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Getting on Your Community's Leadership Team

By Ellen G. Miller and Patricia H. Fisher

Librarians often think of the future, evidenced by updating their strategic plans, missions and/or visions. But there's another aspect of "future" to consider — the director-board team becoming part of the local community's leadership team.

"Hold on!" interrupted Director Donnalee. "Our team is nearly tapped out with business as usual. Why even think about economic development or community building?" Because the library has two choices: Sit at the community's several decision-making tables or keep waiting underneath for crumbs to fall off. The goal is to energize your public library director-board team to position itself and the library as a power-structure partner, not a niche player.

Your community's quality of life and economic viability depend on several interlinked spheres. Each sphere, shown below, has its own decision-making table.

- ▶ Government
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Culture and entertainment
- ▶ Health and social services
- ▶ Religion
- ▶ Economic development

Getting a seat at those leadership tables means mastering the basics, starting with their goals, roles, resources and authority. City, county and township governmental levels require extra attention, since their legal powers, organization, funds and processes affect every interlinked sphere.

Yes, it takes time to understand these spheres. But that knowledge is essential if your director-board seeks a seat at any of your community's decision-making tables.

Unfortunately, "seeks" is indeed the operative word. As a tax-supported institution serving virtually all of these spheres, one might assume that most of the nation's 9,214 public libraries sit at some community decision-making tables.

Not so. In *A Place at the Table*, Kathleen de la Peña McCook examined the community-building literature and practice, noting the dearth of mentions about libraries in either support or leadership roles. "Libraries, like schools, are generally viewed as community services that are passive participants rather than proactive partners in broad visioning initiatives," she said.

McCook discussed the comprehensive community initiative, a model that does capacity building through planning strategies such as those used by the United Way of America. She also showed how to link the Public Library Association's *Planning for Results* process with community building in areas such as arts and culture, city services/infrastructure and employment/workforce. Her suggestions to local libraries include implementing personnel policies that support community building through ongoing outreach by staff.¹

Seats at Seattle's Tables

The Seattle Public Library uses McCook's model daily, stated city librarian Deborah L. Jacobs. "We are leaning toward making 'outreach' — as in *A Place at the Table* — part of regular performance expectations for all managers," she said. "Eventually it is our goal to make it a part of all employee work-plans since everyone has a role to play in making the library a key community player." Jacobs believes in the library being in front of policy makers, donors, businesses, nonprofits and patrons. For example, the director of youth services sits on early-learning and education boards such as the

Mayor's Education Levy Committee.

Civic participation extends to the board and director, too. Each of the five trustees sits at different community tables. For example, the vice president of the library board is on the Washington governor's Early Learning Advisory Board and the larger Washington Learns education initiative. Jacobs sits on the Seattle Downtown Association's board as well as that of the Seattle Convention and Visitor's Bureau, among others. Her advice to other director-board teams? "There is no future for the library without doing advocacy, participation, partnerships and collaborations," Jacobs stated. "Each community should understand that no table is truly set without the library being at it."²

The Special Case of Economic Development

City fathers and mothers face intense pressures. For a library to become part of the power structure, it must understand those pressures. Of all of the interrelated spheres involved in community building, economic development is arguably one of the most important. Why? Both a growing tax base and local quality of life depend on it. Listen up, director-board teams! Blue-chip national and local groups are calling for innovation, a skilled workforce, economic gardening and more. They are also calling for local stakeholders to help the power structure land jobs.

Should libraries heed that call? Yes, for three huge reasons. First, those jobs mean a growing tax base, benefiting your library. Second, those jobs will help keep the next generation in town for years to come, building your community. And, third, local entrepreneurs trying to start or grow their businesses need information to succeed. Information is your library's specialty. Economic development provides an outstanding opportunity for your director-board team to help community leaders achieve their goals concerning growth of jobs, tax base and competitiveness.

Positioning Your Library as a Player

Like a fine wine, "positioning" has textures, body and complexity as shown in this definition: "In marketing, positioning is the technique by which marketers try to create an image or identity in the minds of their target market for its product, brand, or organization... Positioning is something (perception) that is done in the minds of the target market."³

The bad news? Most libraries do a terrible job creating a positive image with civic leaders. The good news? Virtually all of the nation's 9,214 public libraries provide

programs benefiting those leaders' constituents. Not incidentally, many of those beneficiaries — or their parents — are also voters.

If your library has programs supporting economic development, tell your civic leaders! The trick is remembering to cover all the bases. Describe those that indirectly help with jobs and tax base as well as those that obviously do so.

Likely your library offers programs to families, seniors, homeschoolers, teens, hard-to-reach youth, the disabled and other special populations. It may take years for story hours, foreign language materials or the teen poetry club to produce skills needed for your city's workforce. Yet those long-term programs indirectly help local economic development.

Education, Emergent Literacy and Your Workforce

In most communities, funding for education is the biggest portion of the aggregate local budget. Not only is it costly, but education is a key factor in important personal decisions such as buying a home. People make decisions about where they live based in large part on the quality of the schools, usually determined by the test scores compared to average state or national scores. When public schools do poorly, many people homeschool or put their kids in private schools to get high-quality instruction.

Libraries Target Birth to Age 5

The education landscape was carved up decades ago. Grades K-12 belong to schools. Higher education takes over after that.

But what about birth to age 5? Since 2001, it has become the turf of many public libraries. A significant, research-based movement — termed "emergent literacy" — now links those libraries with parents of children under age 5. Emergent literacy helps prepare those youngsters for school and reading.

