



**A MANUAL FOR VERMONT  
LIBRARY TRUSTEES**

4<sup>th</sup> edition

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Montpelier, Vermont  
December, 2007



This publication is supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency, through the Library Services and Technology Act.

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## *Acknowledgements*

Many people contributed to the creation of this manual. Montpelier attorney and former Deputy Secretary of State, Paul Gillies, offered invaluable suggestions and clarifications. Vermont Board of Libraries and VLTA Steering Committee members, notably David Brown, Linda Williamson, Joan Rahe, Marcia Devino, and Dottie Bergendahl read drafts and offered improvements. Department of Libraries staff offered pieces:

- Michael Roche discovered the building image checklist
- Rob Geiszler developed the finance glossary and offered some of the ideas in the financial section
- Amy Howlett developed the interview questions

Thanks to you all and to all the trustees and librarians who have had the courage to ask questions that resulted in this manual.

Please feel free to copy all or part of this manual for use in your library.

Copies are also available online at:

[http://www.libraries.vermont.gov/libraries/misc/misc\\_docs.html](http://www.libraries.vermont.gov/libraries/misc/misc_docs.html)

This information is intended as a reference guide, and is not intended to replace the advice of legal counsel.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A TRUSTEE?

As a trustee, you are an essential link between your community and its public library. You have the power to make your library a vital, active force in the life of many. The person you choose to be the library's director, the funds you control, the building you care for, and the policies you set all impact how the community uses its library. You, your fellow board members, the staff, volunteers, and Friends all make a team that supports a vital service that can transform lives.

Because Vermont has more public libraries per capita than any other state, it also has more trustees per capita. More than 1,000 trustees set the tone for public library service statewide and represent a mighty advocacy group for those services. Vermont library trustees, like library customers, come from various social and cultural backgrounds, levels of education, professions, and beliefs.

Today's Vermont is changing. While our surroundings are still bucolic, our people share the needs and interests of most Americans - technology, diversity, a desire for a sense of community and family, and economic uncertainty. The public library can help people meet the challenges facing our world.

- In 1931, S. R. Ranganathan wrote his [\*Five Laws of Library Science\*](#):
1. Books are for use.
  2. Every reader his book.
  3. Every book its reader.
  4. Save the time of the reader.
  5. The library is a growing organism.

These underlying principles are still relevant today:

1. Surely everything in your local library should be of use or you should question keeping it.
2. At the same time, every individual in your community has different interests which the library staff should respect when providing materials for the community.
3. Of the thousands of materials available in many formats today, all are of interest and must be sifted through when purchasing ones that best suit the community.
4. Public libraries should be convenient and easy for all to use. No one should have to work hard to receive service.
5. Expect change. In order to remain relevant, your library should be different than it was even a few years ago.

As a trustee, you will learn new skills and hone ones you have. You will enjoy and grow working with like-minded people and helping to shape a service that can touch the lives of many of your neighbors and of generations to come. It will be a lot of work, but if you relax, you will definitely enjoy the ride!

## *Things Every Trustee Should Know*

### *Who is involved and what do they do?*

- Names, addresses, phone numbers of all board members, staff, key volunteers, library "Friends" group officers
- Names of board officers and committee members
- Is your library municipal or incorporated?

### *What are we doing now?*

- Board by-laws, library policies, staff job descriptions
- Library hours, phone number, key services provided
- The library's latest annual report and recent promotional materials
- Your own library card

### *Where have we come from and where are we going?*

- The library history
- Census profile of your town
- Town plan and latest annual report
- Current year's budget and latest financial statement
- Long range plan

### *What are our problems?*

- Annual building inspection to assess physical condition, appearance, safety
- Minutes of past board meetings
- Past librarian's reports and information

### *Where can we go for help?*

- [Vermont Library Assn.\(VLA\)/Vermont Library Trustees Assn. \(VLTA\) membership](#)
- Trustees manual, [Vermont library statutes](#), [The Law of Public Libraries](#)
- [Department of Libraries News](#)
- Town officials, Friends of the Library members, area library trustees and librarians
- [American Library Association](#) (ALA) and [American Library Trustees Assn. \(ALTA\)](#)
- [Friends of Libraries USA](#) (FOLUSA)

## WHAT TYPE OF PUBLIC LIBRARY DO YOU HAVE?

In Vermont, a public library is defined by statute as “any library established and maintained by a municipality or by a private association, corporation or group to provide basic library services free of charge to all residents of a municipality or a community and which receives its annual financial support in whole or in part from public funds.” ([22 V.S.A. § 101](#)).

Even though there are a handful of libraries that do not receive tax funds, most of Vermont’s 179 libraries open to the public are public libraries. They can be:

- Municipal – established by a local government for its citizens. One Vermont library serves a “library district,” which is its own municipality.
- Incorporated – a corporation with the purpose of establishing and maintaining a library.
- Community – a library that operates as both a public library and a school library. Most community libraries are answerable to both the municipality and the school board.

