

B-1: Law Librarians and their Governing Bodies:



Identifying Strategies for a Successful Working Relationship

by Donna Bausch

If you work with a Board of Trustees, you have probably daydreamed from time to time about the kind of person you wish served on it. Indulge your flights of fancy for a moment and join me as we conjure up the “ideal” law library trustee. Imagine, if you will, a Library Board chair who is well-known and well-respected in the community, both for his professional acumen and his knowledge of how to work successfully within the political and governmental system based on hard-won experience on the job. Imagine, too, that this well-connected person is a committed, well-informed advocate for the public law library who gives unselfishly of his time and talents because he enjoys being the public face of such a fine institution. Finally, stretching your imagination to its very limits, imagine this Board Chair “talking the talk”—discussing intelligently the need for comprehensive retrospective conversion prior to putting out RFPs for a new integrated online library system. Be still, my heart!

Such a law library trustee actually exists, and his name is **James L. Brewer** (Chair, Board of Trustees, King County Law Library, Seattle, Washington). I’m sure he was a fine fellow who appreciated the King County Law Library even before he met **Jean Holcomb** (Law Librarian and Director, King County Law Library), but it is evident that his dedication, energy, and detailed, specific knowledge have been enhanced due to the relationship that Jean

has developed with the King County Law Library Board during the past seven years.

This session made it clear that great law library trustees are not born but must be cultivated and nurtured and that this is a never-ending process. In good times, this relationship will move the vision and strategic plan forward and in difficult times, a committed Board can marshal its energies and connections to defend the fiscal and political integrity of the law library against all comers.

How can those of us who face challenges that require an energized, committed Board get to where we need to be?

We can listen to Jim Brewer’s advice and put ourselves in the shoes of our trustees. Trustees and librarians must share the same goals but should have very different agreed-upon core duties. What makes Board service worthwhile for busy people who could be pursuing either more lucrative or more pleasurable pastimes? First and foremost, Brewer cited library excellence. Trustees are proud to represent a library that provides quality service. A collaborative decision-making process is also rewarding in itself when it works well. It is important to look for ways to make the job of the law library trustee more fun and rewarding. Brewer cited a public art selection process as having been particularly meaningful to the King County Board.

Charlie Dyer (Director of Libraries, San Diego County Public Law Library) spoke from the perspective of a law library director with many years of experience with governing boards. He asked the audience how many people referred to their institution as “my library.” After a good number of hands were raised, Dyer pointed out that trustees perhaps have more right than librarians do to call it “their” library, since they stand in the shoes of the library’s “owners”—the general public or the membership, depending on the type of library.

Dyer provided a lot of good information and some food for thought. His theme was “don’t bore your Board”—which is a good reminder for librarians who tend to get mired in minutiae and jargon. We need to keep our Boards focused on the big picture and leave the routine to us.

Dyer made a good point about Board motivation. Board members want a purpose and if you do not give them something important to do, they may do something unimportant or inappropriate and become micromanagers.

Dyer is a proponent of term limits for trustees, but Jim Brewer disagrees. Brewer argues that there is a steep learning curve to overcome as well as a need for continuity. You need to be identified in your community as a representative of the law library. Shorter terms do not permit this.

In a lively segment that followed, each panelist responded to questions that addressed some of the core issues of board/staff relationships. Because many in the audience had questions that remained at the conclusion of the session, around 25 of us adjourned to a nearby room for a roundtable discussion. This is the first year there has been an opportunity to continue the dialogue from an exciting program, and it was a welcome opportunity to explore these critical relationships in a more relaxed atmosphere.

This distinguished panel toiled for over two years to bring this presentation to fruition, and the investment of their time and efforts was successful. For those of us who work in law libraries with governing bodies composed of volunteer leadership—trustees or directors—this session provided just the practical advice we need. Brewer and Dyer produced handouts worth reviewing. (These appear in the printed proceedings of the Annual Meeting.)

More than anything else, this session confirmed for me the importance of the expansion of membership opportunities in AALL for law library trustees. The more intimately involved our trustees become in our Association and the issues we face, the better the quality of their advocacy back home. Next year, I plan to invite at least one of the trustees who serve on the Norfolk Law Library Board to attend the Annual Meeting in Philadelphia. Many more will do the same at least in part due to this fine program.

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