Library Governance by Citizen Boards

VIRGINIA G. YOUNG

As technology advances, governance of community services increasingly tends to pass into professional hands. Trained technicians administer various projects and enterprises and are answerable to superiors, who in turn are professional administrators of government. The growth of the city-manager form of government throughout the country is a case in point.

Two conspicuous exceptions to this trend of professional governance are the citizen boards charged with responsibility for public schools and the citizen boards charged with responsibility for public libraries. The accepted and unchallenged continuation of these citizen boards seems to be a plain implication that, although the community is agreeable to the administration of law and order, fire protection or street maintenance by professionals, their children's education — and their own mental resources — must be controlled by the people themselves. Governance by citizen boards of public schools and of public libraries is a kind of insistence upon direct lay participation in mental growth from preschool to adult continuing education.

It could also be argued that continued citizen governance of schools and libraries is part of the cherished democratic process. Perhaps the existence of library boards represents a nineteenth-century idealism which averred that education of whatever kind (including education through a library) deserved special attention through its own governing board, and that it was much too significant and too different from general governmental responsibility to be treated otherwise.

City and county government officials are admittedly far more sophisticated than were their predecessors in the nineteenth century, and an argu-
ment might be made that a skilled city manager could govern a library in much the same way one would run the police department. Moreover, given the fact of scarce resources, some people feel that more public funding might be consumed by a public library today (when compared to other community needs) than they would like. Despite these factors, however, library boards continue to exist. Large or small, powerful or weak, effective or incompetent, they manage American public libraries. It is true that although the concept of trusteeship does persist, there is a clear movement in the direction of reorganizing government in order to make it more efficient. State libraries are frequently in state departments of education. Some communities have replaced the library governing board with a citizens' advisory committee with no legal power.

Repeatedly, however, those public library boards which have been scrutinized to determine their purpose and usefulness have been retained. It has been found that where boards were ineffective, it was not because they were not needed. The reasons for weakness seemed to be either appointment of unqualified persons, lack of knowledge of duties, or insufficient time devoted to the job. Therefore, there must be strong state and local laws defining trustee duties and responsibilities. Appointive or elective bodies need to know the necessary qualifications for trusteeship, and trustees must be willing to learn about their duties and the importance of their services. Trusteeship is, by definition, the agency of a person or persons to act as governor or protector over property belonging to another. The public library, of course, belongs to the entire community, so library boards are created by law to serve as the citizen control or the governing body of the library. Library trustees are, therefore, public officials and servants of the public. Powers delegated to library boards are a public trust.

Library trustees are involved in the processes of: (1) policy establishment, (2) allocation of resources, (3) the utilization of personnel, and (4) regulation of services. The policy established for public libraries should reflect the needs and nature of the public served. It is therefore important that the board itself be representative of the varied backgrounds, interests, religions, educational levels, and ethnic groups which make up the community. Before policy is determined, there should be a clear understanding of the meaning of policy, how it is decided, and what it covers. There needs to be full comprehension of the concept of the modern library and the whole philosophy of library service.

Today it is most unusual to find an independent library unrelated to any other. Library systems and networks are constantly being expanded
in order to extend the resources of the library to meet the needs of all the individuals in the community. The library is, after all, important only as it serves the individual, and individual needs vary widely. It is an essential responsibility of governance of the library to insure that the philosophy and ambience of the community are always considered. Although electronic systems and automated devices are used for efficiency, library trusteeship has the opportunity to exercise governance of an institution that directly approaches the individual. What each person needs and asks for from the library may indeed be supplied through computerized systems, but the fulfillment of the mission of the library has to be its impact on the individual's mind. The library board must be constantly aware of this while acting as liaison between the minds of the community and the policy of the library.

Library policy, determined by the board, must always be clearly written, because it is the basis for (1) the operation of the library, (2) the availability of library service, (3) terms of staff employment, (4) objectives of the library program, and (5) the climate of intellectual freedom made possible by the established criteria for the selection of books and materials. Certainly, every library board needs to decide and record policies on: (1) general library objectives; (2) library hours; (3) staff hours, holidays, vacation, and sick leave; (4) salary schedule, personnel classification chart, and retirement provisions; (5) type and quality of books and other library materials to be added to the library collection; (6) charges for lost books and fines on overdue books; (7) services to schools and specialized groups; (8) special services to nonresident borrowers, use of meeting hall, etc.; (9) cooperation with other libraries; (10) acceptance of gifts and memorials; (11) methods of extending services to branch libraries and bookmobiles, participation in library systems, etc.; (12) public relations and publicity; (13) payment of expenses for trustees and staff to attend library conferences, workshops, and professional meetings; and (14) payment of state and national association dues for board members and for the library.

