

BUILDING A BETTER BOARD OF TRUSTEES



As the community face of your library,
trustees are key. Here's how to capitalize
on their talents and recruit new members

By Maria R. Traska

Fred Stielow, a self-confessed wonk, has been involved in digital automation for decades. In the 1970s, he was on the project team for HyperTies, the first DOS-based hypertext program used on the earliest iteration of the internet.

He dove into the web in the early 1990s, creating his first web page. Later, while at the Mid-Hudson Library System, he orchestrated web automation for 45 rural libraries in New York, for which he was named a Cybrarian of the Year in 1998 by then-telecom giant MCI Communications. Now a trustee of the Anne Arundel County (Md.) Public Library, he likes poring over internet use statistics at library board meetings and is happy to report that library staff have been “proactively using the technology for the minority members in our community, including efforts for the emerging Hispanic community.”





Stielow, who is also a board member of United for Libraries and a US commissioner to UNESCO, is a model trustee of the future. He's a champion of the library, takes his financial duties seriously, and views his work on statistics as helping to set the strategic direction and further the mission of the library. So how can libraries find and develop more leaders like Stielow for their boards?

A bigger role

Norman Jacknis, president of the Metropolitan New York Library Council, has a few ideas—one of which is that trustees, who are the face of the library to the community, must begin by more broadly applying their existing skill set. "Trustees are already community leaders with public responsibilities. They have connections to other organizations that are very important," says Jacknis, who is part of the 35-member working group that produced the 2014 Aspen Institute report "Rising to the Challenge: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries." Trustees' role in reimagining the library and rebranding it is "bigger and more active, with more ongoing community contact," more championing and promoting the library, more fiduciary responsibility as trustees become fundraisers, and a greater role in helping to set strategic direction. The library is no longer just a repository of information—it's a place of cooperative education.

Moving a community forward means an expanded role for library trustees, says Amy Garmer, director of the Aspen Institute's Dialogue on Public Libraries and author of the report. "The library's future is to go out and be engaged in the community," she says. "Libraries are these critical connectors for communities and connectors to others" that can help introduce different organizations or ethnic groups to one another in a town with changing demographics, or they can pull in marginalized members of the

community who may be disconnected from the library as well. And trustees are the ones entrusted to network on the library's behalf.

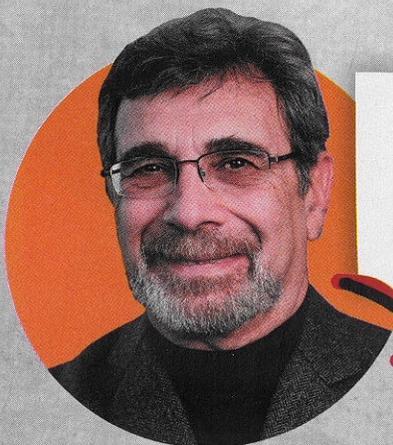
The library as a town hall, community center, and collaborative space can be an antidote to some of the isolation that the digital world creates, Garmer says. "The library is a strong place to discuss some of these issues because the library has a civic square function to it. It's seen as a neutral, trusted public space." This is part of the expanded message that trustees must articulate to the community.

A large part of that role involves educating library staff members as to where the world is going, Jacknis says. Trustees are often business leaders who acquire and use new technology in their own enterprises. They can bring that expertise to the library and to the larger community.

Meeting community needs

Cindy Friedemann is another trustee who has brought her expertise to the library—in this case, the Metropolitan Library System in Oklahoma City, which operates countywide and where she has been a library commissioner for eight years. Her tenure with public libraries began in 1996 when she became a board member of Friends of the Stillwater (Okla.) Public Library. A strategist for various organizations over the last 25 years, Friedemann is now an executive at Metro Technology Centers, a postsecondary educational facility that provides career and technical education for high school students and adults trying to change careers. "We are very much in the digital age in our [library] system," she says.

Friedemann is also national secretary for ALA's United for Libraries and says the advent of the digital domain has "changed the perception of our core business from curating a collection to curating a space that meets the community's needs in myriad ways beyond the collection." She realized her role as a library trustee was expanding when she first noticed



"The first generation of those 'born web' with rewired minds is now in their mid-20s. We need to sit back. They are about to knock our socks off."

FRED STIELOW

Anne Arundel County (Md.) Public Library trustee, board member of United for Libraries, US commissioner to UNESCO

"All library trustees should be strategically thinking far ahead, especially regarding long-term fundraising."

