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The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library

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We Love LIBRARIES!

It takes a village to support a library

by Peter D. Pearson

Nobody in the library world needs to be reminded about the very difficult times facing libraries during this economic downturn. Libraries are experiencing unprecedented use and yet funding for libraries is decreasing rather than increasing to meet the new demands which people are placing on libraries in these difficult times. But, these are not times to bury our head in the sand. This is the time when libraries need all the support they can get from their Friends, trustees and foundations. So, what should be the reaction of Friends, foundations and trustees to this unprecedented use accompanied with a loss in funding?

Clearly, we never want to see private funding take the place of public funding of our libraries. It would be a mistake for any library to turn to its Friends and foundation and request that they plug all the gaps of lost public funding in these challenging times. Private donors don't want to play the role of bailing out an ailing library system, nor is it fair that we put them in that situation. Public funding should always be the cornerstone of the operations of our libraries and private funding should be viewed as funding to enhance basic services and make a good library great. Unfortunately, that's a difficult task to accomplish in these times.

But, an appropriate action for all libraries at this time would be to look closely at the effectiveness of the support organizations that are in place to help the library. Let's look first at our Friends of Library groups. Friends groups have traditionally been volunteer groups which have done book sales and other volunteer activities to help support their libraries. But, one of the activities that should be a central part of every Friends organization is advocacy. By advocacy, I mean political advocacy. Every Friends group should play a significant role in letting its community's elected officials know the importance of the

public library. In my organization, The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library, we have a standing advocacy committee which meets all through the year to develop proposals for our Mayor and City Council to consider for the library's budget in the next year. The committee works hand in hand with the library administration to be certain that the funding initiatives which are being presented to the elected officials are in sync with library plans and needs. But, citizens presenting these needs to the elected officials is far more effective than the library director asking elected officials to increase library funding.

Elected officials expect the library director to give them this message, where the citizens have nothing professionally to gain, which makes them a valued source of information to the elected officials. In St. Paul, the elected officials have listened closely to the annual lobbying platform of our Friends group for 18 years now.

As a result of this, library funding has increased almost every year in St. Paul while neighboring library systems have experienced significant cuts in a number of those years. The role of being an advocate for the library is probably the most important role that any library support organization can take on. After all, more than 90-95% of a library's total funding typically comes from government sources rather than private funds and other special funds.

The other important activity to combine with advocacy is private fundraising. Fundraising can be done either through a library Friends group or a library foundation. Typically, library Friends groups are run on a volunteer basis while a library foundation relies upon professional staff members for this function. Whether fundraising for the library is done through a Friends group or a library foundation, there are a couple of key factors to keep in mind in developing the most effective library fundraising

organization. First and foremost is the board of directors of the organization. The fundraising capabilities of an organization are only as good as its board of directors. Boards of directors of fundraising organizations serve an important role of opening doors to their influential friends and colleagues and serving as ambassadors for the organization, bringing a higher level of visibility and recognition to the library in the community.

An organization that wants to attract the highest level of Board members should take its responsibility of nominating new Board members very seriously. I've seen way too many organizations who send their Board members out on the street in a random fashion asking anyone they may come in contact with about serving on the organization's Board. Instead, a very thoughtful process is needed in which a select group of the Board is sanctioned to be the nominating committee. It only makes sense that the individuals on this committee be the individuals from the board who have the greatest number of contacts and influence in the community. These individuals will recruit like-minded individuals to the board.

All nominating should take place through this committee and new board members should go through an orientation process including receipt of a job description before actually beginning their term on the board. This is probably the most important aspect of fundraising and will guarantee that the organization continues to be vital and well respected in the community.

Another important factor is to move fundraising beyond just membership contributions. Most library Friends groups ask their members for a membership renewal each year. We need to go beyond membership and ask our members to make additional contributions in support of the library each year. Most people don't view membership as a large-scale contribution nor do they view it as a philanthropic venture. Individuals who give \$5 to \$25 as members earlier in the year might be favorably

inclined to give \$100 or \$500 at year's end to a special project that the library has described as a special need that year. Individualizing these requests through board member involvement is also critical rather than having all requests be direct mail. Just these few simple ideas can make a Friends groups' fundraising efforts far more successful for the future.

Many libraries operate a Friends group side by side with a library foundation. This model can work very effectively with good communication and role responsibilities clearly defined for each group. However, an alternative model is a merged model of a library Friends group and foundation serving as one organization. That model is the one which is in place for The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library where one organization with one Board of Directors has a mission of doing major fundraising for the library, along with advocacy, author programs and a membership campaign. This model has worked well in St. Paul as well as in a number of other communities. The advantages are obvious. There is less confusion in the community about which organization to write a check to. There is no competition for Board members between two organizations. And, the library staff and director will need to spend less time at meetings of one organization than for two.

Yes, these are unprecedented times for libraries. But, with a little bit of planning and careful operations, library Friends and foundations can continue to provide the vital support that's necessary to give libraries the financial resources that they need to provide vital services to all the members of our community. ▶▶

Peter D. Pearson is president of the Friends of the St. Paul Public Library in Minnesota. The organization is a 64-year-old nonprofit organization that acts as both a Friends group and as a Library Foundation, raising more than \$1 million annually in support of the library. Pearson is also a member of the board of directors of the Association of Library Trustees, Friends and Foundations.