

TEN THINGS You've Always Wanted to Tell Your Municipal Council

by **Ian Hunter**

Library boards in Canada have an interesting relationship with their municipal councils. Once a term, councils appoint trustees to provide “a comprehensive and efficient public library service” for the community. While the boards have this significant responsibility, they do not have the right to directly levy a tax on behalf of the library. It must seek most of its funds from the municipal council.

With the council both appointing the board members (citizens and a few councillors), and providing most of the funds for the library budget, it is only natural that municipal councillors may see a requirement for the board to be responsive to council’s wishes.

The library board, on the other hand, usually has a different perception of its duty. The board sees a greater need to be more responsive to the community, rather than to council, for the provision of exemplary library services.

Most of the time, this difference in perception does not cause any trouble because the library is being well run and there are few complaints from the public.

At other times, however, tensions arise because councillors want a certain action (e.g., internet filters on all public library computers, or severe budget cuts that would affect services), and the board pushes back, joined by library supporters in the community.

Library boards take care to have the best possible relationship with council, since this should pay dividends at budget time, for example. They may, however, be reluctant to address directly their heartfelt concerns about council’s relationship with the board.

In an attempt to improve the board’s dialogue with council, I’ve prepared a list of 10 things library boards would like their municipal council to do or know.

I hope this list will help councils and boards alike. Could the list be longer? Probably! I would be interested in hearing your important messages from your board to your council.

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1 Treat the board as a responsible governing board. The board is a legally constituted entity and has prescribed duties and responsibilities. It is not a committee of council.

2 Respect the knowledge and experience of the library board and its CEO (the head librarian). The CEO is a library professional, and the board's only focus is the library. Councillors should take care to avoid the habit of second-guessing library decisions. See item 10.

3 The library CEO is the employee of the library board. The CEO is hired by the library board and is directly responsible to the board, not to the municipal CAO. Yes, the CEO works closely with the municipality on things like library finances, but the library board, not the CAO, does the CEO's yearly performance evaluation.

4 Appoint competent citizens and councillors to the library board. The community needs a well-run library, so therefore find the best possible people for the board, and ensure they get adequate professional development. Strong, independent-minded trustees who can see the big picture are more effective than group-thinkers.

6 Treat the library as an important, essential service for the community, on par with good fire and police protection. When tough economic times drive increased demand for library services, protect its budget.

7 Take care with large capital projects for the library, e.g., a new library branch, or a branch renovation. Too often during these projects, council pushes the CEO and board aside, and ignores their sage advice. This may well result in costly disasters.

5 Make the time to learn about the issues and concerns of the library, and about the people in charge. Read the meeting minutes. At least once a year, attend a board meeting to get a first-hand appreciation of their work.

8 Trustees must always act in the best interests of the library. Appoint trustees who want to improve, not diminish, library services.

9 All library board members are created equal. Councillor-trustees have no more power than citizen-trustees. The board's authority comes only from its collective decisions, and these are normally expressed on behalf of the board by its chair.

10 Practice good council-board relations. When there's conflict, have discussions rather than sling arrows. For example, talk to the board about the pros and cons of internet filtering before take a position. Seek point of agreement and find viable solutions to critical issues.