TRUSTEE TOPICS

Prepared by the
Kansas State Library and the
Kansas Library Trustee Association

EFFECTIVE BOARD MEETINGS

GOAL:

The goal of this article is to help trustees handle library business in a timely and efficient fashion by having effective board meetings.

BACKGROUND:

Nothing will help the board foster and support an excellent public library more than having smooth and productive board meetings, where business is conducted in a timely and efficient manner.

Good trustees will be far more willing to give the library their time when they know the library can be trusted not to waste their valuable time.

ISSUES:

There are procedures that will make the board meetings more successful, ensuring that critically important decisions get made in a timely fashion. These include:

Working with an agenda: The agenda should be built around the tasks that need to be accomplished. These should be placed in priority order so that important business can be done early. The agenda should be mailed several days before the meeting with any accompanying documents. Reports should be put in writing and mailed with the agenda whenever possible.

<u>Being Prepared</u>: The necessary information should be available. Any needed tools (such as a flip chart) should be the responsibility of the chair or the director.

<u>Having Good Bylaws</u>: The bylaws should help the board avoid facing the same issues over and over by providing consistency. They should set rules for participation, such as time limits for speakers, the number for a quorum, how to decide issues when there is disagreement, how often the board meets, who keeps the minutes and other relevant issues.

<u>Having a Consistent Schedule</u>: The meetings should start and end on time. There should be reasonable estimates for how long each agenda item will take and the chair should try to meet these expectations. Each board member should be aware that they are expected to be on time and stay until the end of the meeting. Exceptions to this should be rare.

<u>Having a Policy for Absentees</u>: The board should have a policy for recommending the removal of any board member who is consistently absent without a valid excuse. Three consecutive absences might be the standard for such a policy.

<u>Having an Active Chair</u>: The chair should follow the rules and the agenda, move the discussion along, keep on track, encourage all to participate, review and clarify the issues and be fair to all members.

<u>Being Considerate</u>: It is all right to be assertive, as long as courtesy is observed. All trustees should be listened to attentively and no one should dominate the meeting. There should be time limits on presentations and opinions, if necessary.

<u>Making Assignments Clear</u>: Any action assignments should be reviewed and clarified at the end of the meeting so there is no doubt about who is expected to do what and by when.

<u>Keeping Track of Board Business</u>: Each member should receive detailed minutes after each meeting. The chair or someone assigned should make sure that action assignments have been accomplished by a reasonable deadline.

The board minutes should include every action that is taken by the board. Each motion should be stated, with the trustee who made the motion and the board member who made the second. The votes should be recorded, with yes votes, no votes and abstentions.

There are problems that prevent library boards from functioning effectively. These include:

- The Wandering Board: The board meeting wanders from one topic to another with little action taken and many irrelevant issues discussed. When this occurs meeting after meeting, good board members will begin to consider library board membership as a waste of their time.

- The Hurried Board: The board meetings are dominated by a desire to get done "on time." Important decisions that deserve discussion are passed over in a cursory manner because the trustees are unwilling to invest time in the library's needs. Again, good board members will feel frustrated because important decisions are being made without reflection or discussion.

- The Rubber Stamp Board: The library director is often partly responsible for this one by not sharing adequate information with the board. The board members do not review expenses and do not understand what the library is doing or why. They approve the director's requests with no questions or thoughtful consideration of the issues.

- The Micro-Managing Board: The board does not leave the actual management of the library to the director. Board members become involved with the selection of materials, the employment of staff and the day-to-day operation of the library. Board meetings are held without input from the director or with the director absent. An effective library director will not tolerate this situation indefinitely. Such a situation reflects a dangerously weak relationship between the trustees and the director.

- The Antagonistic Board: Board members do not give each other a courteous hearing and do not accept as final the motions that are correctly passed and voted on by the board. Board members publicly criticize the policies and priorities that the library has established.

- The Absentee Board: Board members repeatedly miss board meetings. The board has no policy for removing trustees who cannot or will not accept their full responsibilities as board members.

ACTION STEPS:

The trustees and the director should review the library board's bylaws once a year to see if any changes are needed.

New members to the board should have an orientation session to help them learn how the board functions.

The trustees and the director should review their meeting procedures once a year to see if any improvements can be made. Library boards have high turnover and board dynamics do change over time.

During the library director's annual evaluation, the trustees should consider whether the director has supplied useful information, kept good records and maintained strong communication with the board. Any requests for changes or improvements should be made with impeccable courtesy.

SOURCES:

Some of the material in this document was adapted from:

The Utah State Library Trustee Handbook, p.10, published by the Utah State Library in 1996

and

The Idaho Library Trustee Manual, Section III, published by the Idaho State Library in 1998.