

10 Things You Need to Know as a New Library Board Member

Understanding Public Library Board Governance in Ontario

Congratulations on being appointed to your local library board! During the next four years, you will participate in making many decisions that will shape public library service in your community for years to come.

You may not yet realize the importance or the scope of the role you've been asked to play, but with each board meeting you attend, you will come away with a better understanding of the library and the work involved in being an active board member. With a keen interest in the community, an open mind, and a willingness to learn, you are on your way to becoming a valuable board member who will contribute to informed decision-making that is in the best interest of the library.

Ontario residents rely on the public library to provide what they need to face the future with the resilience that comes from new knowledge, information, skills and abilities. It is not a stretch to say that your community cannot afford to be without good public library service.

Thank you for agreeing to contribute to your community in this important capacity!

For starters, here are 10 things you need to know as a new public library board member:

1. Public library service is free in the Province of Ontario.

The *Public Libraries Act (PLA)* and Regulation 976 specify that most library services must be offered to residents free of charge. This requirement makes the library different from other community services which are often expected to generate revenue from user fees. Access to library service must remain free because universal access to information is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democracy.

2. The library board is a governing board that gets its authority from the *Public Libraries Act*.

Once appointed by Council, the board is a separate, independent corporation with the legal duty to provide "a comprehensive and efficient public library service that reflects the community's unique needs" (*PLA*, 20a).

3. The library board exercises its authority by making informed decisions that focus on matters of governance. Governance includes the following areas of responsibility:

- a. Strategy & oversight
- b. CEO support and oversight
- c. Financial stewardship & accountability
- d. Policy framework
- e. Advocacy based on mission and community impact
- f. Employer obligations.

- 4. The library board is required by legislation to appoint a chief executive officer (CEO) to oversee library operations.** Once appointed by the Board, the CEO manages and controls library operations, freeing the library board to focus on governance. This is an important distinction to understand as it prevents conflicts and other problems from occurring.
- 5. Board authority belongs to the board as a whole; individual board members have no authority.** The board exercises its authority through the decisions it makes, and records as motions, in the context of a legally constituted board meeting. Outside of board meetings, you as a board member have no authority.
- 6. Each board member has a legal obligation to act honestly, in good faith, and in the best interests of the library.** Because the PLA gives corporate status to the library board, it means board members have a "fiduciary" duty to act in the best interests of the corporation. There is a duty of care and of loyalty, and an obligation to honesty and good faith. This includes all board members, whether appointed as a citizen representative or a council representative.
- 7. Library board meetings must be open to the public with advance notice given.** The board is required to hold regular meetings once a month for at least 10 months of the year. Board meetings must be open to the public unless a closed meeting is warranted as prescribed in the legislation.
- 8. Good governance happens when the CEO and library board trust each other, respect each other, and work together.** The library board relies on the support and expertise of the CEO to be successful; and the CEO relies on the support and guidance of the library board to be successful.
- 9. Good governance happens in board meetings that are designed to support informed decision-making.** The board chair and CEO work together to create agendas that are engaging and forward thinking while also meeting the board's needs for accountability and wise stewardship. The best boards find a balance between a respectful, collaborative style with challenging conversations.
- 10. The municipality is the library's primary funder and a strategic ally.** While the library board is an independent corporation, it does get the majority of its funding from municipal tax dollars. Sustaining a collaborative mindset and a strong working relationship between the library and the municipality is, therefore, important work. Council representatives on the library board support this work by facilitating ongoing communication and opportunities for collaboration. It is important for everyone to understand that elected officials appointed to the library board have the same responsibilities and obligations as any other member of the board.

These 10 statements constitute an overview of the most important aspects of library board governance in the province of Ontario. Each of the statements represents an important governance concept or an environmental factor that is crucial for board members to understand. Collectively, the statements are important because they contribute to effective library boards and successful libraries. There is a version available online with more explanation for each of the statements, as well as links to other resources: [\[link\]](#)