

Building Effective Relationships between the Library and the Municipality

A variety of different library board-management structures exist in the Ontario public library community. Some of these relationships position the library and municipality together in a closer relationship. This issue of *Trustee Tips* will examine some of these relationships in order to discover practices that contribute to strong, working relationships between the library and the municipality.

In Ontario, there has always been a relationship between a municipal council and the local public library, and, in fact, between the municipal staff and the staff of the local public library. The context for this relationship is in the public library legislation. Municipalities are given the power under the *Public Libraries Act* to establish public libraries boards. If established, library boards are governed specifically by the *Public Libraries Act*.

The *Public Libraries Act, R.S.O., 1990, chapter P.44*, requires that the library board appoint a CEO, and that CEO is typically a professional librarian. The situation appears to be changing though, as variations on this traditional approach are becoming more common. Over the last few years, a number of newly-amalgamated municipalities established libraries. In some of these cases, the transition boards structured these new libraries so that the library CEO would be more closely integrated into the municipal structure. This close integration is not new. County libraries have, for many years, enjoyed a close and beneficial relationship with their municipalities.



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Please Note:

In examining these different structures, **Trustee Tips** is in no way advocating any one structure but merely attempting to identify effective practices that lead libraries and their municipalities to excellence in library service.

Current Library Board-Management Structures

There are currently two prevalent structures. The first is the independent board structure, which exists in many public libraries throughout Ontario. The boards, in these instances, have a majority of citizen appointees with some council representation. Staff members in these libraries are separate from municipal staff and are employed by the library board. Depending on individual circumstances, the CEO may or may not attend municipal department head meetings.

The second prevalent structure is the county library structure, a ‘hybrid’ system which appears to work well, but exists only in southern Ontario. The details of how a County library is established are described under sub-section 7 of the **Public Libraries Act**.

In the county library situation, as described in the **Public Libraries Act**, the CEO reports to a board that still is an independent corporation, but the board can, and usually does, have a majority of councillors (elected officials). In addition, most county chief librarians are considered to be part of the general county administration.

Sam Coughlan, CEO of the Oxford County Library, comments that he takes policy direction from the library board, but for administrative purposes, reports to the County Treasurer.”

In some cases, the CAO of the county is considered to be the CEO of the library as well. In others, the County CAO may sit in on the library board meetings. While there are 12 counties, 87 separate municipalities are served by county libraries, so the county model represents a significant variation in the governance approach. There are also 3 county libraries that have applied for, and gained, Committee of Council status through a special legislative process.

A number of library trustees and CEOs were invited to participate in a SuperConference session and contribute their thoughts on building effective working relationships between libraries and municipalities in the context of their particular library-board management situations. Their observations demonstrate clearly that it is certain key practices that contribute to strong and effective relationships, regardless of the structure.

A Clear Process For Decision-making and Community Consultation

The London Public Library Board is a traditional board. The Chief Executive Officer is a seasoned professional from the field of education, supported by a management team made up of several professional librarians. In her presentation, the then Chairperson, Martha Curgin emphasized the importance of the board’s clear decision-making process. The process is based on the board’s values and consists of a number of steps involving both board and staff. Important issues flow either from the current Strategic Plan or emerge from the community.

The board understands its critical role in the community mosaic and seeks ongoing community consultation, as well as input from its own members, the senior administrative staff, the public, and the City on emerging issues. As the input begins to point to a decision, staff members gather research data, establish benchmarks, and survey markets to solidify the decision.

The board also believes in the importance of reporting back to the community about what has happened to public input. The board develops a number of options, and presents these to council, supported by extensive public consultation.

The process demonstrates to Council that the library board has both listened carefully and also completed the necessary background work before proceeding. Library staff work with municipal staff and meet with senior municipal administration, the mayor, other politicians, Friends, and key stakeholder groups.

The board also ensures that there is a written fact sheet in the board's words, and uses identified, practiced spokespersons to present its case.

Achieving a balance between independence and cooperation

Deb Jackson is the CEO of the recently-amalgamated Haldimand Public Library. She emphasizes that libraries are a shared responsibility, but admits it is often difficult to preserve the autonomy of the Board as employer when the municipality provides the majority of funding. This is the case in most Ontario public libraries. Consequently, there is a fine balance to be achieved in working with the municipality.