In all three cases, the library is open, free of charge to members of the community or communities that support it. [22 V.S.A. Chapter 3](#) outlines how public libraries are organized.

Reading the statute relating to public libraries may raise more questions for you. Do you know whether your library is municipal or incorporated? Your library’s status determines how people become trustees and what power a board has over a building, staff, and other aspects of library management. Answers to some of your questions may be found in [The Law of Public Libraries](#) which was developed by the Department of Libraries and the Secretary of State’s Office in 2000 in response to some questions that had arisen.

If you have any doubt about whether your library is incorporated or municipal, consult your town attorney or library attorney. You will need to know how your library was formed. Was it by a vote at Town Meeting? Were articles of incorporation filed with the Secretary of State’s Office? How your trustees become trustees is also relevant. Are all of them elected at Town Meeting or appointed by your selectboard? Or are most of them appointed by current trustees? You will need documents to support your finding about the library’s status, or you will need to create them.

Many public libraries in New England started as informal entities – in train stations, churches, general stores, and private homes. These informal libraries later became incorporated, and some were later turned over to the towns to manage. An incorporated public library may become municipal upon formal action by both the corporation and the town, usually by a vote at Town Meeting.

Many of the buildings that dot our townscapes were built through bequests in memory of prominent citizens and remain incorporated entities. Others were built with

bequests and the proviso that the town maintain and operate them. The library building's origins may have nothing to do with whether your library (as an entity) is incorporated or municipal.

Libraries in the northeast are generally individual entities, serving their towns and perhaps some neighboring municipalities. Elsewhere in the country, public libraries were created by municipalities to serve counties or even larger geographical areas.

In a nutshell, the following may be true of your library. Please remember that every town operates slightly differently.

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Municipal Public Library</b>	<b>Incorporated Public Library</b>
Number of trustees	At least 5	At least 5, no more than 15
How do people become trustees?	By election at Town Meeting or by appointment of selectboard	Usually by election or appointment of the board of trustees. Sometimes by election at Town Meeting. One member should be publicly appointed or elected to meet state standards.
Authority	Trustees are responsible for managing the library, but may not be responsible for the building or personnel. Board develops by-laws and policies for operation.	Trustees are responsible for governance. Board develops by-laws and policies for operation.
To whom does the librarian report?	Librarian answers to the board.	Librarian answers to the board.
Personnel policies	Town personnel policies cover library employees unless specifically exempting them. To avoid conflicts, the municipal library trustees should consider adopting personnel policies for the library. In addition, the town policies should specifically exempt library employees.	Board personnel policies cover library employees.
Who evaluates librarian's performance?	Town Administrator may be responsible for evaluating librarian's performance, with board input.	Trustees evaluate librarian's performance.

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Municipal Public Library</b>	<b>Incorporated Public Library</b>
Salaries and benefits	A Vermont Supreme Court decision (174 Vt. 598) affirms library trustees' authority to set the librarian's compensation. Library employees may be paid using town pay scales, covered by town health insurance and other benefits unless otherwise exempted (see Personnel Policies above).	Trustees determine rates of pay and also seek private health insurance and other benefits coverage.
Building maintenance and upkeep	Trustees are generally responsible, unless there is an arrangement with the town.	Trustees are responsible for maintenance and upkeep, unless the library is a tenant in another entity's building (e.g., school, town hall, etc.).
Use of space by outside groups	Trustees may develop policies, but Town may control use of space by outside groups for insurance purposes.	Trustees' policy determines use.
Building insurance	Town may include library in policy covering all Town-owned buildings.	Trustees generally obtain insurance on building.
Money	Trustees have full power to spend town appropriation to library, but town treasurer pays the bills. Trustees are usually responsible for spending and investing separate trust funds unless otherwise directed by the town. Town may create a reserve fund to be managed by trustees.	Trustees control all funds, including municipal appropriations. Town may dictate use of funds appropriated, however. Board treasurer pays the bills.
Fines, fees, grants	Fines, fees, gifts go back to town treasury. Voter approval is necessary before spending grant funds, which are handled by town treasurer.	All fines, fees, gifts, and grants are managed by the board treasurer.
Audits	Accounts are subject to audit by town auditor.	An independent audit may be obtained.
Taxes	None necessary.	Incorporated libraries file form 990 with the IRS annually.

While the above is a distillation of [The Law of Public Libraries](#), any questions concerning your particular situation should be directed to your town or library attorney.

- There is no such thing as a “private” public library in Vermont. Every public library – whether incorporated or municipal – should be open to all members of the community that supports it.

**What about community libraries?** There are only about ten joint school-public libraries in the state. Most, if not all, of these are municipal public libraries that are also answerable to the school district and its board. Most have trustees who are elected at Town Meeting, but some also have “Super Boards” or “Operating Committees” made up of trustees and school representatives. These groups resolve conflicts, develop operating policies, and insure that both school and public needs and interests are addressed.





















































































