



The Changing Role of the Library Board Trustee

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Since the *Ontario Library Trustee's Handbook* appeared in 1986, several critical issues have altered the course of public library service in Ontario. To meet these challenges, library trustees need to quickly develop specific skills. For new library trustees, the pressure is even greater: they must learn the basics of the work and keep up with the changes!

Municipal restructuring

This movement has been prevalent for decades, but the recent focus on streamlining local government has resulted in fewer municipalities and fewer Library Boards. The transitions have sometimes been rocky. Occasionally, ill feelings, resulting from initially strongly held positions, have impeded progress. Amalgamating libraries need to work collaboratively with their counterparts to provide the best possible library service for their new municipalities.

Fortunately, there is significant assistance available for libraries to implement the requirements set out in the Ministerial Order defining the terms of a municipal amalgamation. Field Services consultants from both the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Recreation and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing can help as can Ontario Library Service consultants in Northern and Southern Ontario. The Ontario Library Association provides advice and free searching of library literature for its members.

Service vs. funding pressures

Many libraries have been attempting to provide more services with fewer staff and considerably less funding from the municipality and the province. Although circulation of print materials may be decreasing, library use is on the rise. At the same time, libraries face stiffer opposition from Council and

tougher competition from the many other community groups who seek Council support for worthy initiatives. Libraries need to be able to make a strong case for their funding more than ever.

Boards must be accountable

All governing bodies are being called upon to be more accountable. The activities of local boards and non-profit organizations are being closely scrutinized by parent bodies as well as by the electorate. The expectation is that resources should be used wisely. Accountability must incorporate responding to the needs of the community the board represents. Library boards should assume a leadership role in demonstrating this accountability by (1) setting its expectations in policies, goals, and objectives, (2) knowing which information will prove compliance and achievement, and (3) obtaining and reporting this information to Council, the province and the community.

Rapid advances in technology

Public libraries have seen enormous advances in information technology. Keeping up with the changes has imposed more than just financial strain on Boards. To provide what their individual communities needed to keep pace in a networked world, boards began to explore a broader role with respect to information technology. By asking how the library's expertise in information technology might be used to benefit the entire community, many exciting partnerships developed between libraries and municipalities and/or other community groups.

Now, the internet poses even more complex challenges to Library Boards. Its unorganized and amorphous nature is bringing community pressure to restrict access especially for children to certain sites. Boards must defend the Principles of Intellectual Freedom upon which libraries and a democratic society are based, while at the same time taking measures to discourage patrons' inappropriate use of the technology.

One Place to Look: the Ontario Public Library Strategic Plan (Ontario Library Association, Ministry of Culture and Communications, 1990) was the library community's strategic response to the challenges of the 1990s. It was very forward looking for its time, predicting the impact of the internet as expressed through what it called "the information grid". The progress of libraries and the development of regional and provincial networks in the nineties were propelled by this work. It led to considerable government support for network and digital content development and set libraries on a new path of electronic services to the public. In 2000, a project to develop a new strategic plan for Ontario's public libraries was begun.

Coping with these challenges means change

In order to meet these and other challenges, the Library Board must know its job and do it efficiently by:

1. Maintaining an external, future focus
2. Being aware of the needs of the community
3. Building a strong relationship with users and non-users alike
4. Thinking in a business-like manner
5. Exploring more creatively what the library can do for the community
6. Developing an awareness of library issues beyond the local level, on the provincial and national level
7. Playing a role in supporting the broader library community by participating in the development and implementation of its new strategic plan.
8. Adopting a leadership style that will move library service in their communities forward into the new millennium.

Finally, the Board must understand that its role is separate from that of the CEO and be obsessive about leaving the running of the library to the experts hired to do that job. Governance should not to be confused with everyday operations.