MAUREEN SULLIVAN

Member of the Dialogue on Public Libraries working group, past president of ALA



marked changes in the monthly usage statistics report. "The categories have vastly increased," she says. "Instead of just materials checked out, now it's ebooks, computer use, computer classes, and room reservations. We see our growth in these new areas."

Friedemann views hands-on experience with these new services and programs as part of her job. "You feel the need to learn more about these categories in order to be supportive," she says. But the real eyeopener came the day her home computer went on the fritz: She had to go to a medium-sized library nearby to use a computer, but there was a 45-minute wait because every computer was in use. "There were children doing their homework, parents there with their children, other adults," Friedemann says. "It was a big 'aha!' moment for me, because I realized that we still have a long way to go to serve our communities."

Outreach to community

Likewise, outreach is as important a task for trustees and staff as is thoroughly familiarizing yourself with what the library offers the community and its stakeholders. But it's probably the most costly activity, according to Sally Reed, executive director of United for Libraries. "It means going out into the community to bring in new patrons" and finding out what their needs are rather than waiting for them to come to you, she says. "You must pay attention to changing demographics—know who your users are, or who they aren't" and why they may or may not use the library.

For Joan Buschbach, an insurance company owner and a trustee and former board chair of the Oak Lawn (Ill.) Public Library, the speed of change that she has seen because of the internet and other technology has led not only to a steady expansion of programs and services but also a physical remodeling of the library to create new spaces for new purposes, in response to community input.

Buschbach is a big believer in networking: In addition to keeping in regular contact with village trustees—whose offices are right across the street

from the library—she maintains decades-old connections with different stakeholder groups throughout the community. Buschbach is a past president of the local chamber of commerce and is still active on it; she's on the board of Oak Lawn's children's museum; and she's involved with her local church. "I go to a lot of community events and activities," she says, "so that really helps the library."

Between the feedback that Buschbach and her fellow trustees solicit and an extensive user survey that the library conducted for more than a month in late 2014, the library was able to determine what additional or expanded services the community wanted from the library, and what changes it didn't want. Print book acquisitions were retained at the same level even though more digital materials have been added because that's what patrons asked for.

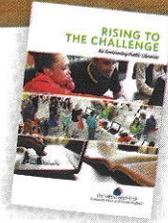
One major result of the feedback effort has been the rethinking of the building's physical space. The library's 3D printer, acquired earlier this year, gets a regular workout as people come together in the new makerspace area. Another result of the effort has been a new emphasis on teen activities and resources, with one youth librarian devoted to organizing programs such as snack and study hours, teen activity groups, special group discussion, and some digital-oriented events.

Jacknis notes that more is needed, especially for patrons who work independently. Many people who work outside of offices or as freelancers use the library for Wi-Fi access or as a de facto business center and depend on librarians' expertise. He cites himself as a prime example, relying on their advice on search methods when he does historical research.

Friedemann agrees and recalls her surprise when a friend from another library system remarked, "We started our new business at the library." The friend and her colleague reserved



BEST PRACTICES FOR YOUR TRUSTEES



In conjunction with its report “Rising to the Challenge: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries,” the Aspen Institute’s Dialogue on Public Libraries developed a list of 15 things library trustees can do to strengthen and ensure the future of their public libraries. They fall roughly into three action categories:

COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING

- Be a well-informed champion of your library and what it offers, and be persistent in restating the case for its importance to the community. Visibly support efforts to reimagine and rebrand the library as a vital community gathering place and resource in the digital era.
- Once you’ve created a new vision of the library that focuses on its people, place, and platform, tell and sell that story to your patrons, policymakers, community leaders, civic groups, and the community at large. Be specific about communicating the value of the library to all its potential users, demographic groups, and supporters.
- Leverage and publicly promote the educational and economic development potential of the library as a community platform.

PLANNING

- Draw up a plan for the future sustainability of the library—including long-term funding and fundraising, board membership, planning for leadership succession, etc.

- Work with the library director to plan a community engagement effort; use it to identify library users’ aspirations and strategies to help the community and library succeed in the 21st century knowledge society.
- Ensure that the library’s programs, services, and offerings are defined around community priorities, recognizing that this process may lead to choices, trade-offs, and change.
- Know your town’s or city’s master plan—better yet, participate in creating or revising that strategic plan—so that you can better align the library’s activities with municipal goals. Make sure your strategic plan and the town’s plan are in sync.

DEVELOPMENT

- Change any long-held policies that impede the development of the library’s people, place, and platform.
- Assemble a list of desired outcomes and goals for the library, then make sure the library has the means to measure them. Communicate those outcomes to key policymakers, partners, and other community leaders.

