A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF PUBLIC LIBRARY TRUSTEES FROM NEW YORK STATE

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Introduction

I had read that library trustees are generally older than the average resident of the town they represent, are well educated, and involved in many community activities. I wanted to find out for myself, and so began some preliminary investigations.

Background Research

In 1935 a particularly important study was done by Carleton Joeckel who concluded that public library trustees were not representative of the average citizen. He found them to be typically male, over 50, well educated and often from an occupation such as law. Another candid look at trustees occurred as a result of a survey done in 1949 by Oliver Garceau. He also concluded that trustees were often elderly, limited in professional backgrounds, and essentially inactive. By inactive he refers to the unlikelihood of the trustee attending local board meetings to request additional funding. A link was deduced between an inactive library board and insufficient local funding. Also, 1949 brought another investigation, this time by Frank L. Schick, with results that were similar to Joeckels'. Schick is responsible for the piece of information that trustees generally tend to be individuals who are active in other community organizations in addition to the library.

A more recent study was done in 1960 by Morton Kroll under the wing of the Pacific Northwest Library Association Library Development Project. Again, the characteristics were similar, but adding that the trustees expressed puzzlement over exactly what their duties included. Kroll discovered that a considerable amount of

time seemed to be devoted to short term matters, rather than policy making and long term planning.²

The American Library Trustee Association designed and mailed a survey to its members in 1961. One-third replied and their replies became the basis of conclusions. Findings supported the earlier studies with regard to personal characteristics of the average public library trustee.³

A bit different study of library trustees was done in 1985 by Tim Lynch. He was not concerned with personal characteristics, but rather the level of activity of library trustees. He deduced from the research that the trustees of a small library are more likely to be involved directly with the library than his counterpart at a large municipal library. This "activity" extends from actually volunteering in the library to speaking before funding organizations on behalf of the library.

Lynch found that state and national memberships in trustee organizations increased as size of the library increased. Trustees consulted from the small library had participated in a grant proposal, but as library size increased few trustees had this experience. It appeared to Lynch that the larger the library the less the involvement of the trustees. The respondents were asked: what, in their eyes, was the major responsibility of a trustee? Smaller libraries tended to list fund-raising as the first concern, and the larger libraries were concerned more with policy-making.⁵

It is assumed that many other quality surveys and research projects were done, and I do not pretend to have looked at them all. Simply, in order to interject reality and a sense of history into my own research, I desired to investigate those who diligently worked before me. Comparisons are part of the human condition, and it is hoped that researchers can benefit and enlarge our base of knowledge as a result.

Methodology

A written survey was constructed during February of 1990, intending to gather information from library trustees in New York State. Included were 34 questions dealing with a variety of issues, in an attempt to collect relevant data. The hope was to learn: first, specific characteristics of the library board and those who comprise it;

second, beliefs and behaviors relative to the trustees role; and third, a list of problems facing libraries today, as the trustees see it.

It was decided to restrict the survey to trustees of New York State because of personal interest and difficulty in acquiring names and addresses. A publication does not exist which includes library trustee names due to rapid turnover, and difficulty in keeping the list current.

There are 739 public libraries in New York State. My hope was to survey 200 trustees from a sample of these libraries.

From telephone conversations with the New York State Library in Albany, I was able to obtain the sheet from the 1989 End of the Year Report that carried the names and addresses of trustees for each public library. They were most helpful and encouraging regarding my research, and commented that little research is available on trustees, especially dealing with those only in New York State. The sheets were arranged alphabetically by systems, and I was able to simply select about every fourth one to achieve my desired 200. The individual trustee was selected from the library's list by taking the first one who was not an officer. My assumption was that an officer would be more conscientious, and less representative of the group. Some libraries had as many as 12-15 trustees.

All aspects of the survey and the mailing could not have been accomplished without the patient and intelligent input from the talented folks at the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University, Clarion, Pennsylvania. A cover letter was prepared that stated the goal of the research, assured anonymity, and emphasized the importance of the anticipated reply. The 200 letters, plus surveys, were mailed March 15, 1990. A request was made to return the survey by March 30. Some still trickled in until April 20, and they were included in the tabulations as well. Of the 200 surveys mailed, 74 were used to form conclusions. The first response came from Long Island, and contained a certificate of death that a relative of the deceased trustee felt obliged to send. Fortunately, I am not superstitious.

