Building effective relationships between the Library and the Municipality

In Ontario, the framework for the connections between a municipal or county council and the local public library is found in the public library legislation known as *Public Libraries Act, R.S.0., 1990, chapter P.44 ("PLA")*. Municipalities and counties are given the power under the *PLA* to establish library boards. If established, library boards are governed specifically the instructions in the *PLA* which requires, for example, that the library board appoint a CEO and gives them the power to hire staff. That legislation also includes some connections between the municipal or county staff and the staff of the local public library. One example is that the clerk of the appointing council would post notices of vacancies on the library board and would call the first meeting of the board in a new term in specific circumstances.

Beyond the enabling legislation, public libraries and municipal or county councils and their staff benefit from having working relationships which benefit both parties. In this document, the relationships in a few different communities will be described as a way of exploring practices that contribute to strong, working relationships between the library and the municipality. We are not advocating any one structure but rather attempting to identify effective practices that lead libraries and their municipalities to excellence in library service.

Legislative framework for the library board

The Act allows for three types of library boards – the Public Library Board, the Union Board, and the County Library Board.

1. The **Public Library Board** serves a single municipality (a single tier municipality) and has a board composed of at least five members appointed by the municipal council. The number of municipal councilors on this type of board are always in the minority.

2. A **Union Library Board** serves a minimum of two municipalities. A union agreement between the participating municipalities would be created to cover details such as percentage of expenses paid by each municipality or location of branches. The relationship is then between the library and each of the participating municipalities

3. A **County Library Board** serves an entire county or that part of a county that wishes to be part of the county library system. An agreement would be developed to determine what proportion of the cost of the establishment, operation and maintenance of the county library shall be paid by the county and the participating municipalities, respectively. A county library board is composed of at least five members appointed by the county council, but the appointing council's own members can only be of a number that is a bare majority of the board.

Building effective relationships between the library & municipality

Other possibilities for governance structure

1) The *PLA* mentions County Library Cooperative Boards but states that only the one existing county library cooperative board (Simcoe County) may continue to exist.

2) There are also three county libraries (Elgin, Lambton and Lennox & Addington) that, through a special legislative process in the 1970s, applied for, and gained, Committee of Council status. The Region of Waterloo Library operates in this way as well. This means that they do not have a library board, or if they do have a board, it functions as a committee of council.

3) Any of the three types of library boards can also enter into a service agreement with another municipality, Local Service Board or First Nation community to provide library service. In this case, rather than establishing a library board to serve their community, a municipality without a library board can enter into a contractual agreement with a neighbouring library board. This relationship is described in Section 29 of the *PLA:*

> **"29** (1) The council of a municipality, a local service board or the council of an Indian band may, instead of establishing or maintaining a public library, enter into a contract with a public library board, union board or county library board for the purpose of providing the residents of the municipality or local service board area or the members of the band, as the case may be, with library services, on the terms and conditions set out in the agreement."

Variations in Working Relationships

Within this legislative framework, the relationship between the municipal or county staff, the municipal or county council and the library board and library staff will vary with each type of library and among different library systems. For example, while the Library CEO reports to the Library Board, that person may also attend meetings of the municipal department heads as an equal member of the group or as an observer or may not be invited at all.

A number of years ago, a group of library trustees and CEOs were invited to participate in a session at the Ontario Library Association conference to contribute their thoughts on building effective working relationships between libraries and municipalities in the context of their particular. Although, some time has passed, their observations demonstrate clearly that it is certain key practices that contribute to strong and effective relationships, regardless of the structure.

Situation #1 - A Clear Process for Decision-making and Community Consultation

The London Public Library Board is a library board which serves the City of London. At the time of the presentation, the Library Chief Executive Officer was a seasoned professional from the field of education, supported by a management team made up of several professional librarians. In her presentation, the then Board Chair emphasized the importance of the board's clear decision-making process. The process is based on the board's values and consists of several steps involving both board and staff. Important issues flow either from the current Strategic Plan or emerge from the community.

Building effective relationships between the library & municipality

The board understands its critical role in the community mosaic and seeks ongoing community consultation, as well as input from its own members, the senior administrative staff, the public, and the City on emerging issues. As the input begins to point to a decision, staff members gather research data, establish benchmarks, and survey markets to solidify the decision.

The board also believes in the importance of reporting back to the community about what has happened to public input. The board develops several options, and presents these to council, supported by extensive public consultation.

The process demonstrates to Council that the library board has both listened carefully and also completed the necessary background work before proceeding. Library staff work with municipal staff and meet with senior municipal administration, the mayor, other politicians, Friends, and key stakeholder groups. The board also ensures that there is a written fact sheet in the board's words, and uses identified, practiced spokespersons to present its case.

