

Sustaining Local Library Advocacy in Today's Political Environment

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ABSTRACT

This brief white paper offers practical, succinct advice for navigating local library advocacy efforts through two straits: sustainable operational funding and the library's commitment to intellectual freedom, which is chiefly embodied in its unimpeded ability to develop an integral collection that serves the entire community.

Is there ever a time when library funding seems plentiful, stable and secure? This certainly has not been the case in the 32 years that I have worked in and consulted with libraries and Library Friends and Foundations. And yet there seems to be a reluctance by many library directors and library support organizations to engage in political advocacy activities in support of their library's operational funding.

The American Library Association began to recognize the need for sustained political advocacy back in the mid 1990's. ALA Presidents began to embrace advocacy as a key part of their presidential platforms. Eventually this prompted the creation of ALA's Washington D.C. office. However, the focus of ALA's advocacy has always been directed to the federal level hoping to impact funding of IMLS and LSTA funds allocated to state library offices.

While this national advocacy is important to keep the eyes of Congress on library needs, it doesn't address the source of funding that is the mainstay for most public, school and academic libraries: local municipal funding. For most of these libraries, this local funding represents 90% or more of its total operational funding. Why shouldn't this local funding be the focus of advocacy efforts for all types of libraries?

The reasons are many and varied. Probably the most frequent objection that is used has to do with the legality of lobbying by 501(c)(3) organizations. There is a misperception that it is illegal for nonprofit organizations to lobby. This is not the case. Indeed, the IRS has set up guidelines for nonprofits about how to lobby legally without jeopardizing their nonprofit status. The most important guidance is that nonprofits cannot lobby for the election of a specific individual and cannot expend more than 20% of their budget annually on lobbying activities. Since most library lobbying at the local level is done by volunteers, it's not difficult to stay within the 20% spending limit. And a legal alternative to endorsing a single candidate is to host candidate forums at the library in which questions about support of

library funding can be asked of all candidates running for elected office.

Another reason that lobbying for local funding is not readily encouraged is the issue of trust. The most effective local lobbying will not be done by the library director or its key staff. In most places, the library director is prohibited from lobbying the local elected officials. However, even if that prohibition did not exist, the library director would not make the most effective lobbyist. Simply put, the elected officials expect the head of a department in the city or county to want extra funding. It would be viewed as building their empire rather than a statement about community need. This necessitates using volunteers from the community to serve as lobbyists. The better known and more influential the volunteers are, the more effective they will be carrying the message of needed library funding to the local elected officials. A bank president, a corporate officer or a civic philanthropist will have a huge impact on the elected officials. The elected officials know there is nothing self-serving about their request for added library funding. However, these citizen lobbyists need to be educated about the cycle of library funding, the underfunded parts of the library's budget and the needed services that library funding supports. All of this takes a great deal of trust on the part of the library director that these citizens will accurately represent the library's funding needs. Without the library director's complete support of a citizen advocacy effort, it will fail.

What might a citizen-based library local advocacy effort look like? It starts with the creation of a standing committee for advocacy within the Friends or Foundation. In addition to Board members of those organizations, the committee should include politically active individuals that represent every geographic area of the library's service area. The first meetings should happen well in advance of a new budget being adopted. Initial meetings are when the library director educates the volunteers about the library's budget and programs. In future meetings the committee learns where the biggest gaps exist in library funding. The committee typically zeros in on one or two funding areas for which they will advocate. The platform is put into the format of a position paper which describes the funding request with rationale. This is then presented individually by committee members to every member of the elected official Board. Committee volunteers also attend budget sessions and provide public testimony as needed. The keys to success with this type of citizen lobbying are:

- Creating a standing advocacy committee
- Working under the guidance of the library director
- Starting the process early in the budget year and not an 11th hour lobbying effort
- Meeting with each elected official and carrying the identical message
- Creating a position paper requesting specific funding initiatives
- Continuing the effort every year so that elected officials begin to recognize the advocates and develop trusting relationships with them

In this piece, the focus has been on advocacy for operational funding. Obviously, libraries are facing an even greater challenge with book banning. There is a danger in having the advocacy committee including this issue in their advocacy efforts. A number of elected officials are rallying around the book banning issue. Tying the library's operational funding to a stance on this controversial issue could create a strong backlash resulting in funding cuts. Instead, there should be an intellectual freedom committee that works in concert with the

advocacy committee to provide them with talking points in case the issue should surface at a budget hearing. But tying funding to the issue of book bans is a losing proposition.

The need for library local advocacy has never been greater. Volunteers from Library Friends and Foundations make the best local advocates. The library director can empower and educate them and then stay behind the scenes while the volunteer advocates carry the library's message for needed funding to the elected officials. The best time to have created an advocacy committee was ten years ago. The second-best time is right now. Don't let your budget languish for another year. Make this a priority for the benefit of everyone who accesses library services in your community.

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