

Chapter 8: The Library / City Relationship

The public library is an important city service, particularly when it comes to quality of life. Although the library board has more autonomy than most city departments, it is shortsighted to think of the library as “separate” from the city. It is better to think of the city and library as a team working together to make life in your community the best it can be.

Your relationship with the city is critical if for no other reason than the city makes decisions about the library’s funding. But it’s more than just the funding. If the library and city have a good relationship, your community wins. It wins because the library can focus on serving the needs of the community rather than on feuds that drain everyone’s time and energy.

One of the most important ways you can strengthen your official relationship with the city is to keep communication open:

- Keep the city informed about board decisions
- Come to a council meeting once a quarter and make a report about the library
- Educate the council regarding the role of the library and Direct State Aid requirements
- Keep the city informed about unexpected revenue (required by Iowa Code section 384.20)
- Invite the city council to hold meetings at the library
- Ask the mayor, city council, city clerk to be part of a library program

Just like any important relationship, you will want to invest time and energy into your relationship with the city. First, talk with the library director about how best to sustain and build the relationship with the city. Once the board and director agree on how to proceed, take the initiative for building a good relationship with your city by getting to know the mayor, city council members, city clerk, city administrator and/or other city staff as people. Talk to city officials and staff when they are in the library, at community events, in the grocery store or at Little League. Get to know their interests and ask the librarian to occasionally send information from the library they’d appreciate.

Knowing how the library is important to city leaders will help you tell the library’s story whether talking to a city official at a council meeting or in the parking lot. In 2004 and 2006 the State Library informally asked city leaders, including city clerks, “What are the three most important things a library does for its community?” The results from the two surveys were identical and affirmed the significance of the public library. For city leaders, the three most important things a library does for its community are:

- Help children develop a love of reading
- Provide computers and Internet access for people who don’t have them
- Provide books and movies for pleasure and recreation

In addition to keeping communication with the city open, another way to build the relationship is to support city efforts:

- Work directly with the city on community development
- Volunteer readily for community events
- Communicate ideas and concerns to the city

Withholding information, making negative comments about the city and/or looking at the city as the enemy are guaranteed to harm your library and the community it serves.

Are library employees city employees?

Public libraries do not exist without their cities; the cities created them. Iowa Code chapter 392 is entitled "City Administrative Agencies" and section 392.5 is entitled "Library Board." Therefore, libraries are considered city administrative agencies. Public library employees are city employees because the public library is a city agency. Iowa Code section 392.1 explains the relationship between cities and their administrative agencies.

Public library employees' salaries are paid from the city's general fund in the form of an appropriation; that makes public library employees city employees. If the city offers benefits to some city employees but not others, that is a discriminatory practice. An Iowa Attorney General's Opinion dated March 18, 1976, states in the last paragraph: "It is the view of this office that the library board has express power to hire and fire the librarian and other library employees. However, it must be remembered that all such employees are employees of the City of Davenport and the library board is an agency of the city deriving its power under the municipal code."