

CHAPTER THREE

The Trustee Job Description

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General Function

Participate as a member of a team (the library board) to protect and advance the interests of the broader community by effectively governing the operations and promoting the development of the local public library.

Qualifications

- serious commitment to being a library trustee
- serious commitment to the provision of library services within your community
- ability to attend regularly scheduled board meetings and be an active member of the library board
- willingness to become familiar with Maine library law, standards for libraries, and principles and practices for ensuring that the library provides broad and equitable access to the knowledge, information, and diversity of ideas needed by community residents
- commitment to freedom of expression and inquiry for all people

Principal Activities

1. Prepare for and attend regular board meetings.

The library board meeting will be the primary opportunity for you to contribute to the development of your library. To get the most from the meetings, and to be able to share your skills and knowledge, you must attend each meeting after having read and thought about the issues and topics that will be discussed. While you and your fellow trustees are busy people, it is important that the full board meet on at least a quarterly basis to conduct business. The bylaws should indicate how often the board meets. You can contribute to the library by encouraging regular meetings and assuring that the meetings are properly noticed in accordance with Maine's open meetings law.

2. Work with the municipal governing body to obtain adequate library funding. Assist in the review and approval of the annual budget and monthly expenditures as presented by the library director.

One of the library board's most important responsibilities is to work to obtain adequate financial support so that the library can provide a meaningful program of services for the residents of the area. As a trustee, your focus should be on those services and what is required to provide them to the public in the most beneficial manner. Once a determination is made as to how much money will be needed, the request must be carefully and accurately prepared and then presented to the municipal governing body;

for example, the select board or the city council. Trustees should attend the governing body meetings when budget requests are presented so that they can answer questions about need and account for how previous appropriations benefited the citizens and the community. After municipal funding has been approved, the library board must monitor the use of these public funds to assure that they provide what was intended.

3. Participate in the development and approval of library policies. Review policies on a regular, systematic schedule.

Certainly the money is important to pay staff, buy materials, and maintain the facilities, but a library cannot operate successfully without policies that assure consistent and equitable treatment of all users while at the same time protecting the resources of the institution. Developing and adopting these policies is another important responsibility of a library board. Each trustee acts as a contact with other members of the community and has the chance to hear about concerns or desires relating to the library. The comments you receive from the public can help you and the other members of the board address the community standards through thoughtful and fair policies. Understanding the feelings of community members and the challenges the staff faces in operating the library can prepare you to participate with other board members and the director in defending policies that may provoke controversy. As needs, processes, and services change within the library, there will be a need to review, revise, and add policies. It can be helpful for the board to establish a routine procedure for reviewing policies to be sure that they remain current. This is often accomplished by the board looking at individual policies at meetings throughout the year.

4. Help determine and advocate for reasonable staff salaries and benefits.

If the library is to offer meaningful and accessible services to the residents of your community, it should have a trained library director and other capable assistants to provide those services. To attract capable employees, and to keep them once they are hired and oriented, it will be crucial that the library board offer reasonable and competitive compensation, including wages and benefits like health insurance, retirement, sick leave, and vacation. By providing adequate compensation for staff, the library board will help local officials and the public in general to understand the importance of the library and the complexity of the tasks involved with providing good library services.

5. If you are a governing board you will hire, supervise, and evaluate the library director.

There may come a time when the library board must hire a new director. If this is required, deciding how the process is conducted and who is finally selected will be among the most important decisions a library board will ever make. A library director can be around for many years and have a

significant impact on the tone and quality of library service. In the one-person library, the library director often becomes the personification of the entire institution. So it is important that this task be given serious consideration and that each trustee take an active role in selecting and then welcoming and orienting the new director. Finally, in order to assure that you do not have to go through this process unnecessarily, the library board needs to establish a regular procedure and schedule for assessing the performance of the director and providing suggestions for improvements. Your willingness as a trustee to participate in these processes will greatly contribute to the library's overall effectiveness.

Advisory boards are often asked to take part in hiring a new director, but the final decision on hiring, firing, and evaluating the library director falls under the responsibility of the town/city officials.

6. Study the needs and interests of the community and see that they are addressed, as appropriate, by the library.

As a community liaison, you are in a unique position to survey the community, learn of its needs and wants, and include those interests in discussions relating to library development. This opportunity and responsibility is satisfied at an informal and formal level. At a minimum the board should do a formal community needs assessment every five years. Informally, just being visible and accessible as a library trustee and communicating with your neighbors will allow you to gather important information about how the library can help its customers. In a more formal fashion, the library board may decide to conduct a community survey and/or call together a focus group to help it pinpoint important issues. Active participation by each trustee at both levels will be invaluable to the library's progress

7. Act as an advocate for the library through contacts with civic groups and public officials.

Gathering information on community needs will certainly put you in contact with your community; the purpose of that activity is to focus development energies. Other kinds of contacts are also important, however, and their purpose will be to raise awareness of the library and promote its services. It has been written that the core of effective politics is the building of rapport. Since local politics are personal, your contacts on behalf of the library with public officials from the municipality, the county, and the state will advance the cause of your institution. In the same way, building rapport and networking with civic and service groups will advance your cause with your customers and potential individual supporters. This is an area where an individual trustee can directly help the library in a significant way.