The responses were divided into four groups. One group comprised the smaller libraries that served 2,500 people or less, the next category was comprised of libraries serving 25,000 or less, the next category was comprised of libraries serving more than

25,000 people, and the fourth category consisted of libraries that could not be classified by size. In most of these instances, the entire survey was filled out, except the questions on number of people served and size of budget. I assumed that the trustee was unfamiliar with these facts, but the remainder of the survey was valid and usable, and I felt should not be rejected. Another small group of respondents⁴ failed to make any marks on page 3 of the survey. It appeared that the pages simply stuck together. The survey was still counted, and answers provided on the other pages were tabulated.

Results

For conclusions 23 libraries fell into the smaller category of 2,500 patrons or less, 32 were classified as medium libraries which served 25,000 or less, 11 libraries were called large because they were chartered to serve over 25,000 patrons, and the fourth ungrouped libraries consisted of 8. All categories may not equal the number returned because of answers that were sometimes incomplete or difficult to interpret. No record was kept of libraries or towns that responded except those already mentioned. Post marks were received from across the state. Many wrote lengthy notes to clarify an answer they felt might be ambiguous.

The results of the research has been divided according to the goals of the survey: composition of the board and how it works, beliefs and behaviors relative to the trustees role, and personal characteristics of the trustees.

The Board and How It Works

Examined first was the board of trustees and how it works. The research indicates that most boards meet on the average of once a month. The boards from the smaller libraries stated that they meet as frequently as 4 or 6 times per year. The rest met predominately monthly.

The term of office of the trustees varied little by size of library. The most frequently indicated length in office was five years with the smaller libraries also listing, to a lesser degree, the terms of three and four years. Not surprisingly, when asked the length of time the respondent had served as a trustee, the average answer

was five years. The second most frequently cited number was ten years, and then one year. Some respondents wrote that they had several terms in office.

The number of individuals on the board was tallied. For the small, medium, and large libraries, the average was five per board, and for the ungrouped board the average was split between five and six. A few of the boards from larger libraries had over ten trustees, and one medium-size library had 25 trustees.

Another question dealt with whether or not there was an initial orientation or training when the respondent first joined the ranks of the local board of trustees. Of the boards from smaller libraries 66 percent replied no, from the medium-sized libraries 56 percent replied no, from the larger libraries 63 percent replied yes. From the ungrouped libraries, respondents were divided 50/50 over having received initial training.

Another item asked about the availability of trustee candidates, should a vacancy develop. The choices were, many willing candidates, a select few, or difficult to find. The smaller library boards apparently have a greater difficulty finding replacements, and a greater number of trustees checked this category than the select few category. The other groupings did not indicate having difficulty finding new candidates.

When asked where the board would turn for help on issues of which it was unsure, there was a variety of answers. The majority of the replies from all groups indicated that they would contact their system library headquarters or a consultant employed there, except the ungrouped libraries where the director and other libraries were listed as choices. A significant number of replies from the larger-sized libraries indicated in second place, that they would contact the New York State Library Association, where the smaller libraries were more apt to contact the director of their own library or even the village board.

Opinions, Beliefs, and Behaviors

Of those responding, 85 percent described their level of involvement with trustee activities as active. The rest checked occasionally active, while no one checked inactive. Perhaps the inactive trustees were the 126 who did not respond to the

survey. It was also worth noting that of the small libraries 61 percent viewed the role of a trustee as very important, the rest as fairly important. Of the trustees of medium-size libraries 84 percent viewed their role as very important, and the largest libraries voted 81 percent as seeing their roles as very important. The trustees that I was unable to group by size of library were only 50/50 between very important and fairly important. No one checked irrelevant.

Three questions on the survey dealt with the beliefs of the individual trustee and the behaviors that would logically follow. A question asked if the trustee held the belief that one of the major duties of a board of trustees was to obtain funds for the operation of the library. Here 90 percent of all the trustees from the smaller libraries felt that this was indeed a major obligation. As well 78 percent from medium-sized libraries agreed, 80 percent from the larger libraries and 71 percent from the unclassified libraries.

