

## When Friends Go Rogue

By Sally Gardner Reed

In a perfect world, the Friends of the Library work hard and effectively to raise money for their library. They help tremendously as ambassadors and advocates within the community. Happily, this is the case for most libraries.

Normally, library trustees have little to do with Friends' operations. Friends are typically 501(c)(3) organizations with their own governance structure, not answerable to the library's board. In a functional relationship, Friends have a slot on the trustees' monthly agenda to report on the group's financial health, contributions to the library, and promotion of the library. The library director or designee should be the liaison between the Friends and the library, discussing the library's needs and the Friends' work to meet those needs.

### ON THE WRONG PATH

However, sometimes Friends get off track. Following are the most frequent reasons I've heard in my former position as executive director of Friends of Libraries USA and United for Libraries.

- Friends are secretive and unwilling to share organizational and financial information with the library.
- Friends don't invite library administration to their meetings.
- Friends believe that because they raise the money, they should decide how it is spent.
- Friends withhold money for which the library has a legitimate need.
- Friends oppose library policy and/or direction.
- The Friends group gives funds raised to organizations or initiatives outside the library.
- Friends become "clubbish" and follow their own agenda.
- Friends' officers don't turn over, and they begin to think of the money raised as their own.

Though it's seldom the case that Friends go down the wrong path, when it does happen, it can cause a lot of sleepless nights for the director. When things go very wrong, the situation will probably find its way into the boardroom - and that's where trustees come in.

Once the director has taken all steps possible, there are times when nothing else works but to bring in the board. It might be that the Friends don't agree with the director about the direction the library is heading. They might even be right. Sometimes the Friends simply don't like the director. However, Friends don't really have a say in the library's direction - that's not their role.



When Friends go rogue, they can damage the library's reputation and fundraising capabilities. Because the trustees work to defend and promote the library's good name, they have a stake in the matter.

The first step will always be to try to salvage the relationship. A few trustees might accompany the director to a Friends meeting and attempt to resolve the issues. The trustees and director can remind the groups of

each entity's role. The trustees govern, set policy, and set the direction for the library. The director implements those policies and creates programs, collections, and services that further that direction. The Friends raise money and awareness to support the library's direction. When these become confused, it's time for serious action on the part of the trustees.

### FINAL OPTIONS

Governing boards have the authority and fiduciary responsibility to protect the library's assets, including the name of the library. Though trustees do not typically have authority over the Friends, boards do have authority over who uses the library's name. Once the decision has been made by the board to disassociate from the Friends, it should send a "cease and desist" letter to the Friends' board asking that the group stop using the library's name. In addition, the board should write a letter to the editor to the local paper, thanking the Friends for past service and explaining in a clear, nonemotional way the reason for the parting of the ways. If the library plans to develop a new Friends group, an invitation asking volunteers to contact the director can be included.

If the board is advisory only, it still has a path to take. In this case, the board and director should meet with their direct supervisor - typically the city or county manager or the mayor. It'll be an easier course with a paid administrator, because they may be less worried about political fallout than a mayor or other elected official. You will want to have solid evidence that extends over a year documenting conversations with the Friends, money collected for the library but not released, and money spent elsewhere. Be sure to let the mayor know that the library is planning to start a new group if this is the case.

Trustees have a vital interest in protecting the library's good name. If Friends operations or behaviors are threatening this, then it is not only permissible but essential that trustees work first to remedy problems and eventually, if necessary, end them by disassociating from the Friends completely.

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