

10 qualities to look for in a new library trustee

By **Ian Hunter**

Next year in Ontario, following the municipal elections, the new councils will be appointing the library board members (trustees) for their library service. Given that the appointments are for four long years (2011 through 2014), it is especially important that the best possible people are selected. The success of a library depends on it.

Too often, library trustees are chosen for reasons that don't adequately address the needs of the position. The rationale for selection may include being a frequent library visitor, a published author, a bibliophile, a municipal or business leader, or a former librarian.

While these factors may enhance a person's candidacy for being on the board, they don't sufficiently address some fundamental trustee attributes that a library and municipal council should be seeking.

Listed here are 10 qualities a library should consider when looking for a new, high-performing, effective trustee.

1 Persistence. In their work, diligent trustees must absorb a huge amount of information, and then have the drive to pursue unresolved issues. If a given library situation is unsatisfactory, instead of accepting the status quo, trustees should be looking for creative solutions.

2 Willingness to learn. Past experience and education do not fully prepare anyone to be a trustee. Even a seasoned municipal councillor has a lot to learn about being on a library board. Only those who want to get the training should be appointed.

3 Respect for the institution. Libraries are proud institutions that provide an essential service and protect a fundamental right. Board members are important for its prosperity and growth. Trustees should conduct themselves so as to always keep the library's interests at the forefront, even when they disagree with some library position or practice.

4 Openness to others' views. Trustees have debates at their meetings. Free and healthy discussions are essential for boards so that they can set new policies and chart future directions.

5 Transparency and integrity. For a board to function well, every member must be a straight shooter. Trustees with hidden motives or agendas can poison the work of the board, allowing confusion and controversy to reign.

6 Friendly, relaxed manner. Library board members listen to and share information with library users, municipal leaders, and others. For success with community relations and advocacy, trustees need well-developed people skills.

7 Ability to make time for the job. Training to be a trustee, staying on top of issues, and participating in meetings mean that new appointees must be able to carve out sufficient time in their busy lives. Even high-quality board members fail if they don't have the time for the job.

8 Desire to improve library services. Board members must pull together in the same direction, to make the library services better for all. Related to item 3, a library suffers if it has trustees working to diminish the library's ability to serve the community.

9 A passion for good governance. Trustees who focus on improving their board's governance structures and practices should see positive results from this work. Key governance reform issues are too often overlooked due to the personalities on the board or its traditions, and this can hamper the library's ability to function effectively.

10 Self-confidence and assurance. A well-trained trustee develops important perspectives on critical topics like intellectual freedom, literacy, library finances, and the appropriate role of a board member. At times, trustees may be challenged on a number of issues, and they need to be able to hold firm to the library's core values and beliefs. It takes tremendous strength, for example, for a trustee to defend a library against organized groups advocating some form of censorship, but that's what a library board needs to do.

This list of 10 qualities should help municipal councillors look beyond what passes for traditional qualifications for membership on the library board. Trustees and library CEOs can help their council by clearly defining for them the skills and qualities the next library board needs ... and also by encouraging good people to apply for the positions!

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