The trustees were asked if they had been instrumental in acquiring additional funding for their library, and the percentages were favorable, but not as high. Actually, 76 percent of the small library trustees had been instrumental in acquiring funds, 65 percent from medium-size libraries, 60 percent from the larger libraries, and 62 percent from the ungrouped libraries.

Another question asked if the trustee had personally had the opportunity to influence a town council person, mayor, or school board member on the library's need for additional funds. Sixty-one percent of the trustees from the smaller libraries have experienced this positive effect, 75 percent from the ungrouped libraries. It may be assumed that the opportunity for personal contact and influence might exist more in the smaller environments, but this research does not indicate that premise. Ninety-one percent and more indicated that they had an active part in the approval of the library budget.

Grant writing was another area under finance that I felt should be investigated. Sixty-three percent and 75 percent of the larger and ungrouped library trustee, respectively, felt this was not the responsibility of the board. The smaller-and medium-sized library trustees felt differently, perhaps due to more acute budget limitations and smaller staff. Fifty-three percent of the trustees from the medium-

sized libraries felt that grant writing was the responsibility of the board. Two from this group answered and wrote, don't know. A larger group, 73 percent of the trustees from the smaller libraries felt that grant writing was the responsibility of the board. Two from this group also wrote, don't know.

The next two questions explored the trustees' belief about volunteering in the library and helping the librarian with day to day operations. The only group that believed this was acceptable were the trustees from the smaller libraries where 71 percent were in agreement. This may be due again to the size of the community, and a more restrictive budget that does not allow for sufficient staff. Seventy-six percent of all the other groups of trustees did not hold this belief.

The research supported, in general, the fact that the trustee, who did not believe that a trustee should also be a volunteer in the library, answered the next question with congruency. No, they all replied they did not volunteer in the library. The trustees from the smaller libraries, who believed a trustee should help out in the day to day functions, also indicated they were volunteers. There were four trustees who did not believe they should volunteer in the library, but did so nonetheless. This could be explained in the variety of ways the question could be interpreted.

Another set of questions asked the trustees' belief about his/her involvement with public relations for the library. The responses were overwhelmingly in the affirmative. The trustees from all libraries, large and small, believed that their role should involve public relations activities. There were only three no's, one from the larger libraries and two from the medium-sized libraries. The next questions asked the respondents to check from a list public relations activities with which he/she had been involved. The most frequently checked items were open house, volunteer appreciation activities, and writing newspaper articles.

The majority of New York State trustees do not belong to professional organizations which are designed to assist trustees, but the percentages vary. Ninety percent of the trustees from the smaller libraries do not belong, 68 percent from the medium-sized libraries do not belong, 54 percent from the larger libraries do not belong, and from the ungrouped libraries 83 percent do not belong to professional

organizations. Although the percentages of noninvolvement decrease as the size of the library increases, it is still not a favorable finding. Those who did belong to a trustee organization are far more likely (3 to 1) to join the New York State Trustee Association than the National Library Trustee Association.

Asked if the trustees had a manual published by the New York State Library in Albany, all groups answered overwhelmingly yes, except the smallest libraries' representatives were only slightly over 50 percent as having ownership of a manual. No question was included as to the manual's usefulness, and this may have been an emission.

Surprisingly, 61 percent of the trustees from the smaller libraries attended conferences; whereas, the attendance by the other groups was disappointing. From the medium-sized libraries, 53 percent said they do not attend conferences designed to aid trustees, 72 percent from the largest libraries, and 66 percent from the ungrouped libraries.

Another question asked about the reading of library journals. Seventy-one percent of the trustees from the smaller libraries do not read any journals, 68 percent from the medium group do not, 54 percent from the larger group do not, and none of the respondents from the ungrouped libraries read library journals. Again, the level of noninvolvement decreases as the size of the library increases, but still it can be said that the majority of library trustees do not read professional journals. Those who did read library journals listed those they did have access to, and they are listed here in descending order of popularity: Library Journal, Booklist, and School Library Journal. Considering the fact that this was a survey for the trustees of public libraries, I found the presence of School Library Journal interesting, until I discovered further that several trustees were school librarians, and therefore, more likely to have access to journals overall, and to publications designed for school libraries in particular.