In the case of Haldimand, the General Council in Committee passed a resolution in 2001 dealing with this issue, and this resolution is reprinted below.

Deb operates as a Division Manager within the Community Services Division, and considers this to be a huge advantage. "The contacts are great, the support is great, the visibility is higher," says Jackson, and it is important to treat this relationship with the proper respect. She cites the example of last spring's strike. In her role as a Division Manager, Deb agreed to fill in during the strike, but requested that her staff be exempt, and this was readily agreed to.

The Corporation of the Haldimand County

General Council in Committee

Resolution No. 1

Date: September 17, 2001

1. THAT in accordance with the Public Libraries Act of Ontario, Council confirms that the Haldimand County Library Board is responsible for management and control of the County public library system, operating autonomously from Council, where possible;
2. AND THAT in accordance with Section 15 of the Public Libraries Act of Ontario, Council confirms that the Haldimand County Library Board is responsible for all personnel policy issues including salary decisions and prescription of duties, within the realm of its Council approved budget;
3. AND THAT the Haldimand County Public Library Board continue to utilize the current services provided by the Haldimand County Corporate Services Department and any additional services that may be required to ensure taxpayers receive the most efficient municipal operations possible.

Another important issue for Jackson is: “who talks to whom?” In the Haldimand situation, the Board Chair can talk to the Community Services GM, and the senior management person then talks to the appropriate staff member in the County. Mostly, though, the CEO does the talking with staff, and the Board Chair talks to Council, as necessary. It can generate resentment and confusion if the Board Chair approaches staff members.

Policy can provide another opportunity for working together. “If you can follow municipal policy without infringing on the rights of the Board, it is wise to make a concerted and visible effort to do so,” advises Jackson. As an independent Board, we might be free not to follow a particular policy, but that could appear to be taking unfair advantage. We think it’s best, in those instances, to follow County policy.

There are other times when county policy can be problematic. The Information Services Division completed their Corporate Web Presence policy, and there were a number of items in it which posed problems for us. For example, the library wanted some autonomy in designing a library home page. The library’s logo and colours were different from the County’s.

There was also a section on “Addressing Concerns about Posted Information” that needed revision, since county policy was for all concerns to be addressed to the County Webmaster. The library had to be able to deal with its own complaints. The Information Services Division Head was receptive to library concerns. Overall, it has taken some time for the library and other divisions to start really understanding each others’ points of view.

The Board and Council also developed an understanding that is recorded in a Council Resolution that recognizing the autonomous status of the board but, also recognizes the desire of board and council to work together to ensure that taxpayers receive the most efficient municipal services possible.

Defining Roles and Relationships Clearly

The Mississauga Library System has an independent library board. CEO Don Mills works closely with the municipality but is still responsible to the board. “The library system and the municipality work together in a number of ways, but this requires getting as close to them as we can to realize these...Some things should be consolidated - like finance, accounting, IT, security, maintenance, HR, legal. It makes better use of local tax dollars which helps our program ultimately!

“Libraries are good at what they do,” remarks Mills, “so [it’s important to] make sure the municipal staff and council understand this. However, the library has to shout it! Our many successes - and there are many! - can be their successes...The common customer gets better coordinated service when we plan and deliver together. Municipal staff and council learns so much more about what we do and why we need money to do it well when we live together.”

One tool that Mississauga Library System has created to ensure a good working relationship is a ‘roles and responsibilities’ chart that ensures all players know “who does what.” You can view this chart at the MPL website, www.city.mississauga.on.ca/library/Board/board_main.htm. Click on *Roles and Responsibilities*.

New Policies Required by the Municipal Act

The new *Municipal Act* will require municipalities and local boards (which includes library boards) to develop policies covering procurement of goods and services, as well as the hiring of employees. Certainly, it would be an option to develop such policies in conjunction with the municipality.

Carole Marion, CEO of West Nipissing Public Library, adds a recent experience to demonstrate how libraries and municipalities might work together with policy development. She approached the municipality’s administrator to review the municipality’s policy pertaining to a particular Human Resources issue concerning library staff. She was informed that the municipality did not have such a policy, but were

interested in developing one. She proceeded to approach other libraries and institutions for suitable examples of their policies, and drafted a document. When she presented the draft to the municipal CAO for his perusal/input, he asked if the municipality could use the document as the basis for its own policy, and even offered to assume the cost to have the document vetted by legal authorities.