Situation #2 - Achieving a balance between independence and cooperation

When the municipalities of Haldimand County were amalgamated into a single tier municipality in 2001, it meant that the separate public libraries within Haldimand County were amalgamated into one system. At the presentation, the then Library CEO, Deb Jackson, spoke about the balance of working independently and with the municipality. At the time, she emphasized that libraries are a shared responsibility, but admitted it is often difficult to preserve the autonomy of the Board as employer when the municipality provides most of the funding.

Consequently, there is a fine balance to be achieved in working with the municipality. In the case of Haldimand, the General Council in Committee passed a resolution in 2001 dealing with this issue, and this resolution is reprinted below.

> **The Corporation of the Haldimand County**
> **General Council in Committee - Resolution No. 1**
> **Date: September 17, 2001**
>
> 1. THAT in accordance with the Public Libraries Act of Ontario, Council confirms that the Haldimand County Library Board is responsible for management and control of the County public library system, operating autonomously from Council, where possible;
>
> 2. AND THAT in accordance with Section 15 of the Public Libraries Act of Ontario, Council confirms that the Haldimand County Library Board is responsible for all personnel policy issues including salary decisions and prescription of duties, within the realm of its Council approved budget;
>
> 3. AND THAT the Haldimand County Public Library Board continue to utilize the current services provided by the Haldimand County Corporate Services Department and any additional services that may be required to ensure taxpayers receive the most efficient municipal operations possible.

Deb operates like a Division Manager within the Community Services Division and considers this to be a huge advantage. "The contacts are great, the support is great, the visibility is higher," says Jackson, and it is important to treat this relationship with the proper respect.

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Another important issue for Jackson is: "who talks to whom?" In the Haldimand situation, the Board Chair can talk to the Community Services GM, and the senior management person then talks to the appropriate staff member in the municipality. Mostly, though, the CEO does the talking with staff, and the Board Chair talks to Council, as necessary. It can generate resentment and confusion if the Board Chair approaches staff members.

Policy can provide another opportunity for working together. "If you can follow municipal policy without infringing on the rights of the Board, it is wise to make a concerted and visible effort to do so," advises Jackson. As an independent Board, we might be free not to follow a particular policy, but that could appear to be taking unfair advantage. We think it's best, in those instances, to follow municipality's policy.

There are other times when county policy can be problematic. The Information Services Division completed their Corporate Web Presence policy, and there were several items in it which posed problems for us. For example, the library wanted some autonomy in designing a library home page. The library's logo and colours were different from those of the municipality.

There was also a section on "Addressing Concerns about Posted Information" that needed revision, since municipal policy was for all concerns to be addressed to the County Webmaster. The library had to be able to deal with its own complaints. The Information Services Division Head was receptive to library concerns. Overall, it has taken some time for the library and other divisions to start really understanding each other's points of view.

The Board and Council also developed an understanding that is recorded in a Council Resolution that recognizing the autonomous status of the board but, also recognizes the desire of board and council to work together to ensure that taxpayers receive the most efficient municipal services possible.

Situation #3 – Defining Roles and Relationships Clearly

The Mississauga Library System has a public library board serving a lower tier municipality within Peel Region. During the presentations, then Library CEO Don Mills talked about how he works closely with the municipality but is still responsible to the board. "The library system and the municipality work together in a number of ways, but this requires getting as close to them as we can to realize these…Some things should be consolidated - like finance, accounting, IT, security, maintenance, HR, legal. It makes better use of local tax dollars which helps our program ultimately!

"Libraries are good at what they do," remarks Mills, "so [it's important to] make sure the municipal staff and council understand this. However, the library has to shout it! Our many successes - and there are many! - can be their successes…The common customer gets better coordinated service when we plan and deliver together. Municipal staff and council learns so much more about what we do and why we need money to do it well when we live together."

