

# Library Board and Municipal Council Collaboration



Collaboration can be defined as “a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties who work towards common goals by sharing responsibility, authority and accountability for achieving results. The purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party.”<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, a recurring question for members of a library board is - How can library boards and municipal councils develop a mutually beneficial, collaborative relationship?

## Libraries are a Shared Responsibility

Public libraries are a shared responsibility in many ways. The legislation regarding Ontario public libraries (the *Public Libraries Act, R.S.O. 1990, chapter P.44*) grants a municipality the power to create a local public library. That municipality would pass a municipal by-law to establish the public library board, and if two-thirds of municipalities forming part of a county for municipal purposes request that the county establish a county library, the council of the county may by by-law establish a county library for those municipalities. Once established, that same legislation makes the local public library board a *corporation* and gives that body the authority to govern the library. The Ministry provides some funding through the Public Library Operating Grant (PLOG), but municipal councils usually provide much of the funding to operate the library. While the council establishes a board to govern the library, the library board must go back to the council to ask for these funds to run the library. In other words, to operate a public library in Ontario, a collaborative approach is required.

To collaborate successfully, library boards and municipal/county councils need to:

- Share a clear vision of library service
- Understand and respect the other’s distinct roles and responsibilities in providing library service
- Commit to providing the best possible library service to the community, and to consulting with the community in defining the best possible library service
- Commit resources to approved projects, and to the ongoing provision of library service to the community
- Trust each other
- Engage in meaningful dialogue as a way of exploring options
- Agree on an action plan, including clear and achievable goals, outlining who will do what at each step in the process
- Openly share information with each other and communicate frequently
- Agree on a mechanism and timeframe for the evaluation and revision of their shared vision and/or action plan
- Collectively create a synergy by choosing to work together and, thereby, provide better library service than would be possible for either working alone.

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At a library conference, a panel comprised of a university professor, along with citizen- and councilor-trustees, offered experiences and thoughts about the importance of the library board's working with municipal council. Although held back in 1999, the remarks of all the participants are still valid, suggesting ways that boards and councils could work together collaboratively.

### **Panelist #1 - Develop an Ongoing Relationship with Municipal Council**

David Siegel, professor of politics at Brock University and frequent contributor to *Municipal World* magazine, urged trustees to develop an on-going relationship with municipal council to avoid serious problems. The resulting achievements may far exceed expectations. Dr. Siegel pointed out that libraries are in an unusual position with respect to municipal council. Typically, there are three senior managers at the municipal level who are not physically at City Hall – Police Chief, Fire Chief and Chief Librarian.

While there is a practical side to this arrangement, municipal council may not view library needs as being as important as those of an on-site department, such as engineering. Such an arrangement might also imply that the library is not really part of the regular business of the municipal council.

Overcoming this physical separation takes some effort. Consequently, the library may need to work harder to be as visible to council as departments of the city administration. While library staff need to work on a strong relationship with town staff to improve visibility, the board has an enormous responsibility to maximize its relationship with council.

### **Panelist #2 - Think Long Term and Always Be Prepared**

Marcel Giroux, who at the time was chairperson of the Kingston-Frontenac Library Board and a former municipal politician, emphasized the importance of creating a long-term relationship with council. "It's like a marriage: start early and work on it every day," he told session attendees. Libraries cannot operate in isolation using the library legislation for protection. There must be a relationship of mutual trust in which the library is part of the broad community vision. And the board must work continuously to keep council aware of the library.

Preparing well for all meetings with council is another key to a strong relationship. Make sure that the board has appropriate data to back up its positions and requests. Research how the library might provide solutions to mutual concerns and then make clear and compelling presentations.

When the Frontenac County and Kingston library boards faced amalgamation, board members from each library started meeting together to determine what needed to be in place to govern the new library. Knowing that the library would not be their councils' highest priority, the boards struck a committee and tackled governance issues, such as by-laws and joint agreements, and sought recognition from the formal transition boards. The transition boards of each municipality responded quickly and positively to their input.

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### Panelist #3 - Go to Council and Advocate

Gloria Lindsay-Luby, formerly a member of the Metro Toronto Reference Library Board and at the time, a councilor on the City of Toronto Council, reminded library board trustees of their responsibility to advocate. “When you are appointed to sit on the Board, you are an advocate for [it]...go to Council and advocate for that Board,” she commented. She stressed the importance of lobbying but not just at budget time. The contact between council and board must be personal, direct and regular. Councils may resent only being approached with requests for money. It is extremely important to keep council informed and involved in what the library is accomplishing.

There are plenty of other reasons to go to council or to invite council members to a meeting or presentation in the library. Keep council informed and credit their part in your successes. Oftentimes boards fail to communicate the great things that happen in the library.

Trustees should also be aware of council’s needs and concerns. Ms. Lindsay-Luby pointed out that Council is always faced with competing priorities. Municipalities have also faced cutbacks and are constantly subject to demands to maintain or lower taxes. It is the library board’s job to make council aware that the library must be part of those priorities, although it is important to take care to avoid becoming just another special interest group in council’s perception. The board must develop the skills to advocate effectively for library concerns yet still be viewed as trustworthy stewards.

