

From the Chair

Bill Sleeman

January 5, 2008. By the time this column goes to print I will have completed both my annual election judge training and will have made it through the primary election in Maryland (which, like many states, has been moved up in the calendar year). I will have already dealt with the myriad of typical election day questions that voters bring with them and I will have spent time thinking (and complaining) about these questions. The questions I get on election day are frustrating to me because they illustrate many of the failures in the way in which our nation educates voters. On election day I serve as much as basic civics instructor as I do an election official.

In the September 15, 2007, issue of *Library Journal* publisher Ron Shank suggested that libraries make 2008 the year of "Election Education" ("Libraries and the Elections," 132, no. 15: 8). This idea is an excellent one and Ron Shank is right on the money when he suggests that this is an area where libraries can really make a difference.

The library community already has a group of experts on these issues in the thousands of government information specialists employed in libraries around the country. These government information librarians have already created detailed Internet sites that serve to bring together election data and resources on both a national and a local level. All you have to do is Google "election resources library" to see what government information librarians already offer on this subject.

Shank goes on to write that librarians should do more than just point to the resources but that we also play a leadership role in our communities to guarantee that all local voices are heard. Again, GODORT members have long known this and continue to lead the way by organizing programs at their institutions and for the association that focus on many of the issues that Shank's column raises.

For example GODORT has planned a preconference on election resources for the 2008 Annual Conference while our colleagues in the ACRL Law and Political Science Section will offer a program on participatory democracy initiatives. Other groups and associations, including the American Association of Law Librarians and the Public Library Association, have also identified elections and participatory democracy as topics to be addressed at their annual events.

One area where GODORT can be particularly effective is at the nexus of voter education, advocacy, and e-government. As we look to the future of our round table we must look beyond just managing content to how we provide and create services for our users. Our members have long been the experts within ALA on government services at all levels and if we want to be a part of the future of the association's e-government initiatives, we have to position ourselves aggressively to make that case. To some extent this means letting go of some long-held notions of what GODORT is and embracing new definitions, ideas, and services.

The GODORT strategic planning initiative now underway is a key component in our efforts to reshape our organization. As part of that effort we have been surveying current members and have reached out to former members to find out what they like and dislike about our round table. The strategic planning effort isn't the only way to have a positive effect on the round table though; other efforts, organized by individual members, are already underway to help us reimagine our organization. These efforts include creating a Second Life presence for GODORT, developing an Occasional Papers Series to be published in electronic form, and creating a category of membership—a virtual member—that will offer alternatives to the familiar pattern of participation in GODORT.

Yet another way that GODORT can be successful in educating users about elections and the voting process, while at the same time breaking free of our familiar patterns would be to look beyond the library community for partners in any election education effort. Teaming up with the League of Women Voters, the Open House Project, or state and local election boards could offer new venues that contribute to the need to educate voters while taking advantage of the skills and experiences that so many government information librarians possess.

Making 2008 the year of educating voters is a worthy goal and I know that government information librarians will rise to that challenge. I am equally confident that GODORT members will embrace the opportunity to reshape our

round table for the future. It is an honor to be chair of GODORT at this exciting time and I look forward to working with, and learning from, each of you.