The Mississauga Library System has developed a policy which outlines roles and responsibilities. Posted on the Library website, as Policy B9, the preamble states that "To be effective, the Library Board will work co-operatively and collaboratively with the City, senior management at the City and senior management in the Library. The document summarizes the unique roles and key responsibilities of these four partners in the five key areas of Library Board activity." A copy of this chart follows:

Mississauga Public Library Board
Roles and Key Responsibilities
COUNCIL, LIBRARY BOARD, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
AND COMMISSIONER OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

COUNCIL	LIBRARY BOARD	CEO	COMMISSIONER
1. Governance/Policy Making			
Responsible for: 1.1 appointing a board every 4 years under clear criteria 1.2 relaying identified community issues and needs 1.3 providing orientation to prospective Board members 1.4 assisting Board with legal guidance 1.5 developing support for the Library and the Library Board	Responsible for: 1.1 determining mission, purpose and strategic goals 1.2 setting annual objectives and evaluating performance against objectives 1.3 determining policies in response to community data and needs 1.4 providing orientation for new members and development for all members 1.5 approving appropriate governance policies and monitoring compliance 1.6 ensuring compliance with Library legislation 1.7 Requiring the CEO's efforts of compliance in areas of corporate responsibility 1.8 Create a legacy document at the end of the Board term	Responsible for: 1.1 developing purpose and goals 1.2 proposing annual objectives 1.3 reporting on progress 1.4 collecting and providing community data 1.5 participating in orientation 1.6 preparing and implementing policies 1.7 maintaining current legal information 1.8 attending and recording all meetings 1.9 ensuring compliance	Responsible for: 1.1 providing input on purpose and goals 1.2 providing input on annual objectives 1.3 monitoring progress 1.4 supplying information as required
2. Community Relations/Services			
Responsible for: 2.1 conveying community opportunities 2.2 encouraging trustee activity 2.3 seeking cooperative opportunities	Responsible for: 2.1 ensuring appropriate service standards are in place 2.2 participating in community activities 2.3 seeking to extend library service in meaningful and relevant ways 2.4 participating in Library Board activities 2.5 collaborating with officials and local community groups 2.6 developing and	Responsible for: 2.1 implementing programs to support goals 2.2 identifying community contacts and developing partnerships 2.3 providing information on trustee activities 2.4 arranging opportunities for Board activity	Responsible for: 2.1 reviewing proposed policies 2.2 identifying community opportunities/needs 2.3 involving the Board as appropriate

COUNCIL	LIBRARY BOARD	CEO	COMMISSIONER
	maintaining a working relationship with local school boards 2.7 maintaining a working relationship with local libraries and information providers		
3. Finance			
Responsible for: 3.1 giving financial direction 3.2 keeping informed of library requirements 3.3 communicating with the Board 3.4 approving annual budgets	Responsible for: 3.1 approving resource priorities and strategies 3.2 adopting annual budgets and monitoring performance 3.3 communicating with Council 3.4 ensuring sound financial management 3.5 monitor large capital projects	Responsible for: 3.1 developing resource strategies 3.2 presenting and implementing annual budgets and expenditure reports 3.3 providing sound financial operations	Responsible for: 3.1 supplying operational support 3.2 providing direction for budgets and expenditures
4. Personnel			
Responsible for: 4.1 providing input on senior staff recruitment and retention 4.2 enabling appropriate compensation 4.3 enabling good working conditions 4.5 enabling staff development	Responsible for: 4.1 employing and annually evaluating a Chief Executive Officer 4.2 approving policies on human resources 4.3 determining compensation 4.4 providing for agreeable working conditions 4.5 providing for the proper development and training of staff	Responsible for: 4.1 directing all staff 4.2 preparing policies on human resources 4.3 providing data on compensation 4.4 providing workplace amenities 4.5 providing staff training and development plans 4.6 negotiating satisfactory labour agreements	Responsible for: 4.1 awareness of library staffing 4.2 ensuring sound policies are in place 4.3 supporting funding needs 4.4 supporting workplace needs 4.5 supporting training needs
5. Legal			
Responsible for: 5.1 keeping aware of library legislation 5.2 keeping aware of library operations 5.3 maintaining a full Board	Responsible for: 5.1 responding to proposed legislative changes 5.2 ensuring complete and accurate records are kept 5.3 reporting on library operations to Council 5.4 maintaining full membership of the Board 5.5 ensuring the Library makes reasonable efforts to comply with all applicable legislation	Responsible for: 5.1 interpreting legislative changes 5.2 creating and retaining complete and accurate records 5.3 ensuring the legal operation of the library	Responsible for: 5.1 providing legal direction

Situation #4 –Policies Required by the Municipal Act

The Ontario *Municipal Act* changed in 2001 and required municipalities and local boards (which includes library boards) to develop policies covering procurement of goods and services, as well as the hiring of employees. Certainly, it would be an option to develop such policies in conjunction with the municipality.

