The library board and the community

In this section, we will look at the library board and the community, as well as in the larger library community.

The board’s relationship with the community is one that is frequently taken for granted. “Of course we represent the community in all its diversity,” comment trustees, “that goes without saying.” When asked to specify what the board is doing to represent the community, the response is often slow and sometimes sheepish.

- How carefully do we think about representing our communities?
- How often do we make a point of examining that relationship?
- How can the board make regular connections a habit by building them into the board’s plan for the year?

The library board is the link between the library and the community and the library and the municipal council. This board role is critical to the success of the library; without this connection, planning may be ineffective, resources may be jeopardized and the library may not reach its full potential in the community.

The Public Libraries Act, RSO 1990, chapter P.44 directs library boards to provide comprehensive and efficient public library service that reflects the community’s unique needs (Section 20a). In order to do this, the board must know those needs. Part of this knowledge comes from regular needs assessment surveys; however, there’s more to it. A regular agenda of meetings with the community helps the board to become aware of community issues, to share information about library mission, to develop liaisons, and to enrich the board’s understanding of the diversity of interest and opinion in the community. It is important to link with the organizations and groups that share the library’s mission and users. These tasks are key board activities.
Why should boards focus on the relationship with the community?

John Carver’s Policy Governance® model identifies linkage with the ownership as a critical job for a governing board. In a public library, the ownership is the community. There is a variety of reasons for library boards to reach out to the community it represents to create this connection and several techniques to achieve the linkage.

- Without regular contact with the community, how can the board collect enough information to make sound decisions on library issues and priorities? Surveys are not the only techniques available to boards to establish contact with the public. The board might also consider focus groups, town hall or special community meetings, as well as many others.

- Sharing information with the community about what is going on at the library is an important step in building a relationship with the community. While staff usually disseminates such information, the board can play an important role, too. Moving the board meetings from branch to branch is a simple way to facilitate the relationship with the people who use a library’s branches. It is easier for people to attend a board meeting in their own branch and people will realize that the board is concerned about local issues.

- Regular contact with the community keeps the board advised on the needs, concerns and opportunities of the community as they are developing. A great deal can happen in a community between scheduled needs assessments. Rapid growth, demographic shifts, or increases in ethnic populations, can put considerable stress on library programming. The board with a strong relationship with the community is better able to adapt to changing needs and opportunities.

- Fulfilling the board’s responsibility to carry out the assigned mandate of the library is another key reason to connect with both council and the community, given the environment of stricter accountability. The public expects to know that tax dollars have been spent in a responsible manner and that control processes are transparent. Current public library legislation requires public library boards to report annually to the province and to the council. Is the board in the habit of making a similar report to the community? An Annual Report is an ideal tool to advise the community of what has been achieved by the library for the community over the past year. Identifying one board meeting as the annual general meeting presents another opportunity to advise the community of what the library has accomplished.

The community and council may need education on the expanding potential of the library and its impact on local communities. In many communities, the library is assuming the role of a community centre, offering space for local groups to meet, acting as an information clearinghouse, and offering a wide variety of activities for all ages. Technology will also play an increasingly important role in the community life of the future. In addition to being attentive to the needs of the community, boards will have to lead their communities in exploring new opportunities afforded by technology. There is a new kind of public education role for libraries, one that is very much in keeping with being a trusted source of reliable information.
Library Board Development Kit

Community Development

It is vital that libraries are ‘at the table’ when decisions about the community are made. By participating in community groups and in discussions about planned programs and services, library boards, either through trustees or staff involvement, are better able to decide where the library can make the most community impact. At the same time, the community will view the library as an active and valuable community partner. (From Ontario Library Service North’s Community Development resources which are posted at www.olsn.ca/community-dev.php)

Libraries come to the table with a wealth of assets: free community space, technology resources, connections to the local economy, a sense of ownership by the community and, above all, a level of community trust. With these assets, the library can connect to all parts of a community, building those relationships and networks that contribute to strong social infrastructure. The library is an important community engagement catalyst. (From: The Engaged Library: Chicago Stories of Community Building. Urban Library Council 2005)

What is community development?

Library staff and trustees sometimes confuse community development with community outreach. The difference, while subtle, lies in their distinct focus. Whereas the focus of community outreach is typically that of providing library service outside of the library building, and reaching out to target audiences who would benefit from library service, community development focuses on the community’s advancement and well being. Put another way:

- **community outreach** is about the library achieving its potential by reaching out to community;
- **community development** is about the community achieving its potential by working together to solve its own problems and build a successful future.

