

Information Guide: Role of the Board Chair

2025



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Overview

The Library Board Chair is one of the five members of a board of trustees. During your 5-year term as a trustee, you may be elected to serve one or more terms as board chair.

A Chair and Vice-Chair are elected from the members to be the officers of the board. Your bylaws define when officers are elected and what their responsibilities are.



Image citation: Reymer, Suzanne, Lewis and Clark Library Trustees. 25 February 2023.

The role of chair provides valuable leadership experience and a greater insight into how decision-making works for public institutions. The facilitation, relationship building, and communication skills you gain are useful professionally and personally. It is a good idea for the Board to rotate leadership positions to give each member opportunities to lead and learn.

The role of board chair benefits the library and community by providing leadership and by acting as a bridge between the board, director, community, and local government. The organizational skills, ability to help people make decisions, and act as a connecting point for all parties help the library achieve excellent service for the community.

This is a job that requires preparation and some additional time to devote to working with the director, local government officials, and fellow board members.

When everything is going smoothly, communication and preparation help maintain great library services and make the time commitment manageable.

When there are difficult decisions or situations to address, this can be a tough job. Particularly so in small communities where personal or business connections can influence behavior and decision-making. Maintaining ethical and legal boundaries is essential.

Time Commitment

The board meets at least six times per year. Each meeting might last 90 minutes, on average. The Chair will spend about one hour to prepare for each board meeting.

Communication with local government officials, community partners, and representing the library as a spokesperson at various events might require several additional hours of time each month.

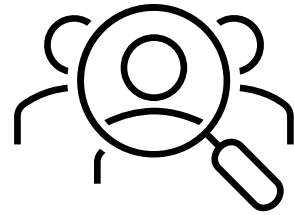
4 Roles of the Library Board Chair

Role	Responsibilities	Partners
Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold to expectations and limits of jurisdiction• Model expected behavior• Be courageous• Provide continuity and direction to the board• Recruit new trustees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fellow board members• Director• Local Government Officials
Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consistently apply laws and policies• Monitor budgets and finances• Keep a pulse on director and staff activities• Maintain routines for director performance feedback and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fellow board members• Director
Facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Run effective public meetings• Maintain decorum• Work toward consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fellow board members• Director
Spokesperson	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Serve as the primary representative of the board• Answer questions about the library, board, and issues• Represent the library at meetings, events, and hearings• Communicate effectively• Model open and transparent communication• Speak up on behalf of the library	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fellow board members• Director• Local Government Officials• Members of the public

Please [contact your MSL Consultant](#) if you have questions about support and resources to help prepare you for this important role.

Leader

Strong and effective leaders have or learn certain skills as they take on roles with greater responsibility. Key leadership skills include effective communication, decision-making, problem-solving, relationship-building, and conflict resolution. Leaders often need to exhibit qualities like integrity, resilience, and the ability to inspire and empower others. As a leader of the library board, these skills are essential to bring together the people and resources needed to have a great library.



The board chair should be actively recruiting new board members and be thinking ahead to transitions as members complete their terms, as well as handing off duties to the next chair of the board. Always be thinking ahead!

Laws and Rules



The board chair should know about the Montana laws, or Montana Code Annotated (MCA), that define where the board's authority comes from and how to conduct its business on behalf of the public. The Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) are adopted by the Montana State Library Commission to define a basic level of library services, define eligibility for state aid funding, and guide policy development.

[Laws, ARM, and Attorney General Opinion resources from MSL](#) can provide you with essential understandings of MCA, ARM, and legal decisions that affect board authority.

MSL Learn Courses

- [Montana Library Law](#)
- [Next Level Library Law](#)

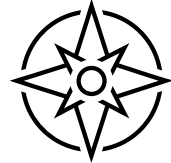
Policy

Policies are an extension of the MCA and ARM. The role of the board chair, with the assistance of the library director, is to build consensus and understanding between parties and adopt policies that are consistent with MCA and ARM. While many policies are common across libraries, policies should reflect the needs of the community the library serves. Consistent application of policy and communication about policy require leadership from the board chair and library director together.

- Refer to the [MSL Library Policies Handbook](#) for more information.

Strategic Planning

Rely on the mission, vision, goals in your written plan to help provide leadership and direction for the board and director. A clear, written plan helps everyone stay on track to achieve the outcomes that translate into great libraries.