8. Become familiar with principles and issues relating to intellectual freedom and equitable provision of public library services.

Public libraries in our country and state are founded on the principle that for a democracy to function properly it must have an educated electorate, and to be educated, people must have free access to the broadest possible array of information and ideas. Libraries, along with other institutions such as the press and the judiciary, have long stood as protectors of the individual's right to have the information that he or she requires to thrive in and contribute to society. Regardless of these basic rights, though, sometimes people seek to limit the access of others to certain ideas and presentations. It is a responsibility of the library board, and each member of that board, to make a commitment to the community's freedom of inquiry and expression, and to be prepared to address calmly and respectfully the challenges that may come before you. While the board must have a carefully devised process for addressing challenges and speak in a single voice on censorship issues to the public and the media, it is up to you as a trustee to take the time to become informed about the principles and issues. While it is said that a public library without something to offend everyone is not doing its job, it is not the job of the library board to offend, but rather to defend the rights of each citizen to search for the truth through his or her own journey. The nation's and the library's future relies on unrestricted access to information.

9. Assist in the formulation and adoption of a long-range plan for the library. Periodically review and revise long-range plan.

Working through the budget process, developing policies, studying community needs and making contacts with individuals and groups prepares you for the valuable process of formulating plans for the library's future. Your library may be accomplishing great things already, but as the world changes, the library must change with it. Trustees, as the citizen representatives with detailed information about how the library functions, are in an ideal position to assist with planning. Your important role in planning will be to investigate, along with the library director, different planning options and then decide on the most appropriate process for your library. If additional resources are required to fulfill the plans, you can also help to establish the amount and identify sources. Finally, once proposed plans are approved by the full board, you can continue to participate by being active in the annual review of the library's plan, during which you can suggest revisions that will keep the library on course. A plan is a means to an end, and it will be the active participation of each trustee in the planning process that will offer ongoing strength and insight to the library board as it pursues its responsibility for library development.

10. Attend Maine Library Association conferences, regional system workshops, and other training opportunities in order to expand knowledge of effective leadership.

As you have probably concluded by now, the library trustee's job is complex and demanding. At the same time, though, it can be stimulating and exceedingly rewarding. One way to maintain energy and enthusiasm, as well as to increase understanding of library trusteeship, is to participate in the various opportunities for education that are available to trustees. Another method for gaining insights and ideas and also a great way to rejuvenate the spirit and not feel alone in the challenges you face is to get involved in the Maine Library Association (MLA). The network of friends that can be developed through MLA will keep you interested and vital; your participation in the association will strengthen the statewide library community, and that, in turn, will help your library as well.

Sources of Additional Information

- The Maine State Library website www.maine.gov/msl/
- United for Libraries www.ala.org/united/
- The Trustee Listserv MELIB-Trustee@lists.maine.edu
- Maine State Library Continuing Education Calendar <http://evanced.info/maine/evanced/eventcalendar.asp?libnum=0>
- Checklist for Effective Library Trustees (attached)

Checklist for Effective Library Trustees

- Be active and informed about library matters in general and of those affecting your library. Ask questions of the director and study the issues.
- Attend all board meetings and be fully prepared to participate knowledgeably.
- Question issues until you understand. Don't be reluctant to vote no on a proposal you don't understand or are uncomfortable about.
- Be a team player and treat your fellow board members with respect.
- Support board decisions even if you disagree. It is your responsibility to ask questions, to be as informed as possible, and to discuss openly in order to come as close to consensus as possible. A democracy works by the rule of the majority. Seek reconsideration in the future if circumstances change.
- Understand the roles of all involved - the board, director, staff, Friends, patrons, etc.
- Conflicts of interest by any board member are the concern of all members of the board. A trustee or family member may not receive any gain, tangible or intangible, in dealing with the library.
- Advocate for the library in every manner possible.
- Support competitive salaries in order to attract and retain qualified staff.
- Appropriate compensation is a direct measure of the commitment and respect a community has for the institution and its staff.
- Understand and respect the role of the director and support the director's administrative decisions.
- Always remember that your job is to provide the highest quality library service possible for your community.