There are many definitions of community development but the basic concept was stated by the United Nations in 1948:

“**Community development is a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation and fullest possible reliance upon the community’s initiative.**”

Community development is a process that involves the community in building a sustainable future and includes a variety of activities that build a stronger and more effective community. Community organizations should somehow further the overall development of the community. According to Ken Haycock, a well-known author and trainer in the library world, to be truly effective, public library boards must adopt community development as their fundamental mission. To do this, library boards must know where the library is going and lead it to achieve certain specific results that will benefit the community. The library’s mission must be seen to contribute to the community – its business geared to making the community a better place to live. The direction and means to reach goals must be clearly set out and the board must know in advance what factors will equate to success. When the board’s term is over, it must leave knowing that the library accomplished specific, tangible results for the community.
Community Development (continued)

Activities demonstrating that the Board is geared to community development

Library boards can only be effective in community development if they concentrate on looking outward towards the community. If the library fails to relate to the community or function as an integral part of it, there will be little effect outside of the library. If libraries are to be successful, they will need to orient their activities towards making a difference in the quality of life in their communities. The following eight activities support community development:

1. **Get outside the doors. Successful community/library relationships are proactive.**
   Trustees and staff that take an active role in the civic life of the community create the ‘two way street’ that positions the library at the center of community. This activity outside the library should be encouraged at every level.

2. **Find the leaders. A concerted effort to discover who’s who in a community makes all the difference.**
   Reading local papers, asking long-time residents, attending civic events—all can be ways to find and work with the people who are already at the center of community activities.

3. **Be creative about what the library can contribute.**
   Go beyond the obvious and be prepared to say “yes” to new ideas that fall within your mission.

4. **Discover and contribute to the unique capacities and conditions of the community.**
   Cultural attributes, family requirements, the particular situations of neighborhood youth all provide opportunities to make the library indispensable.

5. **Support local businesses and institutions.**
   Set up reciprocal relationships with them, advertise your services to them, spend discretionary funds locally. All of these activities will rebound to the library’s and community’s benefit.

6. **Make the library building a community center.**
   Public buildings are community assets in many ways beyond simply being meeting spaces. The more people feel ownership, the more integrated the library becomes in community life.

7. **Create a community-minded culture among trustees, library staff and volunteers.**
   All trustees and staff should be encouraged to learn names, attend events, develop relationships, and pay attention to community issues. Make the library a bridge to and among community populations.

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Community Development (continued)
Activities (continued)

8. **Support library investments that jump start community redevelopment efforts.**
   A new library in a neighborhood brings hope and attention to areas that may have experienced disinvestment. Support new branches with resources for building social networks. When libraries engage their communities, the best characteristics of both library and community are mobilized. Individual gifts, local associations and institutions, the neighborhood culture, economy and physical environment all come together to create unique neighborhood communities. With supportive leadership from trustees, municipal council and library administration, there is no limit to the role local branch libraries can play in building vibrant communities.

Adapted From: *The Engaged Library: Chicago Stories of Community Building*. Urban Library Council 2005

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**Learn about your community**

Whether you want to be an active member of the community, an effective trustee or a community leader, you will have to be familiar with the community’s issues, resources, needs, power structure and decision-making processes. Your initial orientation could include reading your local newspaper regularly, attending community events, reading reports and familiarizing yourself with available services as well as community projects and activities. Close observation of the community as you interact with it will also provide significant insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the community.

According to the Library Trustee Development Program in **Trustee Tip # 22**, the library board is the link between the library and the community. The board’s role is seen as critical to the success of the library: “...without this connection, planning may be ineffective, resources may be jeopardized and the library may not reach its full potential in the community”. However, all staff, board members, volunteers, members and patrons have an important role to play in community development by sharing information and insights about the community.

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Learn about your community (continued)

One systematic way to share community information is to collectively – as staff and/or board - work your way through the six ways to describe your community advocated in the SOLS publication *Creating the Future You’ve Imagined: A Guide to Essential Planning*. The six ways are:

- Social and economic factors
- Lifestyles and interests
- Groups and affiliations
- Agencies and services
- Changes occurring
- Community assets

Assess community assets and resources, needs and issues

To be able to work effectively in a community development context, you will need to gather information about community strengths or assets. It is extremely helpful to undertake a comprehensive community assessment which will collect both qualitative and quantitative data on a wide range of community features. Often time and budget restraints will necessitate choosing between methods and limiting the assessment to particular areas of interest. It is important to keep in mind that your efforts to learn about the community can often be augmented by the work of other agencies. Look for planning and needs assessment reports already in existence that profile the community.

There are many methods of community assessment used in community development practice. A few of the more common methods are listed below; additional information is contained in the resources section.

Compiling a community demographic profile is an excellent start. It is helpful to update the profile periodically so you will be able to track changes that occur within your community and respond accordingly. A demographic profile includes statistical information about age, gender, language, visible minority status, education, and family income. Community demographic profiles are available for approximately 6,000 communities in Canada, along with comparative figures for Ontario, from Statistics Canada’s *Community Profiles* at [www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca).

