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Public library trustee... "What's that?"

by Jim Connor

What images come to mind when people hear about trustees for the public library?

Trustees come in many forms. Prisoners who earn certain favors and freedoms within the system, bank officers who administer certain financial portfolios, court-appointed guardians, bankruptcy referees and many other possibilities are attached to the term trustee. Well, perhaps some of us have qualified in one of the above categories in our previous lives or wondered ourselves about just who and what we are.

My travels to visit with public library leaders across the country have brought me together with some wonderful people. Some are full of wonder, and others just make me wonder. Unique is an appropriate word for individuals I have been privileged to meet over the past 20 years in working with public library trustees.

One common thread found is the sincere interest in their community and their library. Then things start to break down into values, approach, cultural and historical, personalities and just plain being whoever we are. Some of us like to assert ourselves in guiding the direction of any discussions at board sessions or when dealing with our library director.

That's just natural ... right? After all, we do have the best ideas and know

how things should be done. When the others understand what we think is best, they will all agree and we can move on.

Some of us would rather just not get involved for fear of getting someone upset or even angry. It is best for us to observe and not offer ideas or suggestions in order to keep the peace. There are those also who try very hard to stay on the good side of the important people. It makes us anxious to second their motions and always agree with any points they make in discussions. You get the point.

We are just people like everyone else. We have been chosen to provide governance and direction toward the effective development and growth of our library. There are certain laws, policies, procedures and traditions that dictate our actions and hold us accountable to the community we serve.

Every public library trustee accepts specific duties, responsibilities, expectations and limitations that come with the position. How do we learn of these requirements? Why is it important for us to know these things? Getting back to the word "trustee," let's examine what it means to us as public library trustees.

First, it places us in a position of trust. It tells our community we have

accepted responsibility for our public library providing the programs and services needed to sustain its value for years to come. Next, it identifies us as those most responsible for advocating within the community for continued political and financial support for the public library. Then it tells our community that we are willing to listen to their views and needs, as well as helping them understand the position and direction of the library's plan for the future.

As trustees, we should be prepared to seek out and welcome expertise and learning opportunities from qualified library leaders and join peer groups in evaluating our mutual concerns and solutions. The story often told about a board operating in a locked closet could be talking about some of us who decline to meet with other library boards, attend library conferences or accept any educational challenges from the outside world.

With respect, I refer to this practice as "intellectual incest." I urge you all to take an honest look at yourselves, your board and your productivity. Do a structured self-evaluation. It is both fun and enlightening. It is not about you. It is about your library. Your state library team can help you with that. Thanks for your service. ►►

Jim Connor is a nationally known trainer, consultant and author. He is president of the Nebraska-based Trustee College.