Reading is essential to the knowledge-based economy. Based on research concerning how children learn, the Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library® and related initiatives by public libraries should help children enter school ready to learn. As a result, their test scores should go up as they progress through school.⁴

Does your library offer an emergent literacy program? Tell your power structure. This long-term program will help your community build an even more competitive workforce.

Small Business Information Centers

Also tell those leaders about your library programs that directly support economic development. One widespread program offered by both large and smaller libraries is the small business information center.⁵

For example, serving 85,200 population, the Cecil County, Maryland Public Library's small business information center started with a \$47,088 state grant that was matched with local in-kind contributions of \$13,314. Since the grant's end in 2004, county commissioners have funded the center. Its website includes model business plans as well as links to licensing and code information.

Located in the central library, the center is staffed by a full-time librarian with both MLS and MBA degrees. The focus is on forming and sustaining ongoing relationships with business clients. An affiliated group, the Cecil Business Resource Partners, as well as local banks send would-be entrepreneurs to the library's center to get started.

Success begets success. The more that library directors, managers and trustees are out in the field, the more they see possibilities for new linkages. The library attracted two other partners to the Cecil Business Resources Partners. One was SCORE, the Service Corps of Retired Executives; the other was BEPAC, Business and Education Partnership Advisory Council, an organization charged with preparing public school students for postgraduate employment. Winning a chamber of commerce award for small business support prompted invitations for the library to serve on important county committees.

All of these library successes helped Cecil County. Library director Denise Davis commented, "We let people know about these successes. [We would advise other libraries to] make it clear that when you can help your county, you will do so. However, you can't always do what the county would like you to do since you don't want to drift too far from your library mission or vision. The risk is losing your own identity and purpose. But when you can help and it makes sense to do so, really come through for them in significant ways. Be a dedicated part of their team. In the process, be sure to get more and more parts of the county leadership to be part of your team."⁶

Judging a Library by its Friends

Partnerships can help position the library as a player with decision-makers. When volunteers, especially civic influentials, spend precious time and dollars to help your Friends or foundation, your power structure sits up.

Running a library without a Friends group or a library foundation is like rowing a boat with one oar: Hard! Not only do these support groups provide funds to the library, but they also show civic leaders that the library attracts committed, effective individuals.

One of the nation's most successful support groups is the Friends of the Saint Paul, Minnesota Public Library. In 2005, it was cited for its support when the library won the National Award for Library Service from the Institute for Museum and Library Services. The group's vision is to "provide the necessary support to

ensure that the Saint Paul Public Library is among the foremost library systems in the United States."

The Saint Paul Friends routinely raise from \$1.7 million to \$2.4 million annually. Factors in its success include varied programs that attract donor support, including community outreach; a board, committee and advisory group structure of over 100 people; and a highly formalized plan of action.⁷

"We work with the library, the community, the mayor, the library board and city council in a carefully structured manner," said Friends President Peter Pearson. Steps include:

- ▶ regular meetings with the library director to find out the library's top funding needs
- ▶ convening an advocacy committee representing every city ward and every library branch to identify local needs
- ▶ advocating with the mayor that library requests be included in his budget proposal that goes to city council as well as suggesting new items.
- ▶ advocating with each city council member to support the library initiatives in the mayor's proposed budget. The Friends also lobby for new items. They went to city council, supporting a library marketing/public relations position not in the mayor's budget. Council added it.

When volunteers, especially civic influentials, spend precious time and dollars to help your Friends or foundation, your power structure sits up. Running a library without a Friends group or a library foundation is like rowing a boat with one oar: *Hard!*

- ▶ arranging for influentials to advocate with city council on behalf of the library portions of the mayor's budget. "We involve highly respected individuals in the advocacy process," Pearson said. "Former elected officials are especially credible with our council."

The Saint Paul Friends also use the power of matching funds. "If you're requesting that city council spends \$100,000 on a library program, offer a matching \$100,000 from your Friends group or foundation," Pearson urged. "City officials don't want to be criticized for ignoring extra dollars."

Pearson's advice to other libraries? "Make your advocacy process formal, not off the cuff. Make sure you have a community involvement process." Working hand in hand with the library director is essential, as is getting influentials involved in testifying at city council budget hearings. Last and not least, "Never stop," he said. "We've used the same process for 14 years and it works."⁸

Partnerships and relationships help show the local power structure that the library is indeed a community player. ▶▶

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Notes:

¹ Kathleen de la Pena McCook, *A Place at the Table* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000): 14.

² McCook, *A Place at the Table*, 33-37, 101-5.

³ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positioning_%28marketing%29.

⁴ "Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library," www.ala.org/ala/alsc/ECRR/projecthistory/pilotprojectevaluation/evaluationexcerpts/evalxcerpts.pdf.

⁵ Patricia H. Fisher, *The Public Library and Business Services* (Unpublished paper), 18-31.

⁶ Denise Davis, director, Cecil County (Maryland) Public Library, e-mail to author, August 8, 2006.

⁷ Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library, *Fulfilling Visions 2005 Annual Report*, www.thefriends.org/annual_report.htm.

⁸ Peter Pearson, e-mails to author, August 23, 2006.

Adapted with permission from chapter five of *The Library Board Strategic Guide: Going to the Next Level*, forthcoming in Spring 2007 from Scarecrow Press. The guide is written for the public library director-board team. Its other chapters cover: Risk Management; Local Values, the First Amendment and Challenges; Leadership and Management that Achieve Your Library's Vision; Getting and Growing the Funding Your Library Needs.

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