

# Issue Brief: Public Library Trustees

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Library districts and several larger municipal libraries are governed by a five or seven-member policymaking Boards of Trustees. Most other city library boards are advisory only.

Under State laws originally enacted in the early 1940s, library district trustees are appointed by the County's legislative authority and, in the case of multi-county districts, by joint action of the legislative authorities of the counties included in the district. City library trustees are appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the council. They are limited to two consecutive terms and may be removed only for cause after a public hearing. Public library trustees are community volunteers—they receive no compensation for their service.

While bills requiring the election of public library trustees have been periodically introduced, usually because of a local concern specific to one library system, the Washington Library Association (WLA) and most library trustees feel that the current appointment system works as well today as when it was enacted. Appointed public library trustees continue to conscientiously carry out the fiduciary and policy responsibilities and duties set forth in state law (RCW 27.12.210) and continue to be accountable and responsive to their communities.

Those who support continuing the trustee appointment process believe that:

- Annual election costs, up to several hundred thousand dollars for larger library systems and paid from the library budget, would divert scarce funds from the materials and services for which libraries were created.
- Because there are sometimes few applicants for open trustee positions, if they were elective offices there may be serious difficulties filling them, as is currently the case with council positions in small towns and commissioner positions in small special districts.
- In many cities that operate their own municipal libraries, mandating the election of trustees would result in two sets of elected officials, with one — the city council — governing the other — the library board.
- Public libraries, a community's only source of free information on all sides of issues, could be more vulnerable to pressure from special interest groups.

For these reasons, the Washington Library Association (WLA) opposes legislation intended to make public library trusteeship an elected office and urges legislators to join in our opposition.

If it isn't broken, why fix it?