Asked what motivated the respondent to initially become a trustee, a list of replies were provided for checking. The trustees from the smaller libraries checked in descending order: I like libraries. I wanted to work for improvements in the local library, and it was their civic duty. The answers for the medium-sized library

trustees were identical. The answers from the trustees of the largest libraries were the same, but ranked differently: first was civic duty: second, working for local improvement: and third, because they liked libraries. Response from the ungrouped libraries were different again. The first reason for becoming a trustee from this group was that they were asked by a friend: second, civic duty; and third, because they liked libraries.

The next two questions were open, so that the respondent could express themselves more freely. One question asked what in the trustees eyes were the major problems facing their library. Replies are listed in descending order of frequency by the trustees from the small libraries: funding, apathy from the community, difficulty in meeting state standards, lack of space, difficulty in keeping up with new technology, and the problem created by inactive trustees. The replies from the medium-sized libraries included: funding, lack of space, community apathy, keeping trained personnel, compliance with state standards, and planning. Replies from the largest libraries included: funding, lack of space, keeping up with new technology, staffing shortages, and community apathy. Replies from the trustees of the ungrouped libraries included: lack of space and money, salaries, new technology, collection development and maintenance. I felt most of these issues could be reduced to two concerns: money as number one, and disinterest within the community as the second.

The next open question, designed to solicit the most honest answers, asked what the respondent believed was the primary function of a library trustee. Replies from the smaller libraries in descending order of frequency included: to secure operational money, to help manage and make policies, and to assist librarians, and work toward better service. Replies from the medium-sized libraries included: to make policies and a budget, to oversee operations and do public relations, and to assist the director in providing quality service. Replies from the trustees of the larger libraries included: to establish policy and aid director, to develop a budget and oversee finance, and to learn about standards of service and study community needs. The trustees from the ungrouped libraries responded: prepare budget and oversee

operations, policy-making and budget planning, to help with decisions, and assist when needed in running the library.

Personal Characteristics

The average trustee from all libraries in the study is most likely to be female. From the smaller and the largest libraries she is generally between the ages of 61 and 70, and some years younger, between 41 and 50 if she represents the medium-sized libraries. A conclusion could not be drawn from the ungrouped libraries because of missing answers.

According to the <u>State and Metropolitan Area Data Book</u>, the largest age group in New York State is between the ages of 45 and 64. It appears the respondents clearly represent the majority⁶.

The trustees responding seem to have lived within the community they are serving for several years before becoming a library trustee. Twenty was the average number of years.

The educational level appears to be high. The average was a graduate degree, except in the smaller libraries where a four year college degree was reported.

Occupations represented by the trustees from the smaller libraries are professionals (medical research, teacher/professor, librarian, engineer), retired individuals, and clerical and technical staff (secretaries, computer operators). From the trustees of the medium-sized libraries: professional (teacher, photographer, writer, consultant, librarian), retired people, and sales/business occupations (real estate, salesmen). From the largest libraries the trustees represented: retired, sales/business occupations, and professional (dentist, clown/performer). Occupations represented by the trustees from the ungrouped libraries: retired, and homemaker, and sales careers all were cited with the same frequency; after these followed teacher (professional) and clerical.

The average income for the trustees from the smallest libraries was \$30,000-\$39,000, from the medium-sized libraries it was a tie between the \$20,000-\$29,000 and the over \$50,000 bracket. Income levels for trustees serving the largest libraries, again was a tie between the two highest income brackets: \$40,000-\$49,000 and over

\$50,000. The trustees of the ungrouped libraries reported incomes in the over \$50,000 bracket.

Asked if the trustees were active in local politics, all groups said no (3 to 1), except for those from the largest libraries which were only slightly more active in politics than those who were not (53%).

One third of the trustees were not active in any community activities except the library. Those who were active elsewhere listed a variety of community organizations. From the smaller libraries the trustees gravitated to the local historical society, cultural organizations (architectural association, arts councils), and to service organizations (fire departments, P.T.A.). Those representing the medium-sized libraries favored both cultural organizations (DAR and philharmonics), and service organizations (American Legion, firemen's auxiliary), and cultural organizations (historical society, arts), and environmental/political action groups. Organizations favored by the trustees from the ungrouped libraries included church groups, and trade associations (Grange, business bureau).