- Support the deployment of broadband, Wi-Fi, and digital literacy skills throughout the community—especially to any economically disadvantaged, underserved, and other special needs populations.
- Create a plan for resource development, including new ways to deploy existing resources.
- Support the library director and staff by providing appropriate benefits and funding for their professional development.
- Make sure that the diversity of membership on the library board reflects the diversity of the community.
- Consider including on the library’s board of trustees a member of the village board, city, or town council who can serve as a liaison between your board and the municipal government.
- Become involved in efforts to advance the future of libraries beyond your immediate community—meaning at the regional, state, and national level. Be an outspoken proponent of efforts to give libraries greater resources so that they can continue to provide value to their communities and to the greater society.

rooms at the library for two hours at a time while forming their start-up. It was another light-bulb moment for Friedemann: “[Coworking spaces] bring people together at the library.”

Financing the future

Friedemann says she has noticed over the years that “we need a new vision for how to fund our libraries.” That’s also a major point of the Aspen Institute report. Friedemann says not enough smaller libraries in her area are supported by county or municipal property

taxes and therefore have irregular—and perhaps undependable—income. That should change.

Taxes, however, may not be the entire answer for some communities. The report suggests setting up long-term endowments and foundations, seeking 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status and grants from employers and large charitable foundations, and possibly combining local libraries into regional networks that share funding and resources. The report also recommends exploring alternative business models that maximize and sustain efficient library operations and



"The library's future is to go out and be engaged in the community. Libraries are these critical connectors for communities and connectors to others."

AMY GARMER

Director of the Aspen Institute's Dialogue on Public Libraries



good customer service. Trustees must also consider ways of achieving economies of scale in a networked world, without compromising local control.

Jacknis goes even further. "There needs to be more federal funding," he says, given this expanded role for public libraries, and not just for building the digital platform. Trustees have a role in lobbying state and federal legislators and finding allies to help preserve the future of public libraries. A recent public library survey by the Institute of Museum and Library Services found that on average, public libraries receive only 0.5% of their funding from federal sources.

Maureen Sullivan, past president of ALA and a member of Aspen Institute's Dialogue on Public Libraries working group, agrees there is significant trustee resistance to long-term financial planning, but she says it must be overcome: "All library trustees should be strategically thinking far ahead, especially regarding long-term fundraising. In every city, the library board should be asking, 'What can we do to establish financial stability?'" Sullivan acknowledges that in many cases, board members have had no experience raising money, but they must "stretch and develop it," she says. And the library director can lead them in this conversation by first discussing why it's important, then describing successful strategies in other settings.

Developing the team

Trustees need to look to future development, including providing for their own replacement and succession. That involves recruiting younger board members when the opportunity arises, people who are representative not only of the diversity of the community but also those who have grown up with the internet. "The first generation of those 'born web' with rewired minds is now in their mid-20s," Stielow says. "We need to sit back. They are about to knock our socks off."

Friedemann agrees. Young professionals who are leaders of their generation "are into other financing mechanisms such as crowdfunding that older trustees may not be familiar with." She compares the situation with the tech knowledge her staff lacked in

the 1990s, when her secretary was still creating overhead transparencies for slide presentations. "My secretary didn't know what she didn't know," she says. "I knew she needed to learn PowerPoint." There are still library trustees who don't know what they don't know, and they may be loath to admit it.

To find those new leaders requires making contact with organizations that young professionals join, holding events that introduce them to the public library and its future plans, and giving them ideas about what their contribution could be. That may be easier said than done, as Friedemann discovered when she tried to arrange an after-hours mixer. Library staff made a tremendous effort and organized the event, she recalls, but it was a hard sell because of several conservative board members. "Some older trustees didn't understand why younger people wouldn't gather together over iced tea" instead of wine and beer, but board approval was necessary in order to serve alcohol at the event. It was denied. Friedemann concludes that the library may have to try an after-hours event again.

Change, however, can be a touchy thing, coming in fits and starts. Stielow says he fully supports the Aspen Institute's recommendations but thinks the report underestimates how stressful some of these changes will be for libraries and trustees. "I think the report shortchanges the rough parts and angst of transition," he says. "For many, the library is a sacred and traditional space. One brings change at peril. Trustees are in part the keepers of faith and will need to remember the need for communication and tender loving care. We don't want to inadvertently anger, hurt, or leave folks behind in the rush for a brave new world." ■



MARIA R. TRASKA is a Chicago-based freelance writer, author, and blogger.