



ELK RAPIDS DISTRICT LIBRARY

Recommendations

The Elk Rapids District Library is a tremendous asset for the entire region, but it has been plagued by highly publicized board-related issues for the last few years. Disagreements about potential expansion, location, and the sanctity of the Island House have devolved from debate and discussion into inappropriate behaviours. Distrust and animosity has turned a challenging situation into an embarrassment to the entire region as very personal attacks make state-wide headlines.

Hyper-partisanship continues to plague the board as members entrench themselves into a position of representing their respective municipalities and their allies rather than focusing on delivering quality library services to patrons and citizens. The board division on the board has led to virtual paralysis as distrust and contempt continue to dominate the agenda and patterns of behaviour.

Through community engagement over the last month, it has been confirmed that the public within the Village and the adjacent township are not only frustrated by the issue, but appalled at the behaviour. The factions on the board have their support network that tell them to keep up the fight, but the general public takes no sides, and wants this to end, for the sake of library services and the reputation of the communities.

These recommendations are listed in a deliberate order, with the first being the most important and urgent to implement, and the later being of least significant and urgency. We have grouped them into three general areas with some explanation and clarification to address questions we anticipate will arise.

Board Composition:

We are aware there is no option for the Board itself or for the municipalities that made the board appointments, to remove members of the Library Board. Only the Governor, with clear evidence of egregious behaviour, can remove a person from the board. Regardless, we would not be doing our job properly if we did not make recommendations that can resolve the situation.

We believe the current board composition will be hard pressed to refocus, and shed their contempt, based on the long-standing and deep personal issues that have created this tragic situation. If only some members step down, and others remain, it will create the sense one side won, and the other lost. That will not resolve the issue, but rather exacerbate it.

Should the divisions remain and personal animosity and agendas continue, we would advise the Governor to start fresh with a new Board. In the meantime, we recommend:

- Every current member of the Board resigns, and new appointees commit publicly to fulfill the exclusive mandate of delivering and improving upon library services for patrons and citizens served by the regional system.

We are also aware that there is no obligation of member municipalities to make appointments based on requests from the Board for special skill sets, educations, or backgrounds, or based on fulfilling a Library Board Resume, which would keep the focus on delivery of quality library services.. Each municipality may continue to make political appointments based on political motivations. We do not believe that will resolve this issue, which is why we continue to make the following recommendation:

- Create a Library Board Resume of desired skills, educations, backgrounds, and perspectives to create a healthy board diversity, which will improve policy, programming, and service delivery. For example, seeking out skills, experience, and expertise in youth programming, fundraising, stakeholder engagement, finance, governance, and library services would all be assets to the Library Board, and help ensure a focus on delivery of library services.

Governance Improvements:

State legislation currently prescribes the format and structure perimeters for a library board. Good governance dictates an uneven number of board members is recommended. Given there are three municipal partners in the regional library we would ideally recommend a composition of 9 members, 3 from each municipality. We would encourage the Governor to change the legislation to accommodate 9 members, as we anticipate there are other jurisdictions in similar situations. However, in the meantime we recommend:

- Move to a 2-2-2 municipal representation structure to ensure balance and equity. Making this official may require reconstituting the board, or the municipalities with 3 members could simply agree to only appoint two members to achieve the recommendation, without the requirement of the reconstitution process.

As with the other recommendations regarding leadership, governance, boards and committees throughout the community, we recommend:

- All members be required to undertake professional governance training that includes, but is not limited to public engagement, meeting management, dispute resolution, budgeting and finance best practices, and human resources.

The Library Board is there to set strategic direction and policy, while the Library Director is tasked with delivering on the strategic plan goals and objectives. The library requires an updated strategic plan, against which the performance of the Library Director can be appropriately evaluated on a yearly basis, so we recommend:

- Develop a 24 month strategic plan in a SMART Format (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Based Goals and Objectives) with embedded KPIs (Key Performance Measures) to evaluate the Library Director's performance in the execution of that plan.

Future/Next Steps:

The issue of the library expansion is still a contentious issue. There is no easy resolution as some look to preserve the Island House as it is, others seek to grow the offerings at the idyllic location, and others concern themselves with budget possibilities.

Until all recommendations related to Board Composition and Governance Improvements are implemented and have time to become effective no work should be done on proceeding with the next steps. There has not been enough time to heal, and the underlying issues that created the problem, and allowed it to move from a controversial issue to personal issues that made state-wide headlines, have not been resolved.

However, once the previous recommendations have been implemented and a new board, with a focus on delivering library services to patrons and citizens, is ready to consider next steps, we recommend the following:

- Each community in the regional partnership conduct a full community needs assessment to determine the potential for partnerships that can lead to the efficient and effective use of taxpayer dollars. For example, one community may be considering building a youth center which could cut down on capital costs, another may be considering a new municipal building which could reduce operational expenses, and still another may have a new school project coming soon which could double resources. In each of these cases there is an opportunity to reduce the expense to taxpayers while improving service. That can only be accomplished if each community has completed a full needs assessment.
- Conduct a robust and complete new feasibility study with a scope that includes, but is not limited to: fundraising capacity, capital costs, operation expenses, location options, collocation efficiencies, human resource needs, and new design paradigms such as computer labs, coffee shop, board rooms, and social spaces.

As with all our recommendations, we suggest everyone read these over multiple times and let them digest before there is a response or a call made. Your community and region have suffered and been torn apart by this controversy and it has spilled into other issues and into social settings. There is no right or wrong. There is no good side and evil side. Everyone needs to take a deep breath, put their anger and egos aside, especially the current board members, and come together with a focus on how to improve the delivery of library services to the region.