

## **Effective Governance for Rural Libraries**

By Patricia H. Fisher, Ellen G. Miller and James Connor

Library governance is a team sport. The library director is the coach, the board president is the team captain, and the board members are the team players. The director-board team is charged with fulfilling the library's social contract with taxpayers and other funders, that is, in return for taxpayer dollars, the library must offer benefits that make a difference in the community.

Modern librarianship counsels that in order for the director-board team to ensure that the library fulfills its social contract, the library must have a *game plan* to accomplish specific goals. So, the director-board team, usually with the help of an outside facilitator, dutifully undertakes the exercise of developing a strategic plan every few years. Once completed, many strategic plans are too often relegated to a shelf to collect dust rather than used as power tools to effect change. Action plans that spell out tactics which board members could implement to get the needed resources and civic support to empower their library administrators to achieve planned outcomes are never developed.

Well, it's time for a change! Libraries, especially rural libraries need a Program for Effective Governance (PEG) that wraps concepts, rural values, outcomes, incremental steps and diverse training and implementation methodologies into one package. PEG proposes an "A to Z" set of actions that rural boards can take to empower their directors and front-line staff to improve their own libraries and/or their communities. A phased implementation plan, complete with "a helper or facilitator," must be part of the *game plan*. In short, rural libraries need a Program for Effective Governance (PEG) that would reflect five values especially important in rural America:

- Results-oriented actions (not "wouldn't this be nice" ideas)
- Step by step "how to" methods (not impractical, vague suggestions)
- Plain spoken language (not fancy, academic words)
- Proven to work in rural America (not big brother or big city)
- Sustainable over time (don't go away after it is launched)

Rural libraries need a state-wide or national entity to step up to the plate and take on the task of developing and delivering a Program for Effective Governance (PEG). In this concept paper, we will assume a national-scope entity called Library Board Source (LBS) has taken up the challenge to develop and deliver PEG. When it is necessary to illustrate a point, we will refer to this entity.

**How could a Program for Effective Governance be structured?**

We envision a program that is an experiential learning, strategic planning and implementation model. The program has two tracks, each with its own curriculum and several implementation phases. The curriculum in each track would be geared to the role board members play in creating a culture and an environment that empowers and supports the director and his/her staff to achieve the overall outcomes. Figure A shows the PEG structure.

<b>Program for Effective Governance</b>			
<b>Track: LOCAL LIBRARY</b> <b>Outcome: BEST POSSIBLE LIBRARY</b>		<b>Track: LOCAL COMMUNITY</b> <b>Outcome: BEST POSSIBLE COMMUNITY</b>	
<b>Topics:</b>		<b>Topics:</b>	
1. Developing strategies to increase hours open		1. Public safety – sanctuary and safe activity center for at-risk kids, on the loose after school lets out	
2. Keeping up with technology		2. Employment – books and programming for job-hunting, résumé writing, computer literacy, and ESL	
3. Improving library facilities		3. Housing- books and workshops on home remodeling, home buying process, and financial planning	
4. Upgrading collections		4. Education – books and programs for caregivers on reading to children, homework help, and college planning	
5. Recruiting and retaining quality staff		5. Economic Development – resources for entrepreneurs and small businesses	
6. Communicating benefits to stakeholders			
<b>Phases</b> (Applicable to all topics)			
<b>Introduction/Learning</b>	<b>Game Plan/Resources</b>	<b>Start Up</b>	<b>Operational/Assessment</b>
<i>Action steps by BD-DIR team</i>	<i>Action steps by BD-DIR team</i>	<i>Action steps by BD-DIR team</i>	<i>Action steps by BD-DIR team</i>
1. Review basic facts, statistics	7. Decide who does what	10. Decide how/when to launch initial activity	13. Allocate library’s portion of resources needed
2. Tap peer entities that have pursued topic	8. Write up a game plan	11. Get desired level of visibility for all players	14. Lead assessment; communicate results
3. Get local leaders interested	9. Use the game plan to get public, private funding	12. Facilitate decisions by all players regarding ongoing operations	15. Revise goals, etc. per assessment of results
4. Review state/federal regs, funding opportunities			
5. Discuss pros/cons of pursuing this topic			
6. If decide to pursue topic, vote to make it official			

**Figure A: Structure of the Program for Effective Governance**

### *PEG Tracks and Topics*

One track would consist of topics designed to achieve the overall outcome of “best possible library.” Each topic may be a goal the director-board team has for library operations such as, developing strategies to increase the number of hours the library is open; improving library facilities; upgrading collections; recruiting and retaining quality staff; and so forth.

