
The Role of the Public Library Trustee in the Political Process

Terri Union

Editor's Note: The following is a written version of a presentation that Terri Union, member and past chair of the Cumberland County Public Library and Information Center Board of Trustees, made at a recent board meeting. While North Carolina Libraries, as a general rule, does not reprint speeches except in the biennial conference issue, the editorial board felt that Ms. Union's vision of a public library trustee's role in the political process was of such interest and appropriateness that we have published the address in its entirety.

In our society, the word "politics" has an unpleasant connotation. But that is what our system of government is all about. Politics means compromise, give and take. The system is built upon the relationship of mutual trust between the office holder and the constituent.

Whether or not we like the term, we, as trustees, are creatures of local government and the political process. Learning to live and operate within the bounds of the process is crucial to successful trustee stewardship of financial resources. One of the most important roles of a trustee is to be a strong advocate for the library. This means involvement in the political process in support of adequate and necessary funding. Because trustees speak for the public's interest in library service, we become a bridge between the community and county government. We are appointed by government to do a job—to be knowledgeable about the library and the community the library serves. The role of the trustee is to advise the board of commissioners on library matters and actively seek funding for the library. Just like a business (and libraries can be big business), we must know our product and our customers; we must do our best to supply the library services for those customers in terms of their expressed and demonstrated requests.

Although there is a need for state and federal money in support of libraries, the bread and butter comes from local government. It works like

this: commissioners are elected to office because they have effectively convinced the majority of voters to support them in the voting booth. Elected officials serve because they have a commitment to the community and an agenda they would like to see accomplished.

Whether or not we like the way an elected official votes, that official is sincerely interested in improving the community to the best of his knowledge and ability. Elected officials must listen to their constituents and board appointees. They know that if they do not listen, they won't be in office long. Our commissioners are conscientious in trying to keep the right balance between community needs and available revenues without placing unnecessary burdens on the taxpayers. However, they appoint library trustees, and one of our primary functions is to propose a budget that provides the services and meets the needs and requests of the people of Cumberland County. We would be remiss in fulfilling that trust if we did not keep the commissioners informed of our concerns and needs. **You only have to apologize for fighting for the budget if you are shy about it and don't do your homework.** In order to contribute to the political and social process of the library, trustees must diligently become knowledgeable about all aspects of the library and the way in which the library relates to the community. We must develop a realistic understanding of the community and the demands made on public funds. Don't be discouraged by set-backs and don't antagonize. Remember, we cannot antagonize and persuade at the same time.

There are four key components to remember:

1. **Most important: Communicate!** Present no surprises. If you want an amicable relationship with government officials, then you must have an appreciation for their position. Don't toss them the ball when they are not looking. We are all working together for the same goals. Take the time to explain our position and inform them in advance of any changes or new directions. Unless we keep them informed, elected officials cannot be effective in helping us to reach our goals. Get-

Terri Union, a member and past chair of the Cumberland County Public Library and Information Center Board of Trustees, is vice-chair/chair-elect of the Trustees Section of the North Carolina Library Association. Ms. Union also was chosen 1988 Trustee of the Year by the North Carolina Public Library Directors Association.

ting the attention of county government for effective support requires information, dedication, and practice. It is a year-round activity.

2. **Another key is Cooperation.** We must be honest and work together with those in government. Cooperation is essential if we are going to give the best service for the most effective use of budgeted money. Also, trustees should have only one spokesperson directing the lobbying for government funds. This person should be the chairperson or someone designated by the chairperson. It is important to have coordinated effort and direction. There are many nuances involved. Know when to push and when to compromise, when to give elbow room and when to stand our ground.

Trustees should not be afraid to dream for the future of the library or afraid to fight for these dreams.


3. **A third aspect of effective advocacy is reaching into the community for support and suggestions for growth and services.** The library is a mirror of the health and vitality of Cumberland County. The Friends of the Library are our constituency in terms of support for growth and development of the library system. We should have an open ear and an open mind to the needs for library services as expressed by the people. The unprecedented growth of library usage in the last three years has convinced many in local government that the library represents a vital community need. It is a resource that has enjoyed an overwhelming surge of use and support. We must use every opportunity, both formal and informal, to tell the library story.

4. **Another point to remember is our role as a link between the library and government.** As members of the community not directly employed by the library, we can be particularly effective advocates for growth and development. The director has a working relationship with the county manager. Our working relationship is with elected officials. We represent a cross section of the community that reaches into the business, professional, and educational areas as well as across different county communities. Just as the director prepares a budget for our consideration which we have the right to amend, county commissioners can amend the recommendations of the county manager's presented budget. Our job is to communicate with the commissioners. We should keep government officials informed on a

regular basis—not just once a year at budget time. Let them know what the library is doing and how services are being used and requested by the community, their constituency. Communication is like continuing education. The competition for government dollars is becoming increasingly competitive as federal and state wells dry up. We should meet informally once a year with our commissioners to share with them our hopes and dreams. We need to show them where we are and where we would like to be; we need to ask for their help in getting there. Personal contact is very important. Make it our job to know every commissioner.

Perhaps the easiest way to remember the important points of politics is to identify them as the four "C's"—

**Communication
Cooperation
Commitment
Consideration**

Trustees should not be afraid to dream for the future of the library or afraid to fight for those dreams. 

Read



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1. *North Carolina Libraries* seeks to publish articles, book reviews, and news of professional interest to librarians in North Carolina. Articles need not be of a scholarly nature, but they should address professional concerns of the library community in the state.
2. Manuscripts should be directed to Frances B. Bradburn, Editor, *North Carolina Libraries*, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C. 27858.
3. Manuscripts should be submitted in triplicate on plain white paper measuring 8½" x 11".
4. Manuscripts must be double-spaced (text, references, and footnotes). Manuscripts should be typed on sixty-space lines, twenty-five lines to a page. The beginnings of paragraphs should be indented eight spaces. Lengthy quotes should be avoided. When used, they should be indented on both margins.
5. The name, position, and professional address of the author should appear in the bottom left-hand corner of a separate title page.
6. Each page after the first should be numbered consecutively at the top right-hand corner and carry the author's last name at the upper left-hand corner.
7. Footnotes should appear at the end of the manuscript. The editors will refer to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th edition. The basic forms for books and journals are as follows:
Keyes Metcalf, *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings*. (New York: McGraw, 1965), 416.
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Issue deadlines are February 10, May 10, August 10, and November 10.



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Rose Simon
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Salem College
Winston-Salem, NC 27108
(919) 721-2649

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