustees is both a political opportunity and a possible political danger; and alert librarians must be ever aware of this political factor, often a geographic one in system libraries, when vacancies are filled on these multi-unit library boards.

Still another aspect of operating a library serving many political subdivisions is that of the relationships necessary with not just one school district but with several or even a score of different independent

school districts. To the children's or young adult librarian who has dealt with only one school library supervisor in the past, the problems of dealing with several completely independent school libraries can be frustrating. While some districts may be cooperative and sympathetic, others will be very uncooperative. By the same token, the librarian must deal with not one planning commission, but perhaps a dozen; in fact, if the library is in a growing area he can easily become the planning expert. He will attend so many planning meetings that his language takes on the special vocabulary of the professional planner, and he can also become the informal, not always voluntary, coordinator of area-wide planning.

All these problems are not really so different in nature from those facing the municipal library, but in the case of the regional library they are complicated by the wide geographic spread, the potentially wide range of interest and cooperation, and the absence of any one source of authority or responsibility.

If the library adopts a formal salary scale, should it establish one scale, say for the clerical positions? How do you establish the scale if, as is likely, the local salaries vary from city to city or county to county? Or do you pay local salaries to match local scales, varying within your own library system? The implications of salaries are obvious to all boards and administrators, and many a system has had to exercise great care in this regard, particularly in an urban-rural area where clerical salary scales can vary greatly, and what is too low in one community is considered too high in another—at least in the opinion of the local politicians. Some political problems can actually become legal problems, as in the area of staff retirement plans. If there are several county plans or several city plans available, can the library participate in only one, and if so in which one? Does the regional library pay the employer's contribution or do the participating political subdivisions?

The political aspects of library operation over wide geographical areas pose problems which at times can be very discouraging, but they also present opportunities for dynamic administration, flexible operation, and experimental programs. Many city library boards would welcome the opportunity to appear for budgetary hearings before another city council after their own council has been less than considerate of their request, particularly if the second council is a friendly one. It is in this sense that certain advantages can be seen in dealing with more than one budgetary authority. By the judicious selection of budgetary hearing dates, for example, those authorities most sympathetic to the library

Operating a Multiple Governmental Unit Organization

can be given the first opportunity to review the budget. With their approval secured, those less sympathetic can be approached and with each approval it becomes somewhat more difficult for the next authority to react negatively. Unusual demands on administrative skill arise in other connections.

The opportunities of using the strongest pro-library areas as levers against the less enthusiastic areas are numerous, but must not be abused. There is always the countervailing tendency of the lowest common denominator prevailing, and of library service never reaching the level it should because of too great subservience to the least sympathetic authority. A constant awareness must also be maintained by the library to make certain that the level of service is approximately the same in all areas and that those areas which present the greatest problem at budget time are not slighted, even subconsciously, when service standards are set. Library systems serving these large areas of differing governmental units need sufficient administrative staff to spend endless hours and days (and evenings) attending the multitude of meetings at which the library should be represented. Many city libraries decry the amount of staff time consumed in dealing with the city council, the school system, the planning commission and so forth, but the amount of time so consumed by their county cousins in attending such meetings in dozens of different communities is much greater. Yet it is in this personal contact, this keeping the library informed of community sentiment and in keeping the communities informed of the library's situation that the real political points are scored.

The public library serving more than one political unit is undoubtedly the library administrative form of the future. The form will vary from state to state depending upon state laws, and will often vary within each state depending on the organizational basis used and of the needs of the area. Whatever form these systems take they will place the library board in a more politically sensitive atmosphere than has been true of the traditional public library unit. The atmosphere will not be in most cases a partisan political one, but rather that of the political process as defined by Webster ". . . the formulation and administration of public policy usually by interaction between social groups and political institutions or between political leaderships and public opinion." The opportunities for such participation in the political process by the multiple-political-unit library are much greater than in the single-political-unit library.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION
(Act of October 23, 1962; Section 4369, Title 39, United States Code)

1. DATE OF FILING 2. TITLE OF PUBLICATION 3. FREQUENCY OF ISSUE
September 21, 1964 Library Trends Quarterly

4. LOCATION OF KNOWN OFFICE OF PUBLICATION
University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science, Urbana, Illinois

5. LOCATION OF THE HEADQUARTERS OF GENERAL BUSINESS OFFICES OF THE PUBLISHERS
Publications Office, University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science, 435 Library, Urbana, Illinois

6. NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF PUBLISHER, EDITOR, AND MANAGING EDITOR

PUBLISHER	EDITOR
University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science Urbana, Illinois	Herbert Goldhor 331 Library, University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science Urbana, Illinois

MANAGING EDITOR
Herbert Goldhor, 331 Library, University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library Science, Urbana, Illinois

7. OWNER: University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science, 435 Library, Urbana, Illinois

8. KNOWN BONDHOLDERS, MORTGAGEES, AND OTHER SECURITY HOLDERS OWNING OR HOLDING 1 PERCENT OR MORE OF TOTAL AMOUNTS OF BONDS, MORTGAGES, OR OTHER SECURITIES: None

I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.
HERBERT GOLDHOR, Managing Editor