The other track would consist of topics designed to achieve the overall outcome of “the best community possible.” Each topic may address areas most people in the community care about such as, public safety, employment, housing, education and economic development. Libraries have, or can develop, the capacity to speak to all of these areas.

- Public safety? Libraries may contribute to the reduction of offenses committed by juveniles by being a sanctuary and safe activity environment for at-risk kids, on the loose after school lets out.
- Employment? Libraries can offer help wanted ads and books and programming for job-hunting, résumé writing, computer literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL).
- Housing? Libraries can provide books and workshops on home remodeling, the home buying process, and financial planning.
- Education? Libraries can teach children to love reading, teach parents and caregivers how to read to children; provide homework help and offer guidance on college planning, SATs and financial aid.
- Economic development? Libraries can help local leaders increase economic development appeal by providing resources to entrepreneurs who wish to start businesses and providing resources to small business owners who wish to grow their businesses.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, the topics listed under each of the two tracks are illustrative. We know that one size does not fit all, especially in rural America. A self-evident need in one community may be politically impossible in another town just 10 miles away.

Director board teams could use PEG in two ways. One is to review its two tracks and their respective topics for local application. Some topics within a track might fit perfectly; others might suggest new topics needed locally. The other is to share their knowledge, suggesting topics that reflect local needs and circumstances to the national Library Board Source. Topics could come from the strategic directives contained in those dusty old strategic plans. Or they could come from goals contained in community master plans. Encouraging suggestions from rural director-board teams allows the curriculum---the topics that are covered and how they are covered---for the two tracks to be built from the ground up.

### ***PEG topics – elements***

Within each topic there could be a myriad of elements. For example for the *best library possible* track, under the topic, “Developing strategies to increase the hours the library is open,” there could be elements such as: budgets and finance (both the libraries’ and the municipal and state governments’ budgets); advocacy; community needs/preferences; staffing; board decision-matrix tools; getting buy-in from community leaders; forming partnerships; and getting visibility for all players.

In another example, for the *best community possible* track, under the topic, “Helping Leaders Increase Economic Development Appeal,” there could be elements such as: the nature of economic development---what are *economic gardening* and *smokestack chasing*---; case histories of peer libraries which are partnering with their economic development agencies; advocacy; adding appropriate library resources to the collection, print and online that can be used to help entrepreneurs; how to establish small business information centers in the library; board decision-matrix tools; getting buy-in from community leaders; forming partnerships; and getting visibility for all players.

### **PEG topics -- Coverage and Participant Outcomes**

Not all elements under the topics are created equal. Some are worthy of more coverage than others. The curriculum would address **the extent to which elements of each topic would be covered**. *Major coverage* of an element could entail online or face-to-face

seminars/workshops, plus readings and preparatory or homework assignments; *moderate coverage* could entail readings and online or a face-to-face seminar/workshop and no homework assignments; *brief coverage* could entail just mentioning the element during online or face-to-face seminars/workshops. Also part of the curriculum is a delineation of the **expected outcomes for participants** under each topic and the **method of assessing the achievement of those outcomes**.

### **PEG topics -- *Tools, Techniques and Delivery Technologies***

The program would also provide details on how the material for each topic would be covered, that is the curriculum would spell out the tools, techniques and delivery technologies that could be used. Since, we are speculating about what topics and elements would be contained under each track, the discussion that follows about possible tools, techniques and delivery technologies is meant to be taken in a generic sense.