### Panelist #4 - Communication and Planning are Critical

**Wendy Curtis**, who at the time was chairperson of the Cobourg Public Library Board, also emphasized the importance of communication in building an harmonious relationship with municipal council. It is unrealistic to expect to achieve effective communication between board and council if the only contact between the two takes place during the budget process.

In addition, boards and councils alike hate to be surprised by issues that arise in either’s domain. Regular formal and informal communication with council should be part of a board’s communication plan. Cobourg board members talk with elected officials at least once a week.

For Ms. Curtis, sound planning is a must. Cobourg library board conducts its business based on a ten-year intermunicipal funding contract that guarantees operating funding for the new library that opened in 1995. The board started with a Strategic Plan and took it to all its stakeholders including the council, the public and the Cobourg Public Library Foundation. Within a three year period, the new board opened the library 40% more hours, turned a deficit into a reserve fund and secured money for the collection and technology under the funding envelope.

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## More ideas...

### Use Your Customers to Show Community Support

Community support is extremely important in strengthening the relationship with municipal council. “Library boards need to understand their customers and their needs,” adds Wendy Curtis. They should then follow up with the most appropriate services. When customers are happy with the service they receive, they can be tremendous champions for the library. Such champions may prove extremely effective in increasing community support.

### Use Councilors on the Board to Strengthen the Relationship

Council appoints some of its own members to library boards in addition to citizen appointees. Boards sometimes wonder if these council representatives are there as watchdogs. While it is true that council has line-by-line control of the library budget, the councilor-member has the same roles and responsibilities as citizen appointees. In all corporations, each board member must act in the best interest of that organization regardless of other affiliations.

As members of both the library board and the council, the councilor-trustees can fill an important liaison function between the two governing bodies. As liaison between council and board, a councilor who is also a board member has the additional responsibility of keeping the board informed of council’s situation and requirements, and of keeping council informed of the library board’s situation and requirements. The councilor/board member is key to maintaining a good working relationship between board and council.

### Explore Common Ground

An important factor that helps to build a collaborative relationship between council and library board is the fact that both governing bodies serve the same public. This common ground frequently makes it possible to align council and board priorities and find mutually beneficial solutions.

Hanover trustee-municipal councilor Harold Fursman related an example that demonstrates how matching library board and council agendas can assist boards to achieve their goals and provide a benefit for council too. Hanover enjoys a newly renovated Carnegie library attached to its new Civic Building. The library board wanted to open the library on Sundays but did not have enough funds to do so. The library saw an opportunity to locate the summer-only Tourist Booth in the library and run it year-round as the Tourist and Information Centre. The board asked council to give the Tourist Booth budget to the library.

At the time, council was being pressed by townspeople to provide proper public washrooms. In the past, public washrooms had been vandalized and repaired so many times that they had to be closed. Both council and the board agreed that the existing washrooms in the library could be used in conjunction with the Tourist and Information Centre to provide a seven day-a-week facility for the public. By providing space for the washrooms, the library got the funding to keep the library open for the extra hours. The library board and the council each received some benefit from an ingenious, win-win solution.

The exercise on board-council collaboration, which appears below, suggests an approach the library board might take to explore how to align library priorities with those of the council.

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<b>Matching Library Board and Council Agenda <sup>2</sup></b>	
Describe the situation requiring action of the Library Board.	What is Municipal Council’s vision of the community it serves?
What has the Library Board decided is the preferred course of action?	What issues and concerns are currently facing the community and Municipal Council?
Why has the Board decided on this option?	What has Council determined to be its priority work for its term of office and/or the coming year?
What patterns in library use support this decision?	How can the Library Board’s proposed course of action be tied to the issues and concerns facing the community and Municipal Council?
What community characteristics support this decision?	How does the Library fit into Council’s vision for the community?
Are there other trends that support this decision, for example, technological, social, and environmental, etc.? If so, what are they?	What can the Library do to contribute to Council’s priority work?
How does this decision relate to the Library Board’s vision for library service?	How can Council’s support of the Library Board’s decision -financial and otherwise - be made a win-win situation that offers concrete benefits to both Council and the Library Board?

### Demonstrate your effectiveness

It is reasonable for elected officials to expect the library to be well run and efficiently managed. No amount of preparation, advocating, communication, planning or community goodwill can garner much support unless the library board can demonstrate that it has achieved what it set out to achieve. Library boards need to be able to provide detailed information about the aims and objectives that have been accomplished and how the board has carried out its responsibilities. They must be able to prove that public funds have been spent wisely and that the community is a better place to live because the library is there. In the end, the board must be accountable and be able to demonstrate that accountability. It is an excellent way to inspire collaboration and a most effective test of good governance.

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\*This publication was adapted from *Trustee Tips #20 – “Library Board and Municipal Council Cooperation”* A publication of the Library Trustee Development Program, 2000.

#### Footnotes:

1. David D. Chrislip, and Carl E. Larson, *Collaborative Leadership: How Citizens and Civic Leaders Can Make A Difference*, Jossey-Bass Inc., San Francisco, 1994, page 5.
2. Prepared by Anne Marie Madziak, Southern Ontario Library Service, for **1 + 1 = 3: Board and Council Collaborating For a Better Library**, Ontario Library Association Superconference, January 22, 1999.