Conclusions

A positive picture was painted of library boards in New York State as a result of the research. For those of us most interested in rural libraries, it is interesting to note the characteristics of the trustees representing the smallest libraries. Individuals needed to serve as trustees on the library boards when vacancies occur are difficult to locate. They are most likely female and 65 years of age. They typically received no orientation to the library or to the board, but they do own a manual and attend conferences. They consider the position to be very important and feel actively involved. They also volunteer in the library, have a four year college degree, and earn about \$35,000 a year in a professional field. Most trustees from this group believe a major responsibility is to raise funds for the operation of the library and are active politically to bring this about. They do not seek membership in trustee organizations, but will quite often attend conferences. The major problem facing these libraries in the minds of the trustees, is lack of money. The majority are not

involved in local politics but may belong to community organizations such as the Historical Society. The average term in office is five years.

If we extend the group size from which the picture was drawn to include the trustees from the medium-sized libraries, the educational level increases, average age decreases, and attendance at conferences decreases. The average educational level then increases to a graduate degree. In 1980 only 18.7 percent of the population of New York State had a four year college degree or better. Clearly, the responding trustees were better educated than the average.

The average trustee is active with library business and works to increase the funding. Most trustees from these two groups serving communities under 25,000 have even assisted in writing a grant proposal for their libraries. They also define themselves as active in public relations activities, writing newspaper articles, and helping with the library's daily functions when able. This group does not read library journals nor are they involved with state organizations for trustees.

When considering all groups, 85 percent define their involvement as active, and they certainly appear to be. It is interesting to note that there appeared no correlation between involvement in local politics and the individual's ability to influence local leaders on behalf of the library. Participation with local politics was very low (3-1 against), but ability to bring influence was high (70%).

With respect to previous studies, my findings created a new slant, perhaps representative of the changing decade. The 1935 study by Joeckel found the average trustee to be over 50 and male. Garceau found the average trustee to be elderly, limited in professional background, and inactive. Schick, in 1949, found that the typical trustee was active in community organizations. A 1961 study by ALTA again found that trustees were male and elderly. My research disputed these findings. Those responding were 61 percent female, with an average age of 50.

To a large degree findings from research done by Tim Lynch in 1985 were more similar to my own. My research confirmed that trustees are more active in the smaller libraries. They seem to be comfortable filling in for the librarian when needed, speaking at community meetings, and even working on grant proposals. This survey as well as Lynchs' asked for the respondent's opinion of the major

responsibility of trustees, and the finding were the same. Trustees representing small libraries listed fund-raising, and larger libraries cited policy-making.

Further study remains for future researchers. Areas that might need further study are how does a board release ineffective members and how likely is that to happen. It may also be worth discovering why membership in state and national associations is so low and what could be done to improve it. Inexpensive and practical avenues need to be explored to disseminate information to trustees, with the goals of shortening the perceived distance between Albany and the rural library. Trustees need effective marketing skills and public relation information to improve the image of the library, and ultimately, it is hoped increase the library's position within the community.

The pictures created by this research of the library trustees in New York State, are positive ones. It conjures up visions of dedicated and caring individuals who give volunteer time generously to their local library--much like my friend mentioned earlier. After two years, he continues to plod along, working, and making friends for the library, helping out where he can, and doing so without a full concept of what library service actually means--just a caring spirit and a strong sense of civic duty. Library trustees are nice folks!

The views of the trustees surveyed, regarding responsibilities, are consistent with those outlined in the <u>Handbook for Library Trustees of New York State</u>, which is published by the Division of Library Development, State Education Department in Albany.⁸ As a group, they are involved, well educated, and conscientious. The behaviors acknowledged in the survey would, overall, be applauded. The majority appear to be ideal candidates.

So one has difficulty resisting the urge to wonder: why are libraries is such dire circumstances? If we can take the liberty of extrapolating from the 74 respondents, there should be an uproar from these hardworking folks whose favorite institution is so pitifully funded.

As a devotee of libraries, I have to ponder, what could be done, if anything, to help these individuals become more effective. Would a strong, vocal membership of the State Trustees Association make a difference? Would the astonishment and anger expressed by such a body of possibly 3,500 people, over the difference in state expenditures for schools, versus the expenditure for libraries (engaged in <u>life-long</u> learning), be loud enough to be heard by the legislators? After all, it's only a few doors down the hall!