- **Courses.** Webinars, classes and other training products could be produced in-house by the national Library Board Source (LBS) or obtained from other providers. E-courses might be synchronous or asynchronous and delivered on a platform such as Web Junction. In-person courses could be offered nationally or in participating states. Some might be one-time workshops, others a series of sessions. To encourage rural board participation and hold down costs for travel, locally-offered in-person courses are important. Content for these courses could be created by LBS or the content could be created by consultants hired by LBS.
- **Resources.** Library Board Source (LBS) could contract with a web-hosting site, for example, Web Junction, to have a platform to post various hardcopy or e-resources related to the elements under the topics for each of the tracks. LBS or its consultants could find **existing resources** to post, for example:
  - The advocacy kit prepared by ALA's Rural, Native and Tribal Libraries of All Kinds Committee available in both hard copy and pdf formats at [<http://www.ala.org/ala/olosbucket/supporttoolkit/toolkithome.htm>]
  - The California State Library's Rural Libraries Initiative [<http://www.rurallibraries.org/>]

- Susan Hildreth, “Rural Libraries: The Heart of Our Communities,” *Public Libraries*, (March/April 2007)
- *Library Board Strategic Guide: Going to the Next Level*, Scarecrow Press, 2007

LBS or its consultants could develop **new resources** to post, such as:

- Best practices from rural library boards, including examples and policies
  - Video clips of trustees from rural boards talking about a problem and how they solved it
  - Sample agendas and speaking points for meetings with local leaders and officials
  - A hotline for asking specific questions
  - An annotated bibliography of articles, books and websites
  - Sample messages that board members could use with members of the business community to promote the use of resources in a small business information center---an economic development tool a library could establish
- **Communities of Practice (CoP).** While actually part of Resources, *Communities of Practice* (CoP) tools for rural America’s library boards deserve extra discussion. Etienne Wenger, author of *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (1998) defines the term “community of practice (CoP) as “a group of people who share an interest in a domain of knowledge, for instance, how to do open heart surgery or how to write children’s books. Together, they develop a set of approaches that allow them to deal with this domain successfully.”<sup>2</sup> Directors and trustees on library boards in rural America share an interest in library governance. They could use collaborative tools to help each other become more effective.

However, experience shows that just providing convenient online tools (blogs, forums, wikis, etc.) for questions, answers, dialogue and updates doesn’t guarantee usage. For example, perusing the forums that are part of the Rural Sustainability Project finds mostly low usage---and that’s by librarians who are

constantly exposed to the importance of such tools! Many rural librarians don't have the time for or give high priority to using such tools. So how would you get trustees on rural boards to actually use CoP tools? The state circuit rider trained by LBS or its consultants would provide that encouragement.

- **State Circuit Rider.** The term *circuit rider* has two culturally important connotations. One is the onsite, in-person assistance so valued in rural America. Peer input by a credible local expert banishes the stigma of being advised by an outsider who is often perceived as just a hired hand. The other connotation is sharing information and resources, especially useful in offsetting the isolation felt by librarians and board members in rural libraries and by members of their communities. That's especially true in those states lacking regional and/or cooperative systems and/or whose state libraries are understaffed. Web Junction used a similar concept when providing states with a Rural Sustainability Project manager. We envision the PEG state circuit riders performing tasks such as:
  - Onsite assistance
  - Telephone/electronic assistance
  - Group training---whether via distance learning; at conferences; train the trainer (for those states with regional/cooperative systems); or onsite board training
  - Marketing the program to rural library boards
  - Posting best practices of rural boards on LBS' website
  - Suggesting candidates for video clips to LBS
  - Writing regular columns for print/electronic trustee publications

It may be of interest to those entities (state or national) which may be considering taking on the role outlined in this article for the Library Board Source (LBS) that circuit riders providing a wide range of services have been used for over 30 years by the National Rural Water Association (NRWA). Through its state affiliates, NRWA serves over 19,000 water and wastewater utilities annually.

- **Conference presentations.** State library association conferences rarely offer enough trustee- or board-oriented sessions. But if library boards---especially those in rural America---are to pull their weight, they need to find out what's

expected of their libraries and what their roles are in achieving it. They need information about and help with effective practices for governing the library, and advocating for the library; NOT how to manage the library. To facilitate more programming for trustees and library boards at conferences, LBS could use the Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA) model, wherein an RFP is issued to library consultants asking them to propose workshops for rural boards, which could be delivered at state library association conferences. Fees paid by those attending the workshops are typically shared among the broker (LBS), consultant and state library association. In some cases, scholarships could be made available through corporate sponsors for trustees from rural communities.

### ***Timing: Implementation Phases***

Most rural libraries don't have the time to piece together methods, advice and examples. What they need is a recipe that can be discussed and, if adopted, followed in order to get results.

The Program for Effective Governance (PEG) proposes a time-saving "A to Z" set of actions that rural boards can take to empower their directors and front-line staff to improve their own libraries and/or their communities. PEG uses a phased implementation approach, as shown in Figure A.