- Refer to the [MSL Strategic Planning Resources webpage](#) for more information.

Manager

While the library director manages the library, the board chair also has responsibilities to manage certain aspects of the board's business.

Personnel Management

The board chair acts as a bridge between the full board and the director. In the majority of Montana's public libraries, the board is the director's supervisor. Your library and local government may be structured differently. If that is the case, please work with your local government officials and the director to understand the role of the board and chair when it comes to library personnel.

It is difficult for the entire board to be present for all personnel matters, so the board chair often assumes the duty of working with the director. As board chair, you may be called upon to provide assistance and advice to the director. You may also be the one who must relay performance concerns or compliments from the full board.

This is a challenging role, but it helps the director and the library. The director will be able to ask for assistance from you when facing a challenging question or promising opportunity. It allows the library to move forward more quickly.

Your role as chair will involve making decisions about when to involve the full board and when to proceed on your own. Having a discussion with the board members and the director about what level of involvement the full board wants will help you make better decisions about the role you should play as the main point of contact for the director.

- [Watch the Managing Personnel video](#) to learn a little more about how to lead for effective personnel management.



Figure 1 Watch this video to learn more.

Financial Management

Most public libraries in Montana are funded primarily by tax revenue collected at the local level. They may receive state funding, grants, or private donations but the largest percentage of their revenue comes from taxes.

Understanding the library's revenue, expenditures, and local government budgeting is an important duty of the library board and director. There is an expectation that the director and board will manage public funds wisely.

During budget development, the board chair should be available to interact with local government officials – like commissioners and clerks—to understand the timelines and

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requirements for approving and submitting the library's budget. Keeping the board on track to finalize a budget requires leadership from a board chair who is informed and engaged.

Familiarity with government budgeting terminology, processes, and timelines is very helpful.

- [Watch videos in the Public Library Budgets and Finance playlist](#) to learn more.

MSL Learn Course

- [Trustee Essentials Understanding Local Government Budgeting and Finance](#)

Facilitator

The role of the facilitator is that of a neutral leader, usually someone from outside the group or organization that has no known vested interest in the organization's actions and outcomes. The facilitator's main objective is to guide the group's process and progress utilizing the principles of effective facilitation.

In many instances, the board's president or presiding officer is, by default, the group's facilitator. This person is responsible not only for leading the meeting by some form of parliamentary procedures, but also for guiding the organization's overall progression of work towards achieving goals. Although this isn't the optimal role of a facilitator, because it happens frequently, the presiding officer of an organization can benefit from learning, developing, and utilizing facilitation skills. (Montana Board Handbook, page 28)

Board Meetings

The trustee serving as the Board chair facilitates the Board meetings with the help of the director. Before the scheduled meeting, the chairperson and director prepare an agenda and schedule adequate time for the items listed. This agenda, along with related materials, should be provided to trustees ahead of the meeting to give them time to prepare.

The agenda and the meeting date, time and place should also be posted or published in accordance with notice requirements specified in the Montana Open Meeting laws.

To get the meeting under way, the chairperson should:

1. Start on time with roll call (needed to judge a quorum).
2. Introduce visitors and/or new Board members.
3. Review the agenda, revising the order if necessary.
4. Establish time limits.

During the meeting, the chairperson should make sure that participants:

1. Follow the agenda and procedures stated in the bylaws.
2. Focus on issues at hand.
3. Establish action items: who, what and when.

At the end of the meeting, the chairperson should:

1. Review and summarize for the minutes the meeting's progress, decisions, and assignments.
2. Announce next meeting date.
3. Adjourn the meeting.

After the meeting, the chairperson and director work together to make sure that the meeting minutes are sent to all Board members and an agenda for the next meeting is outlined.

Parliamentary Procedure and Roberts Rules of Order

Many boards officially incorporate use of Roberts Rules of Order into their Bylaws to give clear instructions in how the business of the board is conducted. There are simplified versions of Roberts Rules or models for parliamentary procedure to instruct the board about how to work through the information, action, and public comment items on a meeting agenda.

- [Review the MSU Local Government Center's excellent resource](#) to learn more.