The board needs to understand the clear distinction between policymaking and administration. Once a policy has been adopted, it should have the full support of the board, librarian and staff. The administration of the policy is the responsibility of the librarian. The board must give its full backing to the librarian in the implementation of policy. On a number of occasions trustees have put the full weight of their support behind a librarian when books and materials purchased by the library have been challenged by would-be censors. The freedom to read is indeed
a basic and guaranteed freedom. Public libraries are institutions in the forefront in ensuring the freedom of information, so the citizen governance must be certain that the people have free access to all ideas.

Among the policies set by the board, that which governs book selection is thus one of the most important. Trustees must recognize in setting policy that American communities are composed of people with different backgrounds, interests, religions, ethnic origins, and educational levels. The books and materials should reflect these diverse points of view as much as possible, so that the public will have the freedom of choice and can make its own decisions.

The book selection policy is set by the trustees, but the actual selection is vested in the librarian and staff whose education and training qualify them to do so. Even if the library is too small or lacks funds to have the services of a librarian, the policy-makers should not assume the administrative function of book selection. Under such circumstances, the state library stands ready to assist and give advice. The following is one example of a book selection policy:

The board of this library, recognizing the pluralistic nature of this community and the varied backgrounds and needs of all citizens, regardless of race, creed or political persuasion, declares as a matter of book selection that —

1. Books and/or library material selection is and shall be vested in the librarian and under his direction such members of the professional staff who are qualified by reason of education and training. Any book and/or library material so selected shall be held to be selected by the board.

2. Selection of books and/or other library material shall be made on the basis of their value of interest, information and enlightenment of all people of the community. No book and/or library material shall be excluded because of the race, nationality, or the political or social views of the author.

3. This board believes that censorship is a purely individual matter and declares that while anyone is free to reject for himself books which he does not approve of, he cannot exercise this right of censorship to restrict the freedom to read of others.

4. This board defends the principles of the freedom to read and declares that whenever censorship is involved no book and/or library material shall be removed from the library save under the orders of a court of competent jurisdiction.
Citizen Boards

5. This board adopts and declares that it will adhere to and support:
   a. The Library Bill on Rights, and
   b. The Freedom to Read Statement adopted by the American Library Association,

   both of which are made a part hereof.¹

Even though such a policy is board-formulated as it should be, the board must have full confidence in the librarian to implement it. The actual selection reflects the nature of the library. "Book selection which strives for the 'best' should reappraise its stand to serve everyone."² Standard lists may not contain what people want to read or would choose for themselves.³

Libraries serving different kinds of communities, however, are often associated in networks. This means that trustees may be more vulnerable to liability under the censorship laws. It could be that a book that is not considered obscene in one community will be declared illegal in another community in the system. The solution, therefore, is to establish bylaws and policies for every situation and to see that they are followed.

At regularly scheduled board meetings, time should be set aside periodically to evaluate policy. The progress of a library is built on a firm foundation of well-written policy. Heat-of-the-moment decisions can be avoided and crises are much less likely to occur if the relevant policy, which is written, can be cited. Evaluation of policy needs to be done in light of changing conditions in a rapidly changing world, and policies must be revised when needed.

The most critical problem facing public libraries today is the matter of finance.⁴ A primary responsibility of library boards is to see that the library is adequately financed. Two duties of library trustees are concerned with the area of library financing; the library trustee must: "determine the purposes of the library and secure adequate funds to carry on the library program," and "assist in the preparation of the annual budget."⁵ Library trustees must be thoroughly familiar with sources of possible income. Library revenue for operating purposes is almost always obtained by one of two methods: (1) from a special library tax levy, usually expressed in terms of mileage rate on the dollar of assessed valuation of property, or (2) from a lump sum appropriation from the general revenue of the political subdivision. The majority of the states use the first method. In addition, trustees need to know ways of supplementing income through investment, contractual arrangements with other libraries in the area, and
through state and federal funding. Special library needs, such as a new building, can be financed in a number of ways. These may be by a bond issue, special tax levy, federal or state assistance, fund-raising campaigns, private individual contributions, and/or by foundations.

