

The Perfect Politician

Elected officials aren't the only ideal library allies

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By John N. Berry III

Sep 15, 2010

The perfect politician, the ideal political ally to a library, is often but not always an elected official. He or she is always an effective champion of "reasonable financial support," i.e., "the amount...which a thoroughly competent librarian can spend wisely." That is what J.T. Wyer, director of the New York State Library, said in his "What the Community Owes the Library," Presidential address to the American Library Association (ALA) Pasadena conference in May 1911 (see *LJ* 7/11, p. 325-328).

Wyer's formula describes the goal of all ideal allies in these economic hard times, civic leaders who agree that libraries are a fundamental necessity.

The library champions here illustrate that the ideal political ally can come from nearly any library constituency. At the beginning of the public library movement, they made great efforts to guard against undue political influence on library development and governance. Today's librarians realize that although it is often complicated, indeed messy, there is no way a library can avoid political involvement. Convincing the community to come up with tax money to pay for that "reasonable financial support" requires great communication skills by the trustees and staff of every library. The skill of the librarians was to find these allies, enlist them, and arm them with the services, data, and messages to prove how essential the library is to the community it serves.

A critical need

Shawna Thorup, executive director of the Fayetteville Public Library (FPL), AR, found just such a champion in Fayetteville mayor Lioneld Jordan. Not only did Jordan declare FPL an essential City of Fayetteville service, in this tough budget year, but when every other city unit was cut, he refused to allow a decrease in the FPL

budget. The library is a "discretionarily funded" unit of the city, not a city department. It receives about half of its annual operating funds from Fayetteville. In two of the last three years, FPL city funding was cut. Finally, in 2010, Mayor Jordan said, "No!" He insisted that library funding remain untouched because FPL fills a critical need, especially during a tough economy. A tireless library advocate to city decision-makers, Jordan is an avid reader, active library patron, and, as Thorup puts it, "an all-around nice guy."



The mayor takes a stand

David Bieter, mayor of Boise, ID, is a perfect political ally and library champion to Kevin Wayne Booe, director of the Boise Public Library (BPL). Bieter fought hard for the BPL facility plan and with the help of the library trustees led the city of Boise to build a series of three branches and to plan a fourth.

This remarkable undertaking was accomplished without a bond election or special financing. Funds were designated from Boise's capital fund to lease two storefronts and build one new Leadership in

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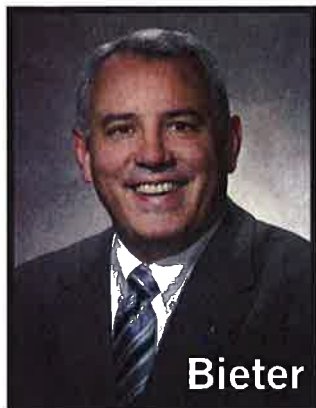
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Boise had been deficient in library services and facilities for many years. The Library at Cole and Ustick was the first new library building ever constructed in Boise's history. After a 2006 bond election failed, Mayor Bieter asked BPL for a "Plan B" approach to creating a system of neighborhood libraries. Boise was the only U.S. city of its size (212,000 pop.) with no branches. Mayor Bieter made the BPL facility plan a key initiative in his 2007 and 2008 budget package. He got unanimous approval from the city council, and he has recommended a fourth branch in FY11.

Bieter even recognizes BPL's need for a new main library and supports a citizen task force to analyze the need, cost, and ways to develop a building program for a 21st-century library for Boise. The library and the new initiatives are very popular with Boise's citizenry. Circulation has increased 25 percent, and new library card registrations went up by 66 percent in

FY08 and another 33 percent the next fiscal year.

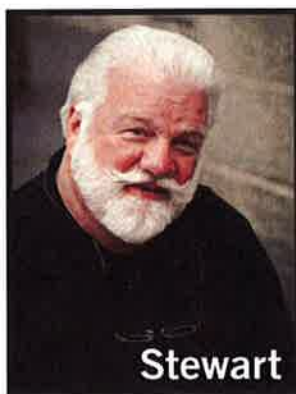
So BPL opened three branches in three years, thanks to Mayor Bieter's leadership, enthusiastic support, and, as Booe puts it, "his understanding that libraries do indeed build communities."

"The library's vision to become a 'world-class library system' is becoming a reality with the public, staff, and local leaders thanks in large part to Mayor Bieter's unshaken support for library initiatives and budget," Booe writes.

The convincing chairman

"With ceaseless energy and unflinching optimism," Scott Stewart, chair of the Board of Trustees of the

Loudoun County Public Library (LCPL), headquartered in Leesburg, VA, was able to convince the county Board of Supervisors to reduce a proposed cut of 24 percent in the LCPL budget to a safe two percent, with all hours and services maintained. That is the report from Linda Holtlander, who manages programming, development, and community relations at LCPL. Stewart raised the level of public awareness and support for the 2011 library budget by directing a multifaceted campaign in which he was always personally involved. Holtlander says Stewart was "significantly responsible" for the final fiscal outcome. Stewart met personally with the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors and mentored other LCPL trustees and advisory board members to become informed advocates.



