

The Public Library's Political Agenda

by Dale Gaddis

Recently, the County Manager called all major department heads together to tell us that, although we had just prepared our budgets for 1992-93 using a no-growth benchmark, he now wants us to cut our no-growth figure by 2.5 percent to enable the county to fund an employee compensation package, the new initiatives the commissioners established last year, and mandated social service increases. He is requiring this of departments before even looking at the budgets we have already prepared. The cut is required to keep the tax rate increase for operations less than \$.02, an expectation of the County Commission.

This meeting marked the beginning of the political maneuvering which occurs every budget season. Our challenge now, as it is every budget year, is to translate the library's program into political terms. A similar challenge is faced when having to deal with controversies over such issues as censorship attempts, homeless in the library, service curtailment, or any number of other issues. What is our agenda in these situations and how can it be defined so that it gains support from those with power in the community?

It has been my experience that, if a library is to progress, it is helpful to have a political agenda that is developed from the following basic elements: an analysis of the political climate in which we are working, a dedication to professional library ideology and our institution's mission and goals, a clear understanding of the community's needs for library services, and established goals for service development which address the community's needs and priorities.

Assessing the Library's Political Climate

In his book, *The Politics of Public Librarianship*, David Shavit claims something that we should not allow to be true: that public libraries generally are insulated from public opinion and influence and the "relevancy of the community's power structure is slight." He says that professional library bureaucracy makes decisions which are rarely questioned, that public libraries have few constituencies, and library services do not provide focus for organized lobbies.¹

Many librarians argue that public libraries should be apolitical and, as a result, many libraries are. This argument stems from the belief that services and policies should be developed objectively by trained professionals and that neutrality in politics is required to ensure that all individuals in a community are served equally and that the organization is viewed as a non-partisan one

from which all can benefit.

While the philosophical basis of the argument may be sound, library development and support can suffer if we do not recognize the political nature of the climate in which public libraries operate and of our professional ideology. According to Shavit, in good times life may be easier without organized constituencies, but this lack of public involvement boomerangs in bad times.²

In order to utilize the political climate to the library's advantage, forces shaping that climate must be understood: the power structure of the community, current political issues which could impact either the library directly or the power structure, economic conditions, editorial policies and stances of the local media, level of activism of the citizens, and internal administrative politics, to name a few. Because these forces continually change, the climate is never constant and must frequently be reassessed.

The current political environment in Durham is illustrative of the elements I have identified and how they are never constant. Last year at budget time, we were faced with exactly the same requirement from the manager as we are this year: to cut our budget below our benchmark to keep the tax rate below a certain figure. Last year, however, followed a year when the tax rate had been increased by \$.16. The manager was the finance director serving as interim manager, a person county department heads had worked with for years.

He initially supported \$.19 worth of increases but was instructed by the commissioners to reduce the request to no more than a \$.03 increase. The Board of Commissioners had been elected the previous November by a coalition of progressive voters. Three were reelected incumbents and two were serving in their first term. The library's liaison from the county commissioners was a relatively influential person on the board, serving in her second term.

This year, the manager is newly appointed with experiences in communities where budgets have recently been cut by as much as 18 percent. Most county department heads are still feeling their way with him and he with us. He was hired by the current Board of Commissioners, the same board as last year's that recently has been under fire from the newspaper and many citizens for some of the stands it has taken during a very heated school merger process. It has also been under fire for a tax rate which exceeds that of comparable communities in North Carolina. The library has the same liaison from the board, but during the controversial merger votes of the board she found herself in the minority and potentially lost some of her negotiating power

*Our challenge now,
as it is every budget year,
it to translate
the library's program into
political terms.*

with the other commissioners. It is an election year.

