

Dear Incoming Trustee

By Maxine Bleiweis

Dear Incoming Trustee:

Congratulations! You've just taken on one of the noblest of positions—representing the public library. You've been sworn in, elected, or appointed, and your work is about to begin. What might you expect?



1. Challenges to the American Library Association's (ALA) Library Bill of Rights.

Advice: Practice having meetings at which you are urged to remove materials from the library. Anticipate that a controversial group will want to use your meeting room. Rehearse what you will say to your family, friends, and coworkers when a situation is reported in the press.

2. Fellow board members and community officials who put forth opinions and suggest actions that are counter to the direction the library has set.

Advice: Have an up-to-date strategic plan and understand why and how it came about. Stay on task to get to the goals outlined—and ask hard questions if you are not making progress. If you feel your strategy is outdated, make a new plan...don't act without one.

3. Dissatisfaction with progress by other board members and an impulse to take control of the process.

Advice: Play your part in avoiding the "meeting after the meeting" in the parking lot. Open dialog should be encouraged and a formal evaluation process set in place—not just for the director but for the board as a whole and its individual members. Create a "report card" for an annual review of your participation, preparation, and how seriously you take your role. Evaluate how you work as a group. It can be sobering to tally the responses and create an action plan based on the feedback. Look first to what you can change in your own approach to achieve the results you want—it's far more in your control than an attempt to change your colleagues.

4. A group of people who get too comfortable with one another and neglect the needs of the community.

Advice: Make sure the group is fluid, and represents a variety of experiences and interests. Term limits work to your advantage by preventing burnout and increasing the number of residents who have an understanding of library needs from the inside. Having dozens of informed former board members throughout the community and serving on other boards will benefit the library.

5. People who comment to you about the library and expect you to correct the situation.

Advice: Welcome comments and direct them to the person who can

do something about them—the library director. The board acts as a governing body, not as micromanagers. Making promises or comments on behalf of the board to individuals, groups, or the press is unwise, unless you are the board president or other official spokesperson and are articulating officially determined library policy.

6. When interested people say, "What's new at the library?" you freeze or only remember the budget cuts, layoffs, and roof leaks.

Advice: At each meeting, ask your director for anecdotes that you can share. Positive stories about how libraries change lives will impress and engage your constituency. Have in your back pocket some statistics, such as how many people enter the building in a week.

7. Potential conflicts of interest.

Advice: Discuss any conflict of interest and draw up an agreement signed by every board member stating that they will not benefit monetarily from transactions made by the library. Recuse yourself from any votes that call your participation into question.

8. Everyone could be watching! Public libraries operate under a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) that differs from state to state. This means that what is said in a public meeting is part of the official record, and only certain topics can be discussed in executive (private or closed) sessions.

Advice: Familiarize yourself with your state's FOIA, review your practices from time to time, and seek legal advice when necessary. Otherwise, you could find yourself spending hours responding to requests for information or being cited for improper procedure.

9. You will need to learn more about your community.

Advice: Without a sense of the community it serves, the library suffers from the impact of educated guesses, nostalgia, and being a place of reaction rather than proactive thinking. Be an active participant within your community. Introduce community members to your director. Ask questions about serving any new group or underserved population. Listen, observe, and look for opportunities for the library to be a catalyst for civic engagement.

10. Satisfaction. You have taken on a role that has the potential to influence the lives of your neighbors. The public library has endured through decades of economic turmoil, political change, and population shifts.

Advice: Stand up for what is right, do your homework, and proudly represent the institution to the community.

Sincerely, Your Library Director

Maxine Bleiweis, 2015 recipient of the Charles Robinson Award for Innovative Leadership and former Executive Director, Westport Library, CT, now consults on library innovation through Maxine Bleiweis & Associates.

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