The library budget must be based on the stated objectives of the library which grow out of the needs of the community. It is the duty of the board to determine what funds are needed and what can be reasonably anticipated. They must be sure that the amount budgeted is both sufficient and realistic, and they must be prepared to explain and justify requests. The preparation of the budget is done in cooperation with the librarian and staff, who furnish the details and who have the professional knowledge—but the trustees must be able to explain it to the appropriating body.

There is certainly competition for the tax dollar, and the library competes with many other worthwhile public projects. The trustee who takes the position seriously, however, will give first priority to the library as a legitimate user of both public and private funds. Such trustees recognize that the library cannot just ask for crumbs, thereby falling far behind the schools and other institutions. They must know the magnitude and potential of what the library has to offer and articulate this clearly to the public and public officials alike. Trustees considering library financial problems have found that "financial studies indicate that local sources of revenue alone will be insufficient to meet the public's demand for new programs, new construction, and new staff." Indeed, dedicated trustees reach far beyond the boundaries of their own library district to be of service in securing state and national funds for all libraries.

One example of this effort occurred a few years ago when libraries faced the prospect of zero federal funding. The American Library Trustee Association called for action; almost 200 trustees from 35 states went to Washington. After a briefing session, these well-informed trustees went to see their congressmen and senators. They did not bludgeon them with statistics, but presented the needs in terms of human resources and backed up their statements with concise and accurate figures. They were prepared to answer questions about their presentations. After the congressional contacts had been made, a press conference was called in the afternoon. Again the trustees gave dramatic presentations of what these cuts would mean to the people in their states. This action received nationwide publicity, and ALA's Washington representative gave much credit to the trustees for the restoration of federal funds for libraries.

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) has stated that "balanced inter-governmental funding at the
local, state, and Federal levels is essential to achieve the content and quality of public library services commensurate with the needs of modern society." In order to achieve funding at every level, there must be a broad base of citizen support. Trustees have shown leadership in promotion of a governor's conference on libraries in the various states to enlist statewide interest and support.

For the last twenty years, trustees in the American Library Trustee Association have been working for a White House conference on libraries. This conference will take place in September 1979 under the guidance of NCLIS and with the help of its advisory committee. The delegates will be primarily lay citizens chosen from the statewide conferences that precede the White House conference. This will result in lay citizen concern with needs and services of libraries. A national spotlight will be focused on libraries, and forces will be set in motion to fulfill the national goals for libraries.

Trustees are not only responsible for public funds, they can do much to increase these funds. This means that they must be informed fully and exactly, be patient, be pleasant, and, above all, be persistent in their efforts. Friendly and cooperative personal relationships provide the key to the best utilization of personnel. The employment of a competent and qualified librarian, along with the writing of policies which govern the operation and program of the library, head the list of trustee responsibilities. Trustees must first determine both the exact qualifications required in the librarian and what the library can offer to the librarian. Do board members want employees who have impressive academic degrees? Do they want creative people, revolutionaries, book readers, bureaucrats, engineers, teachers, town jesters, philosophers, etc.? The library board must decide. Before employing a librarian, the board should be thoroughly familiar with federal and state statutes concerning equal opportunity and affirmative action. It is also advisable to review the ALA "Equal Employment Opportunity" policy statement, as well as its "Guidelines for Library Affirmative Action Plans." These matters should be clearly covered in a written library policy.

Many personnel problems might be nipped in the bud with policies that precisely indicate the terms and conditions of appointments. There will undoubtedly be better job performance if the employees know that there are policies which guard against arbitrary dismissal. Principles of employment security would be stated in policy defining adequate cause and due process. At the same time, library employees should expect a periodic performance evaluation according to written policy.
While employee organizations in the public sector do exist, they are uncommon, particularly in libraries. For economic considerations, such organizations bargain collectively with the agency or body authorized to make a financial commitment on behalf of the governmental unit. For example, such areas usually include a grievance procedure with an impasse provision. The American Library Association has established a Staff Committee on Mediation, Arbitration and Inquiry. When a librarian feels that there has been a problem regarding employment conditions or dismissal, a request for action may be submitted to this committee. This could result in a library’s (or a library board’s) placement on a censured list until corrections are made.