Professional Ideology: a Key to the Library's Political Appeal

In what way can a political agenda be developed to enable the library to progress in such a climate as this? First of all, we need to have a basic understanding of and commitment to our professional ideology. How this ideology relates to the political climate is the subject of William Birdsall's 1988 article in *Library Journal* entitled "The Political Persuasion of Librarianship."³ Birdsall provides an excellent analysis of the basic political tenets of librarianship and how librarianship has related historically to the American political environment. It presents the thesis that American culture consists primarily of liberal tenets, and that these tenets accommodate a wide range of paradoxical political attitudes "whose center of gravity shifts back and forth from left to right and that librarianship's ideology tracks these more general shifts."⁴

The history of liberalism in this country, according to Birdsall, has been that of an ideology which stresses the individual and respect for individual rights, self-fulfillment intellectually and economically, a rational and utilitarian orientation, and equality of opportunity, coming to play against the "conservative's attachment to hierarchy, family, and tradition," and the socialist's emphasis on equality of result.⁵

Likewise, library ideology has embraced basic liberal tenets, which are the bases for our professional stance with regard to intellectual freedom and censorship, for the development of libraries as resources geared to serving the needs of the individual, for the emphasis on the need for trained experts to administer the library function, and for the utilitarian idea of the library ("the best reading for the largest numbers at the least cost"⁶). Throughout their history, libraries have also been considered by many to be a safe place, providing stability to a community, and thus promoting a conservative ideal. Library efforts to reach out to extend services rather than assume that the reader will be self-motivated to use the library have been a response to the more socialistic idea prevalent since the 1960s that equality of result does not always occur if society depends on independent action by individuals.

According to Birdsall, "because [library ideology] incorporates a wide range of political perspectives, it is able to draw on support from a diverse constituency."⁷ Herein lies the hope and the possibilities for me in this political year and for all of us during times of controversy: that support is out there for libraries from the full range of the political spectrum.

The Library Mission as "Guiding Beacon"

The paradoxical political attitudes inherent in library ideology require us to be extremely careful when we develop our political approach to consider the possible long range impacts on both our own libraries and on the profession as a whole, along with the local and immediate political effect of our actions. Henry T. Blanke in his *Library Journal* article entitled "Librarianship and Political Values: Neutrality or Commitment?"⁸ warns against allowing ourselves "to drift into an uncritical accommodation with society's dominant political and economic powers."⁹ He declares the need for librarians to have a "clear and vital set of philosophical and political ideals acting as a guiding beacon."¹⁰ The individual library's mission should be a statement of those

ideals as they apply to the local community.

Our professional ideology is most tested in times when the various roles libraries play in a community come into conflict with each other. Political support for the library can be jeopardized if the library attempts to face these controversies without a clear statement of the library's mission to serve as a "guiding beacon."

Controversy as a Political Opportunity

During my tenure as library director in Durham, we have encountered several controversial situations. Some we have handled successfully, others perhaps not so successfully. Only recently have I thought much about these situations in political terms. It has been my belief that a firmly grounded principled stand will more often than not get the library through a controversy. I have also believed that one is always laying the groundwork for support during difficult times with one's general approach to service in good times. In the past, however, when faced with controversy, my most immediate objective has been survival and damage control, not long term political benefit. More and more, however, I am realizing the power the library can gain during controversy when it takes principled stands that are solidly grounded in an understanding of and caring for the community, combined with a commitment to professional ideology and our own library's mission. These stands set the stage for more respectful and supportive future responses from politicians, the media, and the community as a whole.

The controversy for which Durham is probably most known, and the one that caused the most political furor, was the controversy over a gay rights display in the library. The library has always subscribed in its mission and goal statements to the Library Bill of Rights and to its emphasis on providing materials and information representing all points of view. The library had therefore often hosted potentially controversial exhibits and meetings, but had received little negative comment. When the staff in-

Controversies provide one opportunity to learn about the community's needs and the roles the community wants the library to play in serving these needs.

formed me that the Lesbian and Gay Health Project had requested to use our display cases for a month as part of a community-wide celebration of Gay Rights Week, I did not foresee any problems. I was told that the Mayor of Durham had also agreed to proclaim the week to be Anti-Discrimination Week. My impression was that Durham was a liberal community that would generally support the anti-discrimination sentiments of the exhibit and the proclamation. I was only partially right: only part of the community supported these sentiments; a larger group than I would have predicted had strong sentiments against gay rights and the display in the library.

