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Trustees must be advocates for libraries

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why do it?

We public library trustees and board members in Oregon cast a small shadow.[1] Too small.

Several hundred prominent citizens throughout our state serve on local library boards, usually in an advisory capacity to elected officials. We could be enormously influential when political action is required to benefit libraries. As a practical matter, we are not.

Trustees Must Be Advocates for Libraries

by George Bell

Salem Public Library Advisory Board

In fact, though several critical statewide measures have been on the ballot in the last two general elections, trustees have been conspicuous by their silence. We should have been in the vanguard, where our voices in support of libraries would have been heard and listened to by our fellow citizens.

The professional library community in Oregon has learned, slowly and painfully, that the time and the issues do not permit leaving the battle to someone else.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the threat from the Oregon Citizens Alliance (OCA) was so clear and dangerous that the Oregon Library Association (OLA) was compelled to organize politically and move to the ramparts. Measure 9, the first wave of the OCA assault, was defeated decisively by Oregon voters in November 1992, due in no small measure to the efforts of the library community.

Since then, similar as well as new threats to the integrity and well-being of libraries have appeared on Oregon ballots. The OLA has challenged them all, fearlessly. But trustees have not joined in the fray. That's unfortunate because we've been needed.

Never more, it turns out, than in the election just past – the November 5, 1996 general election. Ballot Measure 47, the so-called cut-and-cap measure, clearly signaled a devastating future for library budgets dependent on local property taxes.

OLA's leadership spotted it early and marshaled arguments against the measure. A position paper was drafted, space was purchased in the Voter's Pamphlet, and educational workshops were scheduled around the state. A letter to the editor was sent to the state's newspapers, warning about the effects of Measure 47 on Oregon's public libraries.

Where were the trustees? No where to be seen.

Trustees were no-shows in the fight against Measure 47 – the most crippling measure to libraries ever to appear on an Oregon ballot – simply because we

failed to see ourselves in an advocacy role. We were unable to see beyond the parochial agenda of our last board meeting. It was a fatal blindspot.

Some trustees may argue they were prohibited from political action by state law, which regards citizen members of boards and commissions as government employees, and, therefore, does not permit any official involvement with politics.[2]

The law does forbid official group action, but individuals have their full civil rights. Nothing prevents a trustee from promoting or opposing a ballot measure or candidate in the manner of any citizen.

So, according to the attorney general, the Salem Public Library Advisory Board, on which I serve, was precluded from passing an official resolution in opposition to Measure 47. But as individual members, we were perfectly free to say or write whatever we chose about the measure.

For the sake of argument, let's suppose that two weeks before the last election, every library trustee in the state had written a cautionary letter to the editor of their local newspaper with information about the threat Measure 47 posed to their library and its services. Would our neighbors and fellow citizens have paid attention? Almost certainly.

But the issue here isn't election-time political activity. The point is not to rush forward with a lock after the horse is already out of the barn. The point is that we trustees must begin to see ourselves as political partisans for libraries, statewide and locally.

It's not hard to do. Here are three basic steps that will enable us to exercise our political responsibilities toward the libraries we serve:

1. **Join OLA.** Trustees have their own separate division within OLA, and the chair is a voting member of OLA's executive committee. For some inexplicable reason, few trustees involve themselves with OLA – to their detriment. Seeing library issues from a statewide perspective enhances a trustee's performance on a local board and provides an improved service to the library and the community. Public library directors should aggressively encourage their trustees to be part of OLA. Everyone would benefit.
2. **Contribute to the People for Oregon Libraries, the PAC.** Even at the library level, money is the milk of politics, and trustees should not be shy about writing checks in behalf of the library political action committee. The PAC is totally separate from librarians' professional organization, OLA. Its purpose is to contribute financially to worthy legislative candidates, to support local library issues, and to support or oppose ballot measures. An annual contribution of \$10 qual-

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Trustees

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ifies for membership. Checks should be addressed to People for Oregon Libraries, and mailed to Deborah Jacobs, 2995 NW Royal Oaks Drive, Corvallis, OR 97330.

3. **Be an Advocate.** Trustees must assert themselves politically for libraries on local and state levels. We can speak out about issues in situations where it would be awkward or risky for the library staff to be vocal. Our opinions about library services will carry weight with neighbors and friends. We should speak up at service clubs and neighborhood associations. We should talk with our newspaper editor and call in to local radio talk shows to make sure the community understands library issues. We should get involved in campaigns of candidates for public office.

As librarians have been compelled to become politically active by emergent issues in recent years, so

must trustees take on a more active role in our democratic processes in Oregon. To do otherwise, to continue to take a passive posture, is to deprive a library of a valuable and increasingly necessary asset: the ability to compete politically.

We trustees must throw our hats in the ring! **Q**

ENDNOTES

1. In the interests of economy, the term "trustee" is used throughout to refer to advisory board members as well.
2. ORS 265.232 is too broadly written and is misapplied to volunteer citizen boards and commissions.

George H. Bell is a member of the Salem Public Library Advisory Board. He is a former trustee of the Oregon State Library. In 1995, OLA made him an Honorary Life Member.

Big Teeth

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In my childhood, the effect of this story on me was so strong that on those evenings I had to run through the Dark Woods from my friend's house, I knew the wolf was hot on my heels. I also knew he was tricky; to look back offered him an opportunity to sneak ahead of me.

Thus, when I finally came upon other versions of Little Red Riding Hood, the ones where the hunter saves both the girl and the granny, I was shocked. What a difference that hunter makes! Quite simply, he makes all the difference in the world. The hunter comes, sees, and conquers only to disappear, perhaps into another tale where his services are needed.

Tales such as Little Red Riding Hood exist in "once upon a time." They serve us well there. But, sometimes, we can bring tales out of the timeless and, guided by their lessons or the emotions they evoke, enliven them to better make sense of our own time. My current readings of Little Red Riding Hood remind me that I meet symbolic and stereotypical wolves daily. If I can draw something from the tale, it would be to remember to use the hunter's quali-

ties to battle the wolves at the library's door. The hunter is the one who was so ready that he appeared to be only passing by. The one who knew pretense and disguise. The one whose knife of deliverance was sharp, timely, and true. The one who was so prepared as well as so right in his actions that we feel no regret for his adversary. (What is a mere wolf anyway?) The one who would save Red Riding Hood and her hopes. **Q**

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Plan on coming to Salem on February 26 for OLA's Legislative Day.
