Tales from a New Trustee

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Becoming a Library Trustee

Just as there are several types of libraries, you will find different types of Trustees – and there are a lot of them!

Terminology may differ a bit, but virtually every library has some sort of governing board with an average of seven to nine Trustees or directors. Using just the ALA estimate of about 9,200 public libraries, there are roughly 65,000-80,000 Trustees. Some Trustees are appointed, some are elected, and a few may be Trustees by virtue of their office or their job.

So how do you become a library Trustee?

In my first column, I wrote about the board meeting when I was appointed to the Fountaindale Public Library Board of Trustees, and explained briefly how I got to that point. In this column, I’ll expand a bit on my own experience and list some suggestions for how someone can become a library Trustee.

I decided I wanted to be a library Trustee to serve my local community. In August 2005, I applied for a vacancy on our local library board, positive I was a great candidate, even the best candidate. Problem: there were 14 others who thought they were equally great candidates. I didn’t get the appointment. To show my interest, however, I began regularly attending board meetings and was often the lone representative of “the public” to show up.

As the 2007 elections neared, I decided to fill out petitions to get on the ballot, “just in case,” though I intended to support the two incumbents. At the very last minute, I learned the 2005 appointee had decided not to run. I hurriedly got my petitions in order and submitted them just a couple of hours before the deadline. That’s when I learned that another candidate had already filed, someone I didn’t know.

Now there were three candidates for two positions. It was a friendly campaign, but I was a novice and had neglected to seek support from local officials ahead of time. While I won a respectable 21% of the vote, I came in third and didn’t get the seat.

I looked ahead to 2009, hoping one of the incumbents might not run. I kept going to board meetings. The board was planning a new library, something I really wanted to see happen. Given my interest in the new building, I agreed to chair a citizens’ committee to advocate for the referendum to get approval for the building project.

The election was in early February 2008. The Chicago area was hit with heavy snows and extreme cold that January, and we couldn’t even get our referendum signs in the ground! Our district covered parts of two communities and the new building was going into Bolingbrook; our Romeoville branch was only going to be remodeled. That was as much of an issue as the amount of the proposed bond issue.

Unofficial results on election night were disappointing: we lost by a very narrow margin. After beating myself up for not having worked harder, I started planning for the next election, assuming the board would go to referendum again.

A vacancy on our board occurred right after the election. Given my consistent efforts to join the board, as well as my support of the board’s goals as a volunteer, I was appointed to fill the 15-month unexpired term. In April 2009, I ran unopposed for election to a full six-year term.

That’s how I became a library Trustee. But my path is not the path that everyone can or should follow – you must do what you need to do in your community. I had a dream about becoming a library Trustee to make a difference in my community; now I’m living that dream! What about you?

Steps to Becoming a Library Trustee

Be a library user. Check out books and other materials, attend library programs, or bring your children to story times at the library. Become familiar with the way things work for patrons and think about what the library can do better.

Attend board meetings regularly for a while, to learn both how the library board works and to get to know the current board members. Speak up occasionally on issues important to you. Show your interest.

Being involved in other community activities is important, whether it’s coaching Little League, helping with the Boy Scouts, joining the PTA/PTO, or being involved with a local service organization like Lions, Kiwanis, or Rotary. If you’re a businessperson, be active in your local chamber of commerce. Get to know members of your community and learn what is important to your fellow citizens.

Learn about your library’s governing system. Libraries run as part of a county or town or city government often have Trustees that are appointed by the mayor or other governmental official. Many public library districts are self-governing and the Trustees run for election. You may need to learn how to become a politician and/or make contacts that help you get appointed.

Be prepared to serve if you are successfully elected or appointed. Being a library Trustee is an honor, a privilege, and a duty. Be ready to spend more time than you thought. It’s more than just attending board meetings once or twice a month. Depending on how involved you get, it’s easy to spend 2-4 hours in “extra” activities for every hour you spend in a board meeting! You can probably double that if you get involved in a state library association or with ALA or ALTAFF at the national level.