"By providing leadership to a committed group of trustees, Stewart demonstrated a remarkable ability to communicate the importance of a vigorous public library system; to marshal the budgetary and financial resources necessary to meet the challenge of the last two years; and to engender the enthusiastic support of a wide spectrum of the public," says Holtlander. Stewart keeps in close touch with the people of the Loudoun community, listens to their perceptions of the library, their information needs, and what they want from LCPL. Obviously, Stewart is the perfect political ally for LCPL.

The citizens come out

"Deeply concerned about holding the line firm on taxes," elected officials in Westport, CT, chopped even the "most carefully crafted budgets," like the one proposed by the Westport Public Library (WPL), reports Sandra Lundgren, who handles communications.

"There were no sacred cows," Lundgren says. Westport's 26,000 residents pay for one of the busiest libraries in Connecticut, the eighth busiest in all of New England. Just an hour's train ride from Manhattan, Westport is the affluent hometown to many nationally and internationally known arts, business, technology, and media people.

Town budgets are reviewed and adjusted by the Board of Finance and then voted on by the Representative Town Meeting (RTM). When the Board of Finance recommended a WPL budget cut

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of \$100,000, library director Maxine Bleiweis and the library's board found \$55,000 they could cut from their already lean budget. They were still \$45,000 above the mandated amount. Closing on Sundays emerged as the best way to eliminate the fewest hours to meet the required reduction. But Sundays are the busiest day at WPL and for certain groups-job seekers preparing applications for Monday; students with assignments due; seniors whose center is closed; and commuters who spend limited family time in town.



Just six weeks earlier on a Sunday, the library was a refuge for the whole town when a vicious winter storm downed trees, cutting power to most homes in the area.

Library board president Martha Aasen, a seasoned politico, seized the moment and tapped Friends of the Library president Kathie Fording to reach out to the Friends constituency through its newsletter. The motto was "Save Our Sundays" (SOS), and the call went out in the newsletter and emails on the library's website and Facebook pages, in news releases,

and in onsite fliers urging one and all to implore the RTM to vote to restore the library's budget.

Westporters came out in force. They flooded the newspapers with letters, the community blogs with comments, and the RTM with calls and emails. At two scheduled nights of budget hearings, they came prepared to speak out about the critical importance of keeping WPL open seven days a week.

Pros in public speaking lined up with more private citizens to voice their need for WPL. One man credited a librarian who taught him how to tie a tie so he could be successful in his first job interview decades earlier. An outplacement consultant told how he urges his clients to use WPL's database access and personalized service. A pastor described WPL as a lifeline for the unemployed.

Westporter Dan Gross, economics editor and business columnist at *Newsweek*, author of the Moneybox column for *State*, and economic expert on CNBC, MSNBC, CNN, and National Public Radio (NPR), told the RTM the library was a prime example of countercyclical spending. NPR and HBO commentator and author Frank Deford talked of the irony of needing WPL the most in times when we have the least. The RTM let the testimony continue until everyone had had their say. The change in the tenor of the RTM was tangible, from wishing they could, if only it wouldn't raise taxes, to knowing they must, because the library embodies the best of what the community has to offer.

The successful effort to restore \$45,000 to its 2010-11 budget proved that the ideal ally for WPL was an aware community, ready to pay a little more for the essential services of its library.

Saving Britannica

For 13 years, the Arkansas State Library has maximized Library Services & Technology Act and state funds to provide the Arkansas Traveler, a collection of electronic resources made available to all types of libraries within the state (www.asl.lib.ar.us/traveleraccess). Traveler allows Arkansas residents to access 52

subscription databases at no cost to their local library, be it K-12, academic, special, or public. In May 2010, the state library was notified that for the first time in the program's history, Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) funding would be unavailable to support all Traveler resources. *Encyclopedia Britannica* would be dropped.

In response to pleas for help from librarians, Jim Boardman, assistant commissioner for the Division of

Research and Technology in the ADE, worked diligently to make sure key stakeholders and decision-makers recognized ADE funding for *Encyclopedia Britannica* as a priority, according to State Librarian Carolyn Ashcraft and Fayetteville's Thorup. At the end of June, libraries received the news that *Britannica* has been spared through Boardman's actions. Without him, 2.9 million Arkansans would have lost access to a premier research tool. Boardman was an ideal champion in the battle



for this key resource.

These stories from the library budget wars of 2010 prove again that librarians are learning to "play politics." Their efforts provided effective libraries and library service while they searched the whole community, not just among elected officials, to enlist their ideal allies and armed them with strong messages to win the battle for that "reasonable financial support."

John N. Berry III is Editor-at-Large, LJ

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Good work, everyone. We care, They Care... Thank them all they have done a valuable service, a clear message. Let us live up to their praise.

Posted by Beatrice Priestly on September 22, 2010 04:01:09PM

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