The phases and their possible activities (use of selected tools, techniques and delivery technologies discussed earlier) are:

- **Introduction/Learning phase.** In this phase, board members learn the basic facts and statistics about the topic; learn about the experiences of other libraries; take the pulse of local leaders; examine local, state and federal regulations; explore funding opportunities; discuss the pros and cons for their library and community; and specifically identify what board members can do to empower and support their library administrators. Typically, this is where current programs that assist



director-board teams end---there is no follow-through for planning, implementing and assessment of tactics.

- **Game plan/Resources phase.** In this phase, the director-board team, supported by LBS staff, and/or the state circuit rider, actually writes up an actionable game plan with strategies and tactics. It spells out who does what, when it is done and who is in charge. It could include roles for the director, staff, individual trustees, Friends, foundation members and other supporters. Information gathered and learned in the previous phase is very useful in developing the game plan. This plan's primary purpose is to get public and private funding and support. Trustees can be very influential in gaining this support. However, they need to be guided in their actions and they need supporting material, for example scripts to use with civic leaders.
- **Start up phase.** In this phase, library administrators actually launch the initial and subsequent activities related to the topic. Planned activities to get visibility for the library, donors, partners and those in the community who benefit from the library's services are carried out. Board members are made aware of the specific roles they can play in getting visibility for the project with civic leaders and the library's users. They also have a role in facilitating decisions to provide funding and other resources for ongoing operations. LBS staff and/or circuit rider is with the library-board team providing resources in the way of training; templates for press releases, etc; support; coaching; and so forth, throughout the entire phase.
- **Operational/Assessment phase.** In this phase, library administrators allocate the necessary resources (dollars, space, staff, etc.) to implement the *game plan*. Pre-determined measurements of success are monitored by the director-board team. Library administrators execute communication plans to inform other stakeholders of the results. Trustees can be a vital part of the plan to communicate with civic leaders and library users. The director-board team must also make decisions, based on the assessment of the metrics, about the continuation and/or expansion of the program. LBS staff and/or the state circuit rider are there to lend support to the director-board team as they communicate with civic leaders and library users and LBS staff can help the director-board team use decision-matrix tools.

## **Is there a National or State-wide Entity that can Develop and Deliver a Program for Effective Governance for Rural Libraries?**

From a national perspective there are several entities that could become the Library Board Source (LBS) referred to in this paper. These entities could develop and deliver a Program for Effective Governance (PEG) on a small scale in a few rural communities and possibly on an increasing larger scale nationwide. The most obvious entities are The Association of Library Trustees and Advocates (ALTA), the Rural Libraries Committee of the Public Library Association (PLA), the Association of Rural and Small Libraries, and the Rural, Native and Tribal Libraries of All Kinds Committee of ALA's Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS). The Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) is another candidate. It could coordinate with its individual state libraries which may have special interests, especially the twelve state libraries that are part of the WebJunction partner program. On a regional scale, there could be multi-state associations such as the Mountain Plains Library Association and similar groups.

Looking at which entities could become the Library Board Source (LBS) from a statewide perspective, it would be those states with a large number of rural library systems that would be the prime candidates.

### ***Tapping Partners***

Maybe there is no single national or statewide entity that wants to commit to going it alone to develop and deliver a Program for Effective Governance (PEG). If this is the case, several of the entities named above may want to consider partnering in a joint venture to bring PEG to fruition. The joint venture organization could become the Library Board Source (LBS). Then LBS could apply for grant funding to develop and implement PEG.

In addition, a joint venture of library organizations could seek partners from non-library groups. At the national level prospective partners might include: the International City/County Management Association, whose website includes this statement: "The

viability of public libraries is at the heart of a new ICMA project, thanks to a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. ... Beyond their classic role as knowledge centers, libraries now provide access to the Internet for millions of Americans and increasingly support local economic sustainability, among other nontraditional roles.”<sup>3</sup> Another national candidate for a partner is the Rural Community Assistance Corporation, through its six regional offices, provides funding for housing, infrastructure, environmental and other community facilities. At the state level, potential partners could be leagues of municipalities, county associations, boards of education, Chambers of Commerce, rural water associations, USDA’s Rural development state offices and many more.