Being Well-prepared and Informed

As noted above, county libraries have long had an edge in navigating the library-municipal relationship because they have worked so closely with the county for many years.

When the 1997 Bill 109 debate focused on closer ties with the municipality, much of the library community opposed the bill because many members felt it posed a threat to the independence of the library board. The bill was withdrawn, but, at the time, some county libraries felt that the changes in Bill 109 did not threaten the independence of the board and had strong, efficient library systems to prove it.

For Beth Ross, CEO of Huron County Library, making sure that everyone is informed is a key factor in keeping

the relationship running smoothly. When serious and important decisions need to be made, one of the initial steps is to get the municipal staff on board. Library staff members develop recommendations to meet specific needs and seek input from their county staff partners. Library and County (management and technical level) staff discuss both the issues, underlying needs and the proposed recommendations, before the project reaches the library board.

The next step is to ensure that the library strategic plan fits in with the municipality's plans and priorities. Council and the board are more likely to agree with proposals if they meet the criteria that underlie current plans and priorities, and if there is adequate and convincing background data to support both the need and the recommendation for action.

Another key element is ongoing communication between the board and the council. The board reports to council every month and provides a 'heads-up' in all regular reports of what issues are facing the Board. The aim is to ensure that the board and council are always informed and never surprised. Since the media is always on hand for council meetings, a change in activities at the library may appear on television before the board has had time to consider how they would respond to questions or concerns.

Final thoughts on effective relationships....

Today's libraries have a great deal to offer to their communities. Library boards and staff members frequently are not proactive enough in demonstrating the library's effectiveness. This sometimes results in municipalities not understanding the library's potential or its needs. It is critical for libraries to work together with their municipalities. While it is true that the library board is a separate entity, it is extremely important that the library board works towards aligning library agenda with those of the council, including, for example, in the areas of policy and planning. Consider working together to find ways for the library board and the municipality to share policies or approaches to an issue, rather than focusing entirely on the separateness of the two entities.

The challenge for library boards in the 21st century is to develop their role in community development, a job that demands an effective working relationship with the municipality and a willingness to think beyond the library to the broader community. Council is also in the community-building business and it makes sense for both bodies to cooperate with each other. This is perhaps the strongest reason to focus this critical relationship on collaboration for a common vision.

Summary of Practices that help to create a strong relationship

Practice	How
Recognize and comply with the Public Libraries Act and relevant municipal legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align library and municipal policies as appropriate • Follow municipal policy without infringing on the <i>Public Libraries' Act</i> or the rights of the Board
Develop shared understanding about respective roles and responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chart defining roles of Library Board, CEO, Council, Appropriate Town Staff (e.g. using Mississauga Public Library example on Web) • Haldimand Resolution
Align agendas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the separate and different needs of the council and the library • Communicate and support each other's "big picture" • Ensure board and council knows the other's agenda leading to common ground • Library Strategic Plan should fit in with the Municipal Strat Plan and Vision • Recognize the danger of overplaying the "we are separate" card
Commit to ongoing, planned communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan all communication • Designate spokespersons • Establish who talks to whom • CEO talks with staff • Board talks to Council • Ensure two-way input/ongoing flow of information and communication • Remember internal communication so no one in the "family" feels uninformed • Report to Council regularly • Provide frequent "heads-up" in order to avoid surprises • Eliminate unnecessary surprises on both sides • Celebrate successes together
Evaluate opportunities to integrate administrative services that will eliminate unnecessary duplication at the expense of taxpayers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in shared training opportunities as appropriate (computer, supervisory, health and safety) • Overall coordinated approach to financial accountability • Integrating systems where possible to avoid duplication • Human Resources (HR) services • Building maintenance and repair • Written policy and/or agreement to provide guidance
Align Policies Where Possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigate municipal policies on various issues and determine their suitability for the library
Develop a decision-making framework and process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting out a standard process for making decisions that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identifies the criteria you will use in making decisions - Ensures decisions are in the best interest of the library - Offers a range of well-articulated choices/options - Involves everyone who needs to be involved - Ensures everyone understands the situation - Includes accurate research - Keeps all parties involved • Use this process in an ongoing fashion – not just in a crisis
Commit jointly to the community's development and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Council with a succinct role statement that summarizes the library's contribution to the community • Discuss with Council how library programs and services address community issues • Ensure community input