Carole Marion, then CEO of West Nipissing Public Library, added an experience which demonstrated how libraries and municipalities might work together with policy development. She approached the municipality's administrator to review the municipality's policy pertaining to a particular Human Resources issue concerning library staff. She was informed that the municipality did not have such a policy but were interested in developing one. She proceeded to approach other libraries and institutions for suitable examples of their policies and drafted a document. When she presented the draft to the municipal CAO for his perusal and input, he asked if the municipality could use the document as the basis for its own policy, and even offered to assume the cost to have the document vetted by legal authorities.

Situation #5 - Being Well-prepared and Informed

Many county library systems have an edge in navigating the library-municipal relationship because they have worked so closely with the county for many years.

For Beth Ross, then CEO of Huron County Library, making sure that everyone is informed is a key factor in keeping the relationship running smoothly. When serious and important decisions need to be made, one of the initial steps is to get the municipal staff on board. Library staff members develop recommendations to meet specific needs and seek input from their county staff partners. Library and County (management and technical level) staff discuss both the issues, underlying needs and the proposed recommendations, before the project reaches the library board.

The next step is to ensure that the library strategic plan fits in with the municipality's plans and priorities. Council and the board are more likely to agree with proposals if they meet the criteria that underlie current plans and priorities, and if there is adequate and convincing background data to support both the need and the recommendation for action.

Another key element is ongoing communication between the board and the council. The board reports to council every month and provides a 'heads-up' in all regular reports of what issues are facing the Board. The aim is to ensure that the board and council are always informed and never surprised. Since the media is always on hand for council meetings, a change in activities at the library may appear on television or radio before the board has had time to consider how they would respond to questions or concerns.

The chart which follows provides a summary of practices to help to create a strong relationship between the local public library and the municipality

Building effective relationships between the library & municipality

Summary of Practices that help to create a strong relationship

Practice	How
Recognize and comply with the *Public Libraries Act* and relevant municipal legislation	• Align library and municipal policies as appropriate • Follow municipal policy without infringing on the ***Public Libraries' Act*** or the rights of the Board
Develop shared understanding about respective roles and responsibilities	• Chart defining roles of Library Board, CEO, Council, appropriate municipal staff (e.g. using Mississauga Public Library example) • Haldimand Resolution
Align agendas	• Recognize the separate and different needs of council and library • Communicate and support each other's "big picture" • Ensure board and council knows the other's agenda leading to common ground • Library Strategic Plan should fit in with the Municipal Strat Plan • Recognize the danger of overplaying the "we are separate" card
Commit to ongoing, planned communication	• Plan all communication • Designate spokespersons and establish who talks to whom, e.g. CEO talks with staff, Board talks to Council • Ensure two-way flow of information and communication • Remember internal communication so no one in the "family" feels uninformed • Report to Council regularly • Provide frequent "heads-up" to avoid surprises • Eliminate unnecessary surprises on both sides • Celebrate successes together
Evaluate opportunities to integrate administrative services that will eliminate unnecessary duplication at the expense of taxpayers	• Participate in shared training opportunities as appropriate (computer, supervisory, health and safety) • Overall coordinated approach to financial accountability • Integrating systems where possible to avoid duplication e.g. Human Resources (HR) services; Building maintenance and repair • Written policy and/or agreement to provide guidance
Align Policies Where Possible	• Investigate municipal policies on various issues and determine their suitability for the library

Develop a decision-making framework and process	• Setting out a standard process for making decisions that:
	  - Identifies the criteria you will use in making decisions
	  - Ensures decisions are in the best interest of the library
	  - Offers a range of well-articulated choices/options
	  - Involves everyone who needs to be involved
	  - Ensures everyone understands the situation
	  - Includes accurate research
	  - Keeps all parties involved
	• Use this process in an ongoing fashion – not just in a crisis

Commit jointly to the community's development and well-being	• Provide Council with a succinct role statement that summarizes the library's contribution to the community • Discuss with Council how library programs and services address community issues • Ensure community input

Final thoughts on effective relationships....

Today's libraries have a great deal to offer to their communities. Library boards and staff members frequently are not proactive enough in demonstrating the library's effectiveness. This sometimes results in municipalities not understanding the library's potential or its needs. It is critical for libraries to work together with their municipalities. While it is true that the library board is a separate entity, it is extremely important that the library board works towards aligning library agenda with those of the council, including, for example, in the areas of policy and planning. Consider working together to find ways for the library board and the municipality to share policies or approaches to an issue, rather than focusing entirely on the separateness of the two entities.

The challenge for library boards in the 21st century is to develop their role in community development, a job that demands an effective working relationship with the municipality and a willingness to think beyond the library to the broader community. Council is also in the community building business and it makes sense for both bodies to cooperate with each other. This is perhaps the strongest reason to focus this critical relationship on collaboration for a common vision.

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