What would entice a trustee to join and become active in the Trustees Association? I spoke with a gentleman in Albany in charge of trustee education. He said he would need a staff of at least ten people just to be able to visit all the libraries in New York State. If that were possible, and ten positions were created, visiting is not the same as educating, coordinating, and making it physically and financially possible for these individuals to visit Albany.

This conjures up a vicious circle. There is meager financial support, which disallows the continuing education of the new and enthusiastic who may want to be a part. We must not settle for the stodgy image handed to trustees and to libraries. Librarians and trustees must work together to create a new image, to increase funding, and to advance the institutions to the level of our own efforts and talents.

Library trustees in New York State are alive and well. The certificate of death received at the beginning of this study was clearly not an omen.

NOTES

¹Prentice, Ann E., <u>The Public Library Trustee: Image and Performance on Funding</u> (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973), p. 11.

²Ibid, p. 12.

³Ibid, p. 13.

⁴Lynch, Timothy P., "A Preliminary Survey of Library Board Trustees From Four Libraries In Pennsylvania," <u>Rural Libraries</u> vol. VIII, no. II (1987): 61.

⁵Ibid, p. 72.

⁶Bureau of the Census, <u>State and Metropolitan Area Data Book</u> (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1986), p. 508.

⁷Ibid, p. 539.

⁸Division of Library Development, <u>Handbook For Library Trustees of New York</u> <u>State</u> (Albany, New York: State Education Department, 1984), p. 6.

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TRUSTEE'S SURVEY

1.	How long have you been a trustee of the library? years
2.	What made you originally decide to become a library trustee? Please check all that apply.
	civic duty asked by a friend I like libraries other (specify) I wanted to work toward the improvement of the local library other (specify)
3.	When you first became a trustee did you receive an orientation in order to prepare for your responsibilities?
	Yes No
5.	How frequently does your board regularly meet?
	2 times/year monthly 4 times/year at discretion of president 6 times/year other
6.	What is the length of term for your board members? years
7.	How many individuals are on your board currently?
8.	Which is most probably when a board vacancy occurs: many willing candidates a select few difficult to find
9.	What is the primary function of a library trustee as you see it?
10.	If your board as a group had questions on policies or hiring practices, where would you look for help?

	active occasionally active inactive
12.	Do you believe one of the major duties of a board of trustees is to obtain funds for the operation of the library? Yes No
13.	Have you been instrumental in acquiring additional funding for your library? Yes $$N_0$$
14.	Have you had an opportunity to personally influence a town councilman, mayor, or school board member on the library's need for additional funds? Yes No
15.	Did you have an active part in the approval of the library's budget? Yes No
16.	Do you think the application for special grants is a responsibility of trustees? Yes $$N_0$$
17.	Do you believe the role of a library trustee should involve some public relations activities? Yes No
18.	Check any of the public relations activities below that you may have participated in:
	making posters designing newspaper articles volunteer appreciation activities writing a newsletter National Library Week campaigns library open house other
19.	What do you see as the major problems facing your library today? List in order of importance.
20.	Do you believe a library trustee should also volunteer time to assist the librarian with day to day operations? Yes No

How would you describe your level of involvement with trustee matters?

21. 22.	Do you volunteer in the library? Yes No Do you belong to any professional organizations designed to assist library
22.	trustees?
	No Yes
23.	Do you attend conferences for trustees when they are offered? Yes No
24.	Do you read any library journals? Yes No
	If so, please list:
25.	Do you feel the role of the library trustee is: irrelevant
	fairly important very important
26.	About how many people is your library chartered to serve?
27.	Approximately how much is your operating budget?
28.	Check those which are appropriate: age: 20-30 male
	31-40 female 41-50
	51-60
	61-70 71-80
29.	How many years have you resided in your community? years
30.	Check highest level of education completed:
	high school 2 yr. college
	4 yr. college
	graduate degree
31.	My occupation is:

68	
32.	Check the range that best fits your income bracket: less than \$10,000 \$10,000-\$19,000 \$20,000-\$29,000 \$30,000-\$39,000 \$40,000-\$49,000 over \$50,000
33.	Are you, or have you been active in local politics? Yes No
34.	What civic organizations do you belong to beside the library?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME