

TRUSTEE TALK

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A Law to Remember

Open Meeting Provision Insures Your Right to Know

You're proud of the work you do on the five member library board for your community. Setting policies, supporting the director, and fine-tuning the budget are tasks that you willingly undertake to help make the library as good as possible. One Sunday night, after your church's Christmas Pageant, you go down to the fellowship hall for punch and cookies and see two of your friends, also on the library board, in a corner talking. Going up to them to say hello, you find that they are discussing how crowded the library is getting. One of the members had taken his grandchildren to a story hour and said the children were packed into a corner of the children's section like sardines. Interested, you tell them about a person in a wheelchair you saw recently who couldn't get into the narrower aisles to look at the books. Pretty soon the three of you are engrossed in a discussion of how an addition could be added to the library building.

You don't even notice the city attorney who comes quietly up to listen until he says, "You know, you all are breaking the law." Shocked, you look at him and say "You're kidding! What law?" He answers "Oklahoma's Open Meeting Law. You're a quorum of the library board discussing library business outside of a library board meeting and without notice to the public."

As you can see, trustees must constantly be aware of Oklahoma's Open Meeting Law. Designed to ensure the right of all Oklahomans to know how public funds are spent, the law applies to all boards, commissions and committees that are supported in whole or in part

by public funds, are entrusted with the expending of public funds, or are administering public property. In short, it applies to all public library boards. Here are the answers to some common questions about the law.

What meetings does the law address?

All meetings of the library board – whether regularly scheduled, reconvened, emergency or special meetings. According to the *Oklahoma Statutes*, the law applies to the “conducting of business of a public body by a majority of its members being personally together.” Thus, in the example at left, three members of a five member board were a majority (or quorum) of the board discussing library business, without the general public knowing about or being able to participate in the discussion.

What kind of notice do we have to give?

For regularly scheduled meetings, notice must be publicly posted at least 24 hours in advance showing the time, date and place of the meeting along with an agenda show-

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A Law to Remember

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ing what topics will be discussed. An annual schedule of all regular meetings must also be given in writing to the “appropriate officer” (either the city or county clerk) by December 15th for meetings in the next calendar year.

For special meetings, notice must be given at least 48 hours in advance. Sometimes emergencies happen, and the law recognizes that saying that emergency meetings may be held with “reasonable” notice given.

If your local newspaper, radio station, or anyone else requests that you notify them of any special meetings, then notices must be mailed or delivered to them at least 48 hours in advance. You can charge up to \$18 a year for this service.

What should be included in the agenda?

Agendas which are deceptively vague and designed to mislead the public are illegal. Instead, simply use plain language to say what the purpose of the meeting is. List any proposed actions that the board will consider including what specific new business will be discussed at the meeting. Sometimes new business does come up too late to be listed on the agenda; for example, the roof develops a leak on the morning of the board meeting after a heavy rainstorm the night before. But, usually, new topics for board consideration are known at least 24 hours before the meeting and can be listed on the agenda.

Often the library director assumes the responsibility for preparing the agenda and posting notice of board meetings.

Can't we ever discuss anything in private?

Yes, the board can go into an executive session, but only to discuss:

- *the employment, hiring, promotion, disciplining or resignation of an individual salaried employee;*
- *negotiations concerning employees and representatives of employee groups;*
- *the purchase or appraisal of real property;*
- *or,*
- *confidential communications between a public body and its attorney concerning a*

pending investigation, claim or action if the disclosure will seriously impair the ability of the public body to process the claim or conduct the investigation or proceeding.

The executive session must be listed on the agenda, and board members must vote to go into the executive session. No actions may be decided in executive session. Instead, any action to be taken must be publicly voted upon in open session.

Minutes should be kept of executive sessions but are only available to the public with a court order.

What should the minutes include?

Minutes should be an official summary of the meeting including:

- *which members were present and absent;*
- *all matters considered by the board; and,*
- *all actions taken by the board. Votes of the board should be individually cast with the minutes showing how each board member voted on each issue.*

Minutes of all meetings (except executive sessions) shall be open for public inspection.

This is a lot of work. What happens if we ignore all of these rules?

It seems like every year or two some newspaper in Oklahoma runs an article about a board that violated the Open Meeting Law. First of all, it's embarrassing for the board and the community. Second, it can make all of the actions taken by the board invalid, meaning that the board then has to go back and reconsider everything it did when meeting illegally. And there are even fines of up to \$500 and the possibility of going to jail for up to a year.

Perhaps the most important reason to follow the law, though, is because it's the right thing to do. Public libraries are supported with tax monies paid by the members of the community. Certainly, those taxpayers have the right to see for themselves that their taxes are being used in the best, most responsible way possible.

How **TALK** so 'They' Will Listen

Closing the Communication Loop

A Fall Trustee Workshop sponsored by the Oklahoma Department of Libraries

This year's workshop for library trustees will focus on techniques to improve the communication skills of library board members. Being able to communicate well is an essential skill for trustees. Finding out and reporting community needs, discussing issues and reaching agreement with other trustees, and telling the library's story to the community are responsibilities of all library trustees.

Theresa Dickson from the Pioneer Library System will present tips on communicating effectively in a lively and informative program. Theresa holds both a Master's Degree in Library Science and a Master's Degree in Human Resource Development from the University of Oklahoma, and has taught numerous classes for the Institute in Public Librarianship. Having Theresa as presenter guarantees useful information and a lot of fun.

The Oklahoma Department of Libraries will present this workshop at five locations around the state. Each workshop will start with dinner at 6 p.m. and end at 8:30 p.m. Here are the dates and places:

Monday, September 9th
Chickasaw Regional Library System Service Center
601 Railway Express
Ardmore

Tuesday, September 10th
Beaver County Pioneer Library
201 Douglas Avenue
Beaver

Tuesday, September 17th
Elk City Carnegie Library
221 West Broadway
Elk City

Monday, September 23rd
Stillwater Public Library
1107 South Duck
Stillwater

Thursday, September 26th
Warner Public Library
207 8th Street
Warner

For further information or to register for the workshop, contact Ginny Dietrich at the Oklahoma Department of Libraries:
1-800-522-8116, or
gdietrich@oltn.odl.state.ok.us



What Is LSTA?

The Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) is the major source of funding for libraries by the federal government. Every year the United States Congress allocates funds to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), which is the federal agency that distributes the LSTA funds to state library agencies, based on the population of each state. Last year Oklahoma received \$1,920,980, and used it to fund such things as Summer Reading Program materials, workshops, classes in the Institute in Public Librarianship, a portion of the statewide databases, grants to individual libraries, programming resources for children, interlibrary loan, and even this issue of Trustee Talk.

The Oklahoma Department of Libraries funds these projects based on 5-year plans that are approved by IMLS. The current *LSTA 5-Year Plan, 2003-2007* was approved by the ODL Board this June and has been forwarded to IMLS for its approval.

Here are the needs identified by ODL and the goals that we will be working toward accomplishing during the next few years:

Need #1: Oklahomans need convenient library resources that are available in their local communities through physical libraries and online virtual libraries.

Goal #1: Provide an equitable base of print and electronic library resources to all of Oklahoma through resource sharing and statewide licensing of electronic databases and through support of public library operations and development.

Goal #2: Strengthen public library leadership in Oklahoma through training in library management and advocacy skills. Train library managers, board members, funding decision makers, and friends in skills to address community library needs and communicate the role of libraries in an Internet information world.

Need #2: Trained library staff members are essential for assisting Oklahomans in meeting information needs.

Goal #1: Insure that all Oklahoma public library staff members have convenient, low-cost or free continuing education opportunities. Provide training to all Oklahoma library workers in use and promotion of statewide library resources.

Need #3: Oklahomans who are at risk due to economic, social and physical conditions have less opportunity if they lack basic information skills and resources.

Goal #1: Support high-quality reading programs for children and youth in public libraries, especially at-risk children, to promote healthy development and readiness for school.

Goal #2: Support quality library and community-based literacy councils providing basic literacy education to adult Oklahomans and their families.

Goal #3: Increase use of library services by Oklahomans whose first language is not English by training public library staff, supporting increased resources, and encouraging cooperation with community groups and agencies.

Goal #4: Maintain libraries in state institutions by consultation and grant eligibility standards.

Need #4: Developing technology presents opportunities and challenges for libraries as institutions to assess their basic business service model, adopt technology, and innovate service.

Goal #1: Lead statewide library technology planning. Assist libraries in creatively adapting to societal changes through innovation and technology adoption.

You can find more information about ODL's LSTA 5-Year Plan on our website at www.odl.state.ok.us/fyi/lsta



News About ODL's Budget

Last year we reported to you that the state legislative session had been very good to libraries, and we thanked all of you for your support of library issues. This year the news didn't turn out to be as good, but we want to again thank you for your continuing support of libraries. State legislators had less revenue to allocate to state agencies this spring and tried hard to make fewer dollars go as far as possible.

The Oklahoma Department of Libraries received a 5% cut in its budget for fiscal year 2003 which started on July 1st. Thanks to Deputy Director Vicki Sullivan, Business Manager Joe McRee, and Accounting Technician Kristi Hawkins, ODL managed to reduce its budget by 5% without taking any funds from State Aid. Several vacant ODL staff positions will remain unfilled, and various other cost-cutting measures are being implemented at the department. Legislative staff working on agency budgets complimented ODL's Director and Deputy Director on their professional approach to this year's difficult budget process.

Besides maintaining State Aid at its current rate, public libraries will also have the opportunity to apply for construction or remodeling grants. This year three grants were awarded: \$25,000 to Guthrie Public Library, \$50,000 to Chickasha Public Library, and \$75,000 to the John F. Henderson Library in Westville. If your library is planning a construction project soon, be sure to have your director watch for the grant announcement sometime this fall. These grants will continue to require an even match of local funds for any state funds awarded.

Assuming that the state's financial picture does not worsen, ODL will not receive any additional budget cuts. Instead, we look forward to a more positive financial picture so that, with you, we can continue to work to improve Oklahoma's public libraries.

Quotable Quotes What Do People Say About Libraries?

Getting my library card was like citizenship; it was like American citizenship.

– Oprah Winfrey

As a child, I loved to read books. The library was a window to the world, a pathway to worlds and people far from my neighborhood in Philadelphia.

– Ed Bradley (60 Minutes correspondent)

Whatever the cost of our libraries, the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation.

– Walter Cronkite

I received the fundamentals of my education in school, but that was not enough. My real education, the superstructure, the details, the true architecture, I got out of the public library.

For an impoverished child whose family could not afford to buy books, the library was the open door to wonder and achievement, and I can never be sufficiently grateful that I had the wit to charge through that door and make the most of it.

– Isaac Asimov

When I got my library card, that's when my life began.

– Rita Mae Brown

The richest person in the world – in fact all the riches in the world – couldn't provide you with anything like the endless, incredible loot available at your local library. You can measure the awareness, the breadth and the wisdom of a civilization, a nation, a people, by the priority given to preserving these repositories of all that we are, all that we were, or will be.

– Malcolm Forbes

Websites for Senior Citizens

AARP, www.aarp.org, is the official site of the American Association of Retired Persons, and includes information on discounts, useful websites and “how to” sheets on various topics.

Blue Mountain, www.bluemountain.com, is strictly fun, and gives seniors the opportunity to impress their grandchildren with colorful, animated and even musical e-mail messages.

Elderhostel, Inc., www.elderhostel.org, is a great site for seniors with an itch to travel and a yen to learn. Learning opportunities offered by universities and organizations in the United States and abroad are described with information on how to participate.

FirstGov for Seniors, www.seniors.gov, is the federal government site that pulls together information and services of use to senior citizens. Links to Medicare and Social Security, as well as many others, can be found here.

Senior Net, www.seniornet.com, helps seniors and others understand computers and navigate the web effectively. Links to useful sites and numerous groups on topics of interest can also be found.

The Resource Directory for Older People, www.aoa.gov/directory, lists almost 300 services and organizations related to the special needs of older persons. The directory is compiled by the Administration on Aging and the National Institute on Aging.

MedicineNet.com, www.medicinenet.com, provides relevant, easy-to-read, in-depth medical information for consumers. Information on diseases, treatments and drugs is provided, as well as the doctors’ answers to users’ questions.



Trustee Talk is a publication of the Oklahoma Department of Libraries designed specifically for public library trustees. Because Oklahoma’s public libraries serve diverse communities, Oklahoma’s library boards can be either a governing or an advisory board and may serve a large system, a metropolitan area, or a rural community. Therefore, some information in Trustee Talk may not be useful to you and your library. However we hope that everyone will find something useful in each issue.

If you have questions on anything you have read, please contact your regional consultant at the Oklahoma Department of Libraries. If you would like to suggest topics for future issues, please contact Ginny Dietrich, editor, at ODL, 800-522-8116 or gdietch@oltn.odl.state.ok.us.

Check out ODL’s website at:
www.odl.state.ok.us

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