Board Chair and Meetings with Executive Session

The board chair is the only authority who can decide whether something is public or private (except for individuals involved who may waive their right to privacy).

For library boards there are two main situations in which a meeting may be closed to the public (otherwise known as going into executive session).

First, a public meeting may be closed when a person's right to privacy exceeds the public's right to know. The person involved can waive their right to privacy and request that the meeting be open. The meeting must remain open in this situation.

- Refer to the [Information Guide: Public Comment and Open Meetings](#) document for more.

Second, a public meeting may be closed when the board needs to discuss a litigation strategy. However, if the litigation involves only public entities that meet the definitions in [2-3-203, MCA](#), the meeting must remain open.

- [Watch the Tips for Effective Meetings video](#) and access resources on the [Board Meeting Resources webpage](#) to learn more.
- [Watch the "In Conversation: Public Officials, Code of Ethics, Open Meetings, and Public Participation" video](#) to learn more.

MSL Learn Course

Take the [Board Member Basics course](#) to learn more.

Spokesperson

In larger libraries, there may be a communications officer, or the director is designated to field inquiries from the press or the public. In smaller libraries, the library director and board chair often share the duty of official spokesperson to convey information on behalf of the library and board. Good communication between the director and board chair is needed so the information needed is always up-to-date and available.

- The chair works with the library director to identify needed information to clearly explain or inform deliberations of the board.
- Set expectations and use appropriate communication channels in accordance with open meeting and public participation laws.
- Hold board members accountable to maintain open communications and flow of information.
- Regularly seek feedback and input from local government officials, members of the public, and library partners.

The board chair has responsibility to ensure board members have access to information that will help them make good decisions as well as guarantee that decisions are made in a transparent way. Reports, talking points, or newsletters can help keep everyone on the same page with accurate and accessible information.

Suggestions and Complaints

When you are known as an official representative of the library, you may be approached by members of the public with suggestions or concerns about the library. As an official spokesperson for the library, your knowledge of the library's policies, board bylaws, and what's going on at the library come into play.

Concerns About Materials or Programming

When members of the public raise serious concerns about library materials or programming, this is where knowledge of policy and procedure is critical to both address the concern and help maintain consistent and fair application of the policies.

If a member of the public approaches you outside of a public meeting, please refer that person back to the director and the next scheduled board meeting for public comment opportunities. Consistency and fairness are important.

Who Does What?

There are differences between what the chair, board members, director, and local government officials do when addressing several critical functions.

	Board Chair	Board Members	Director	Local Government Officials
Setting the agenda and meetings	Yes, with director and input from the board	Consult	Yes	No
Policies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Consult
Personnel management	Yes, for director only and setting salaries	Consult	Yes	Consult
Spokesperson	Yes	Consult	Yes	No
Financial management	Yes	Consult	Yes	Consult

Refer to this chart when you need to clarify responsibilities and keep healthy boundaries between the different stakeholders.

One Last Note...Courage

The library board chair job includes components of leadership, management, facilitation, and communication. Another component is courage. Courage is needed when there are difficult issues to address and there are pressures from within the board, or from external sources. Courage to model leadership, effective management, diplomatic facilitation, and transparent communication means sometimes having to hold others accountable to the policies and procedures adopted by the board. Everyone has a bad day from time to time but in order to effectively serve the public good, courageously moving forward sometimes means that not everyone can be satisfied or happy. Lean into your commitment to serve, knowledge of best practices, and keep an eye on the long-term benefits of working through difficult situations.

The importance of working with your board, county commissioners, city council members, city managers, clerks, finance officers, attorneys, and the library director can't be overstated. It is also a good idea to connect with other board chairs from libraries within your Federation or for libraries that have well-run boards.

You are not alone in this important role! The Montana State Library Consultants are available to support your learning and growth in the position.

Essential Resources

- Your Board's Bylaws
- [MSL Board Meeting Resources Webpage](#)
- [Information Guide: Open Meeting Law and Public Comment](#)
- [Role of Board Chair Video](#)
- [Montana Board Handbook](#), MSU Local Government Center (2022)
- [Montana Association of Counties \(MACo\)](#)
- [Montana Municipal Interlocal Authority \(MMIA\)](#)
- [Montana League of Cities and Towns](#)
- [MSU Extension Local Government Center](#)