Other community statistics may also be of interest to you, such as crime rates, morbidity and mortality rates, or availability of affordable housing. Some of these are available from Statistics Canada, but local data may be obtained from local agencies; e.g. the local police service will have crime statistics.
Learn about your community (continued)

Assess community assets and resources, needs and issues (continued)

However, simply collecting information is not sufficient; it must be analyzed in order for it to be meaningful. For example, you might be interested in the relative proportion of seniors to youth in your community, or the proportion of the population for whom English is a second language. You may want to compare the most recent data available with previous years; perhaps to identify the rate of growth of the population, changes in ethno-cultural patterns or age distribution.

Statistical information isn’t the only type of information that is important to collect. Finding out how residents perceive their community is also essential to effective community development practice. Community surveys, community asset mapping, environmental scans, focus groups and key informant interviews are other methods of obtaining community data. The City of Calgary has an excellent publication on community assessments. It contains background information on the need for community assessments, describes various methods and provides easy-to-follow worksheets for planning and implementing a community assessment process.2

The process of community asset mapping can be very energizing and rewarding for the participants, forcing people to focus on the good things in their community. Engaging a cross-agency group in this activity can be a tremendous community development strategy in and of itself.

Listen to community members

You will not be able to learn everything you need to know by reading and observation. You will need to talk to others about their interests and perceptions to put it into context. You can contact community members through formal channels, such as joining a local organization, or informally by chatting with people who visit the library or who you encounter in other situations, such as shopping at local stores or attending school activities. By listening to the community you may identify an area in which there seems to be a common interest in making a change.

Library staff and board members need to maintain regular contact with the community to collect enough information to make sound recommendations and decisions on library services and priorities and to identify important community issues.

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Learn about your community (continued)

Making it work

For a library to become a significant player in a community development process some particular organizational attributes are required. The library board and key personnel must be willing to take the initiative and tread into areas that are not traditionally seen as being within the mandate of the public library. They will need to be open to new ideas, new ways of doing things and developing new partnerships.

Part of the work of the library is to help community members recognize and articulate their causes and concerns. After that the library can help to establish a vehicle for change which in most cases will start as a steering committee.

Community development work depends on public standing, credibility and building the library’s profile in the community\(^3\). Information should flow both ways. It is important to tell the community what is going on and what is new at the library, without asking for any support. Patrons and non-patrons alike should know how to contact the board. Are the names and profiles of board members on the library’s Web site? Do board members have business cards to give to contacts they meet when attending and participating in community events? The library board can improve its visibility and strengthen accountability when the community can easily make contact.

Resources - In addition to the resources in the separate resources section, specific resources for community development include:

Ken Haycock’s Community Development Sessions, Ontario Library Boards’ Association (All are available on the OLBA website at [www.accessola.com](http://www.accessola.com).)
- Ontario Library Boards and Community Development: New Initiatives for New Times, or...No, this is not what we have always been doing...,”
- Community Development: The Board’s Visioning Process
- Community Development: Roles and Relationships
- Tracking Board Success,

Internet resources on Community Development

- Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet) is a national organization committed to strengthening Canadian communities by creating better economic opportunities and enhancing environmental and social conditions - [http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en](http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en)
- Community Development Foundation: [www.cdf.org.uk](http://www.cdf.org.uk)

Library Board Development Kit

The board and the broader library community

There are other relationships that the board may wish to cultivate. From a broader perspective, the board may wish to promote library interests with provincial or federal politicians, depending on the local issues and projects. Making sure your provincial politicians are aware of your library and its role in the community does help to improve the library’s profile and it is important to get your message out when you’re not just after something.

It is important also for boards to look to the broader library community both to learn from others and to share valuable experience with others. Taking advantage of networking opportunities, such as Trustee Councils or other training opportunities, introduce your trustees to others in the province, and encourage exchanges of information, views and sharing experiences. Taking a more active role both increases knowledge of library issues and helps trustees feel that others share similar challenges.

If networking opportunities are not available in your area, consider making one happen. Invite trustees from neighbouring boards to join you to discuss current issues.

Finally, join other trustees in furthering the aims of Ontario’s public libraries by joining the Ontario Library Boards Association (OLBA). A similar national organization, The Canadian Library Trustees’ Association (CLTA), considers library issues across Canada.

In southern Ontario, library trustees can participate in the Trustee Councils. The purpose of the SOLS Trustee Councils is to provide:

- A communication link between SOLS and boards regarding SOLS’ services.
- A forum for sharing information and an opportunity to hear how other boards deal with similar issues.
- Suggestions and support for trustee training.
- A pool of trustees from which to elect members to the SOLS board.

Trustee Councils meet twice a year in eight locations. All public library boards are requested to appoint a representative to its area Council but in addition, other trustees are welcome and encouraged to attend. The meetings are a combination of information sharing and updates on various issues of concern to public library trustees, including an update from a representative of Ontario Library Boards Association (OLBA). Training sessions are occasionally included in the meetings.

Clearly, participating in networking opportunities or other training opportunities with other trustees encourages exchange of information, increases knowledge of library issues and helps trustees to face challenges.