

Cold Feet, Hot Seats

Unexpected controversy
challenges volunteer leaders

By Sherry Squires

Every community has them. They meet in the nooks and crannies of public buildings to debate proposals, approve budgets or just chat about local events when the meeting agenda is light.

They are the decision makers — the unsung volunteers who serve on cemetery boards, school boards or library boards in every Idaho community.

They turn the wheels of public policy. Their decisions, while usually important, are often ignored by an uninterested public.

Until a hot-button issue emerges — one that starts controversy. The issue that sets the decision makers apart, usually sets them up for criticism, and forces them to take a stand in their community. The issue that turns volunteer board members into community leaders, at least for the moment.

This is very often the scenario with community decision making, says Dave Patton, director of the Center for Public Policy and Administration and Boise State professor of public administration.

"It was [former Speaker of the House] Tip O'Neal who said all politics are local," Patton says. "The real issues over values are local. That's where people have the greatest ability to influence their decision makers. And that's where some of the most difficult decisions are made."

A case in point: The Nampa Library Board of Trustees. Usually conducting its business with little fanfare, the board suddenly was under the glare of the public spotlight last summer when two children's books placed on the library shelves in May came under scrutiny. The books deal with homosexuality and attempt to explain to children why some kids have two males as

parents and some have two females.

The library ordered the books after a patron requested them. Controversy began the day the books arrived. After some patrons expressed concern, librarians moved the books from the picture book section of the library, aimed at 3- to 5-year-olds, to the juvenile section. Members of the community then attended a library board meeting in July.

Some wanted the books removed from the library. Others wanted them moved to the adult section. Some supported the library board's decision to keep the books.

The library board listened to the public debate and refused to overturn the library staff's decision.

Chairman Ed Schiller summarized board members' views and their fears during the August meeting.

"If we censor these books, what's next?" he asked. "Pretty soon we get a library with a counter in the front and the books behind it."

But arriving at their decision took some soul searching.

"It was pretty intimidating," remembers Katharina Parry, who has served on the library board for five years. "You always want everybody to be happy, and you could see right off that wasn't going to happen."

Parry, who graduated from Boise State in 1975 with an associate degree in marketing, says she has served on the board for her church and helped out with Boy Scouts, among other civic duties. But her current position is the only one that ever forced her into the public spotlight.

"Most of us are kind of uncomfortable with homosexuality in a way," Parry says. "But the freedoms that we share are sometimes a double-edged sword. These situa-



tions force you to look at yourself and how much you value your basic freedoms."

Board member Laurene Stanford, who received her MPA from Boise State in 1990, was born and raised in Nampa. Working as a spokeswoman for one of the largest school districts in the state and han-





CLOTHA KATIEB ANDRE

Trustees Katharina Parry, bottom left, and Laurene Stanford, bottom right, discuss library issues along with fellow board members, above, in August.

dling parent complaints, she was no stranger to controversy. But she says the library issue was different.

"No one ever realized this was going to be this big," she says.

When she arrived for the July meeting there were demonstrations taking place



outside the library. Most of those involved were objecting to the books on religious grounds.

"We knew there were lots of pro and con arguments and lots of hot-under-the-collar people," Stanford says. "It's uncomfortable to be in the position of deciding, but we also knew that this was important. I believe in true American libraries. That's more important than my feelings."

Stanford says she has learned to separate people from issues and depersonalize controversial situations.

But board member Doug Rosin says that has proven a more difficult task for him.

"This thing followed me to work," he says. "And I had so many phone calls at home. I really got yelled at. People got so involved in this issue that they lost perspective."

The issue was still unresolved in early September. The Nampa City Council threatened to withhold money from the library, and the board planned to discuss the issue further. But Rosin and other board members say they are set in their belief that they made the right decision.

That resolve likely has earned board members the respect of many citizens in the community, says Boise State's Patton.

Citizens often blame leaders for the conflict that naturally arises out of strong stands on issues, he says. But citizens are looking to the decision makers for leadership.

"When a leader takes a strong position, they reflect certain values that we want to hear, often deep values," Patton says. "The trick is that sometimes citizens don't know how they believe about something until it comes out. But the decision makers emerge as leaders because they're able to say what they believe, and that connects with somebody else."

Nampa librarian Karen Ganske says if there's a positive that has come from the controversy, it's likely that the board members now see how important their role really is.

"This experience has made them more committed, rather than less," she says. "They had to do some soul searching, but I think they're stronger for it. Although I'm not sure they would want to repeat it, I think each one has been a hero in this." □

BOISE STATE HELPS LEADERS LEARN EARLY

Boise State students have many opportunities to explore their leadership potential, but the university also co-sponsors several conferences that tap future leaders at the high school level.

The two most popular events are the annual Idaho Business Week and the Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership Seminar, both of which draw hundreds of Idaho high school students each summer to campus.

Idaho Business Week, sponsored by the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, holds two one-week sessions each July and demonstrates to high school students the challenges and rewards of operating their own businesses.

With the help of business leaders from across the state, students simulate the first three years of opening a business and hold discussions about the major issues facing private enterprise.

The Hugh O'Brian seminar, named for the late actor who wanted to promote leadership skills, is held in all 50 states and is aimed at high school sophomores.

One student is selected from each Idaho high school to attend the four-day affair on campus, where students hear from community, political and business leaders. They also hold mock legislative sessions and attend other training as part of the seminar's effort to get young people to think about their world and how they can get involved. □