As soon as the exhibit appeared and before I had even seen it, I received a complaint. It was a Saturday. By Monday morning, we had received numerous complaints and I was being told in no uncertain terms by the County Manager that I had to remove the display because the commissioners were receiving calls. I took a deep breath, "calmly" explained to him our display policy and invited him to come view the display before requiring me to remove it. He agreed to do that, as did the library board chairman upon my request. Both agreed that the exhibit fell within the guidelines of our display policy and should not be removed. The manager then defended the library's stand to the commissioners and to the many citizens who called his office during the month the display was in place. (This is the same manager who a couple of years later gave permission for a giant balloon in the shape of

a condom to be flown over the county stadium as part of a community-wide AIDS awareness effort — the commissioners decided in this situation not to support the manager's decision.) We also successfully defended our stand to the local newspaper, which subsequently provided editorial support for our actions.

Because the exhibit was in place for a month, gaining the support of the manager, commissioners, board, and newspaper was only the beginning of the furor in which we found ourselves. Daily we received both complaints and compliments. The newspaper's editorial page was extended beyond its usual single page to include large numbers of the letters written on both sides of the issue. We became less the target of complaint when the mayor issued his proclamation, but then became a site for community efforts to recall the mayor. The people in town who were upset with our exhibit discovered quickly that they could use the library as a public forum as well, and did.

Although this was an exhausting time (we were also trying to maintain normal operations and get a budget passed), it did provide us with an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the political environment in our community and the expectations the public has for its library. We were also able to educate the public about the library's role as a public forum and a promoter of intellectual freedom. Many of the public had only thought of a library from the conservative viewpoint that the library is a safe place, a place which provides stability to a community. They considered the display a violation of public trust. They had not thought of the library in its potentially more threatening role of encouraging public debate. I am not sure the library staff and board had even thought of the full ramifications of this role until we were faced with this controversy. During the month, we had many discussions with people who were angered by the point of view being displayed in our exhibit cases. Most were grateful for the time we spent listening to their point of view and many came to respect the role the library was playing as public forum. As a result of this controversy, the community gained an understanding and appreciation for the many roles that the library plays and the library gained support for its services. Library staff learned how deeply and in how many ways the public values its library.

Relating Library Goals and Priorities to Community Priorities

Final and crucial elements to consider when developing a political agenda are the community's needs for library services and the goals we have established for service development to meet these needs. Controversies provide one opportunity to learn about the community's needs and the roles the community wants the library to play in serving these needs. A planning process which has involved staff, board, community, and governing officials is a less disruptive way. If the planning process considers the needs of all segments of the community and solicits a broad base of participation in the process, then political support is being established from which to draw during both good and hard times.

Durham conducted a planning process in 1989, following the Public Library Association model, and developed a five year plan for library services. We did not use the process to full advantage to build political support, but did have the very active involvement of the library board and the Friends of the Library, with the result that board and friends members became more effective spokespersons for the library. During the process, we all gained a fuller understanding of what library services the community values and which ones it would like to have developed.

... librarians must stay aware of and cultivate the changing political environment.

We were then able to establish priorities for service and service development which have guided our budgeting and political efforts for the last three years.

We found during the process that the library had developed a strong base of service, which had emphasized to that point the library's role as a community information and activity center. This role had enabled the library to connect with the diversity of the Durham community. It was a role that the planning group did not want to diminish. It became the consensus of the group, however, that the library should turn its focus in the five year

planning period to more traditional and basic services. Goals established related to increasing access to services and improving library facilities, developing library staff to provide the highest quality of service, enhancing reference services, emphasizing popular materials in collection building, expanding services to preschoolers, and increasing public awareness of the library.

Last year's budget experience is illustrative of support that can be gained when a political agenda is developed which is based on an understanding of the library's service strengths, particularly as they relate to those with political power, and a commitment to goals and priorities set by staff, board, and community through a planning process.

The budget objectives were based on goals set through the planning process. We wanted to maintain the library's strong service base as a top priority. Emphasis was placed on restoring the materials budget which had suffered some losses in the previous two budget years and on keeping existing services

SOUTHEASTERN BOOK COMPANY

top publishers
great personal service
comparative prices
high fill rate & fast delivery
full processing

for more information please call:
ROBERT MOSER
CHAPEL HILL
1-800-223-3251

Representing quality adult and juvenile publishers

operating at the current levels. We also had an expansion item which the commissioners had approved in concept the previous year: upfit and operational costs of a new branch library, the construction of which was about to go out for bid.