### ***Tapping Other Expertise***

With grant funds, the Library Board Source (LBS) ---the lead entity developing and delivering PEG---could make use of library consultants, who have some familiarity with rural libraries and rural communities, to develop syllabi for the topics; develop content for courses; and find existing resource materials and/or develop new resource materials. Consultants could also conduct “train the trainer” sessions for state circuit riders and develop facilitator guides for them to use with the local director-board teams. LBS could also use library consultants, who have some marketing expertise, to develop a promotional campaign (key messages, posters, e-mail notifications, brochures, direct mail pieces, etc.) to get rural library trustees, directors, and staff to become aware of PEG, supportive of PEG and loyal to PEG.

### **Summary**

Rural libraries need a Program for Effective Governance (PEG) that wraps concepts, rural values, outcomes, incremental steps and diverse training and implementation methodologies into one package. It is the objective of the co-authors of this paper, who have over 80 years’ experience working in rural America, to exhort national and state entities to take up the challenge to explore avenues of collaboration and support to bring such a program to fruition. It is our belief that rural director-board teams are in immediate need of such a program that helps them achieve community-wide and library goals.

## Notes

1. Based on several items including a presentation by Marylaine Block for the Rhode Island Library Association, June 7, 2007, <http://marylaine.com/doright.html>, last accessed July 24, 2007 and Ellen G. Miller and Patricia H. Fisher, *The Library Board Strategic Guide*, chapter 5, "Getting on Your Community's Leadership Team," (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007): 175-207.
2. Wenger, Etienne. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press) 1998.
3. Quote is from the website of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), a local government leadership and management organization. [http://www.icma.org/main/ns\\_search.asp?nsid=3288](http://www.icma.org/main/ns_search.asp?nsid=3288)

### About the Authors



**Patricia H. Fisher.** Fisher brings marketing expertise and political savvy to the table. Fisher began her marketing career at a major telecommunications company. She is now working as a library consultant in the areas of marketing planning and communication, public relations and library board development. She is senior author of *Blueprint for Your Library Marketing Plan* and co-author of *The Library Board Strategic Guide*.

Fisher has served on the governance board and foundation board of her local library. She has also been president of the trustee division of the Maryland Library Association and the president of the Association of Library Trustees and Advocates (ALTA).

Fisher's library advocacy has led her to testify before the lower and upper house of the Maryland state legislature on behalf of library bills as well as to develop relationships with elected officials at the county, state and federal levels. For details about clients, services provided and publications, please see [www.pfisherassociates.com](http://www.pfisherassociates.com).



**Ellen G. Miller.** Miller's career has targeted governance bodies, especially library boards, rural water/wastewater boards and city councils. She has facilitated strategic planning by individual rural library boards, cooperative/regional systems and state libraries. For over 25 years, she worked with national and state rural water associations, targeting water and wastewater boards and/or rural city councils. From 1993 to 2001, she was the author and/or editor of all eight handbooks in *The Water Board Bible* series for rural water boards and rural city councils, published by the Kansas Rural Water Association; over 40,000 copies have been sold nationally.

A member of the Kansas State Library Advisory Commission, Miller is the founding past president of the 9-year-old Kansas Library Trustee Association (KLTA). 93% of its 823 members are from libraries serving under 25,000 population. Her current responsibilities include chair of the KLTA Kansas Trustee Education Program. For details about clients and publications, please see [www.ellenmillergroup.com](http://www.ellenmillergroup.com).



***Jim Connor.*** *Connor* has over forty years of education and practical experience in community leadership and organization management to the team. His experience includes business owner, Chamber of Commerce executive and newspaper publisher. He has served in both elected and appointed community leadership positions and has been active in political campaigns since the 1960's. He has been campaign manager local fund-raising and Congressional office campaigns.

Connor is serving his second term on the Board of Library Trustees for the Jefferson County Public Library (Colorado) and served on the advisory board of the Colorado State Library (CoLAB). Recognized with the ALA Trustee Award, Connor was asked by the Bill & Melinda Gates U.S. Libraries' team to serve on its advisory group for small/rural libraries. He has conducted workshops in rural venues for over twenty years, working to develop strong leaders within the community. He is founder of the Trustee College consulting service and currently works with the Wyoming State Library to develop a series of DVD segments to provide trustee training. For details, please go to <http://trusteecollege.googlepages.com>.