Trustees need to be aware of good labor relations practices and to look at staff demands objectively with regard to the best operation of the library and the good of the community. Although there may be certain elements of basic opposition of interests in the relationship between management and employees, it actually can be a cordial and productive relationship.

Any prospective candidate should be provided with a job description and know exactly what is expected. There should be a clear understanding not only of the professional duties, but also of the relationship with the board and with the staff.

The librarian has a right to expect to administer the library operations within the framework of the board’s policy without interference by the board. The board has the responsibility of approving job specifications and salary scale for the library staff members. The librarian, on the other hand, is responsible for interviewing and recommending the staff of the library, and for supervising their work.

The staff is responsible to the librarian. Any dissatisfaction that may be expressed to board members concerning staff should be taken up directly with the librarian. The relationship of the board with the staff should be one of cordial, friendly interest, completely free from personal intervention between staff and supervisor. The librarian has a further responsibility to keep the board informed at all times in regard to library operations, programs, finances, and problems.

Library trustees are not professionals, nor are they expected to be. Precisely because they are lay people, they bring the citizen viewpoint into focus. “Creative tension,” where librarian and board feel free to challenge the others’ ideas, can work for the good of the library and community.

A board of trustees and the librarian must work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Only where there is understanding
Citizen Boards

and cordial cooperation among the board, librarian and staff can the common goal of better library service be achieved.

The services and programs of the library must grow out of the needs of the community, but the best-planned services are worthless unless the people know about them and use them. Citizen boards have a dual role with regard to the services of the library. As laypersons and as the community representatives, trustees must be certain that the public's point of view and the community's needs are considered in the development of services. Equally important is the trustees' responsibility of interpreting the library and its service to the community. As liaison between the library and the community, trustees have the knowledge to relate effectively to both.

The visibility of library services is recognized as a critical problem of libraries. If individuals have questions or problems, or need information, do they automatically think "library"? Do they know they can get telephone reference service? Do they know they can get books or materials not in the library through interlibrary loan? Do they know about outreach programs and other programs in the library? In addition to a planned public relations program, there needs to be a constant discussion of the library. Trustees have wide contacts with various groups, organizations, and individuals. In talking about the library, it should not be just "library, library, library," but the library in relation to farming, in relation to business, in relation to education — the library in relation to the needs of every individual and group. Every possible means must be utilized to let people know how the library can serve them. Many librarians recognize this need. "The knowledge of non-librarian must be used in implementing the new techniques of public relations." Of course, if wide use of the library is stimulated, it is important that the services not only be there, but that they meet high standards as well. There must be careful planning for all services.

Planning is a continuing process. Short- and long-range plans for library programs and development can never be shelved or taken for granted. They must be in constant focus. Trustees must agree on certain basic assumptions: (1) planning is essential, and (2) the ultimate objective of library planning is service to people. Trustees can be effective in seeking the opinions of individuals and groups on how library service can be improved.

The use of technological advances and automation to extend library service and to improve delivery service must certainly be taken into consideration. Thorough studies of exactly what can be accomplished through
the use of computers and other technology are valuable for decisions about what should and should not be used.

The challenge of the future is to find ways of extending library services through cooperation of all types of libraries. Indeed, it may be that through networks of libraries and information centers, the total resources of the libraries of the country may be available to any citizen. John W. Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, has stated:

We built this complex, dynamic society, and we can make it serve our purposes. We designed this technological civilization, and we can manage it for our own benefit. If we can build organizations, we can make them serve the individual.

To do this takes a commitment of mind and heart—as it always did. If we make that commitment, this society will more and more come to be what it was always meant to be: a fit place for the human being to grow and flourish!

Those who assume the responsibilities of trusteeship cannot be timid souls. Citizens willing to accept the challenge of library governance must have broad vision, strong convictions, and the courage to dare the impossible. This is the kind of commitment that is required of citizen boards involved in library governance; to paraphrase Pogo, “We have met the public, and they is us.” This “us” is also our children and older people, our minorities and our ethnic divisions, our occasional consensus and our frequent disagreements. “Us” is a collective noun meaning a community of many individuals. It is for us that libraries exist; otherwise they would be architectural boxes for the storage of books, unused and unread. Responsibility for the governance of our libraries must therefore be accepted in order to attain the fullest possible representation and usefulness to the individuals who constitute “us.”

References

5. Young, op. cit., p. 10.

[296]
Citizen Boards


ADDITIONAL REFERENCES