When we were told by the county manager that our budget requests had to be cut below the benchmark, the opening of the branch was jeopardized. Our only alternative in this scenario to delaying the opening was to cut existing services. Although the opening of the branch directly served our goal of increasing access to our services and improving library facilities, there was no support among the staff or board for cutting existing services in order to increase library accessibility. Instead, it was decided to do battle politically to restore the branch operational funds to the budget.

Being aware of the political climate made this decision a relatively easy one. We knew that there was considerable political support for the branch from the community in which it would be located that could be called upon in a budget battle. We also knew that the commission needed support from the community that would benefit from this branch. It was this community that was most unhappy about the prospect of a school merger being advocated by the commission. It was this community that was being most heavily impacted by increasing taxes to pay for increased human service and public protection costs.

Despite this climate that favored our chances for success, we also knew that there was a risk we might lose this battle because of the commissioners' own priorities for the budget year, which emphasized service to low income residents. The population to be served by the new branch was predominantly middle to upper income. Our case was strengthened, however, by the point that the library's basic services, which had received the highest priority from staff and board in the base budget had long emphasized service to lower income areas of the county rather

than service to suburban neighborhoods. It was also strengthened by the concern that not funding the branch would cause our operational budget to drop below the prior year's budget, resulting in a potential loss of state and federal aid, severely impacting our basic services.

With the support and guidance of our commissioner liaison, we were able to identify and use our political strengths in this situation. We searched the community to be served by the branch for spokespersons who could impact the vote of each commissioner. With the help of the Friends of the Library, we were relatively successful in getting them to write, call, and come out to the public hearing on the budget. The library board was extremely influential in the lobbying effort, each member using arguments appropriate to the commissioner being addressed. Our commissioner liaison was almost obstinate in her support for the library during the board's final budget deliberations. Ultimately, the library branch was one of the few expansion items approved by the commissioners. If the library had not had a clear set of priorities and objectives during this process and an awareness of how they related to the political climate, it is likely that the new branch would have been delayed, and possibly even scuttled.

I have attempted in this article to illustrate that libraries can gain support from those with power in a community, even in difficult budget years and during times of controversy. To do so, librarians must stay aware of and cultivate the changing political environment. We must be committed to the ideas we stand for professionally and educate the public as to the relevancy of that ideology to the full diversity of the community. We must also educate ourselves about the ways that the public values the library and touch as many people as we can through our services in meaningful ways. Finally, we must keep the library's mission and goals always in front of us as a guiding beacon for our actions. If we follow these guidelines, we will have developed an effective political agenda.

References

- ¹David Shavit, *The Politics of Public Librarianship*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 24, 63.
- ²*Ibid.*, 63.
- ³William F. Birdsall, "The Political Persuasion of Librarianship," *Library Journal* (June 1, 1988): 75-79.
- ⁴*Ibid.*, 79.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, 77.
- ⁶Melvil Dewey, quoted in Paul Dickson, *The Library in America*, (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1986), 20.
- ⁷Birdsall, 79.
- ⁸Henry T. Blanke, "Librarianship and Political Values: Neutrality or Commitment?," *Library Journal* (July, 1989): 39-43.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 42.

TAB BOOKS

*Current and Backlist
Titles Available*

40% DISCOUNT

No Minimum Order

CURRENT EDITIONS

858 Manor St.
P.O. Box 4031
Lancaster, PA 17604
F. James Dantro
Sales Representative

Tel. Order 1-800-729-0620
Fax Order 1-800-487-2278

GREAT EXPECTATIONS/HARD TIMES *What the Dickens Is Happening in Libraries?* An NCLA Conference Workshop

Co-sponsored by: The Round Table on the Status of Women In Librarianship and The College and University Section

Thursday & Friday, (NOON TO NOON) August 6 - 7, 1992.

\$30 for members • \$40 for individuals
(Includes Wine & Cheese Reception & Dinner)

Contact: Karen Seawell Purcell (919) 379-4483/4176 (Round Table)
Plummer Alston Jones, Jr. (919) 584-2338 (Section)