For libraries with elected Trustees, continued on page 9
Trustee award applications due Dec. 15

The Trustee Section of ALTAFF gives three awards annually: the Trustee Citation, the ALTAFF/Gale Outstanding Trustee Conference Grant, and the Major Benefactors Award. Applications for all three awards are available on the ALTAFF Web site, www.ala.org/altaff. The application deadline is Dec. 15.

The ALTAFF Citation, established in 1941 to recognize public library Trustees for distinguished service to library development, symbolizes and honors the best contributions and efforts of the estimated 65,000 American citizens who serve on library boards. It is presented during the Opening General Session at the ALA Annual Conference. Recipients are expected to be present to accept the award, and expenses for attending must be borne by the recipients or their library organizations. Trustee service may have been performed on the local, state, regional, or national level or at a combination of levels. Equal consideration is given to Trustees of small, medium, and large public libraries. Citations may not be awarded when there is no sufficiently outstanding achievement brought to the attention of the Committee.

The ALTAFF/Gale Outstanding Trustee Conference Grant enables public library Trustees to attend the ALA Annual Conference for the first time. A grant of $850 is awarded annually to a public library Trustee who has demonstrated excellence in support of his or her public library. The Conference Grant, made possible by an annual gift from Gale Cengage Learning, is administered by ALTAFF. Winners will be notified by late March of the Annual Conference year.

The Major Benefactors Honor Award was established to give recognition to individuals, families or corporate bodies who have made major benefactions to public libraries. The award, announced at the ALA Annual Conference and presented locally, consists of two specially prepared citations for the recipient(s) and the beneficiary library. The significance of the gift will be measured from the point of view of the recipient library, rather than by the size of the gift alone.

For more information about these awards for Trustees, visit ALTAFF’s Web site at www.ala.org/altaff and click on “Trustees,” then “Grants & Awards.”

ALTAFF seeking Trustee Section Chair-Elect

ALTAFF is looking for a Trustee Section member interested in being nominated for an opening for the 2010-2011 term: Trustee Section Chair-Elect. The Trustee Section Chair-Elect will be involved with section business such as publications, awards, and nominations for the section.

This position is a two-year commitment, as the elected member will then serve as section Chair for the 2011-2012 term and will be serve on the ALTAFF Board for both terms.

To be eligible, you must be a current ALTAFF member of the Trustee Section. Those serving on the board are expected to attend both the Midwinter Meeting and Annual Conference, in addition to participating remotely in board business between Midwinter and Annual.

Those interested in being nominated should contact ALTAFF Executive Director Sally Reed at sreed@ala.org or by phone at (800) 545-2433, ext. 2161, by Nov. 15.

Tools for Trustees

continued from page 8

learn the election schedule and take the appropriate steps to get on the ballot. You may have to gather petitions and file with your local government several months before the election. Learn about election law and how to run a campaign. Watch for announcements about vacancies on an elected board. You might be able to get an appointment for the balance of an unexpired term.

For a board that is appointed, learn when the current Trustees’ terms expire. Make your interest known to the government officer who makes the appointments. You may want to start on this process a year or more in advance.

When the right time comes, just do it! Run for Trustee or seek an appointment if there is an opportunity. It may not happen right away, but persevere if you’re really interested. Volunteer to be on a public task force or a referendum committee; keep coming to meetings; show your continued interest.

Please consider passing this column along to a contact who you know is interested in becoming a library Trustee.

The next column will focus on orientation for new library Trustees. Let Dave Hargett know about any great experiences you had during orientation. Send any questions or comments to altaff@ala.org to be forwarded to Dave Hargett.

Trustee Tip Sheets are now available on the ALTAFF Web site. Visit www.ala.org/altaff, click on “Trustees” then “Tip Sheets.” These new Tip Sheets address a variety of concerns and issues faced by Trustees, including the role of library Trustees, mission statements, and library support for Friends activities. If you have an idea for a Tip Sheet or would like to write one, e-mail Beth Nawalinski at bnawalinski@ala.org.