

11 June 2018

TO: RAILS Board of Directors

FROM: Deirdre Brennan

SUBJECT: RAILS Board Engagement Strategies Report

One of the priority goals the RAILS Board set for me and RAILS in my evaluation last year was to improve our communication and engagement with board members. Mary Witt led this project as part of her role overseeing communications at RAILS and also because of her interest in evaluation of RAILS services.

The attached report highlights some of our recommendations for accomplishing this goal. These recommendations were gleaned from a complete study of current RAILS communication/engagement strategies, research into the practices of other nonprofit organizations, a survey of the current RAILS Board, and interviews with some of the board members elected most recently.

We implemented some of these recommendations with the most recent board election process. We plan to implement additional recommendations in the near future. Others will involve further discussion with the board before implementation, specifically:

- Page 3: Discussion of enforcing the RAILS Bylaws requirement for board members not to have more than two unexcused absences from meetings during the system year and the definition of an unexcused absence. Our bylaws state: “The System Board by a majority vote may, with a quorum present, declare a System Board position vacant if a Director fails to attend two (2) unexcused Board meetings during the System year.”
- Page 7: Discussion of all RAILS Board members attending the July board meeting at Burr Ridge, and a discussion of specific agenda items for that meeting.
- Page 8: Discussion of the suggestion by some board members to assign an experienced board member as a buddy/mentor to each new board member.
- Page 9: Discussion of discouraging board member participation in meetings via phone.

I, and the entire RAILS staff, are very appreciative of board members’ interest in RAILS and their willingness to dedicate their time and energy to RAILS success. In return, we, as staff, want to make sure that board members feel knowledgeable about RAILS and prepared if they are asked questions by colleagues at their home libraries. The board member job is an important one;

you all represent the residents of Illinois as well as member libraries so we take very seriously our responsibility to help you understand as fully as possible how we use tax dollars to support libraries in RAILS and across the state as well.

I look forward to discussing these issues, as well as any other comments or suggestions you have on the report beginning at the June 15 meeting.

RAILS Board Engagement Strategies Report

June 2018

Introduction/Background

Each fiscal year, the RAILS Board sets priorities for the Executive Director and RAILS staff to focus on during that year. One of the priorities the board established for FY2018 (July 2017 through June 2018) is board communication and engagement. This includes:

- Ensuring that all new RAILS Board members are effectively oriented into the system
- Making sure that all RAILS Board members are engaged with the system throughout their years of service
- Effectively/efficiently communicating with all board members and providing them with the information they need to make timely, informed decisions, including information about RAILS programs/services and other library-related issues of importance

For the purposes of this report, we will refer to all of these activities as board engagement.

RAILS currently uses the following strategies to engage our board:

- Scheduling board meetings at different locations throughout our 27,000 square mile area so the board can learn about and talk with members from different areas, interact in person with other RAILS Board members from different areas, and meet RAILS staff working at different RAILS service centers
- Using videoconference to ensure that those unable to attend a RAILS Board meeting in person are still able to participate as fully as possible
- Providing reports to the board on a monthly, annual, and special basis to “tell the story” of RAILS (what we do, why we do it, and how it impacts our member libraries) and to inform the board about other critical issues (funding, legislation, etc.) that affect our member libraries of all types (academic, public, school, and special)
- Utilizing monthly meetings to educate the RAILS Board about system programs/services and other issues they should be aware of to be effective board members
- Scheduling visits by the RAILS Executive Director to board member libraries to meet with them in their “natural habitat”
- Recruiting board member candidates from across the RAILS area as possible
- Encouraging all board members to visit the RAILS Burr Ridge service center, the system’s administrative headquarters, for an orientation into the “inner workings” of RAILS and to learn more about our programs/services in action

RAILS wants to build on these engagement efforts. Our board members generously volunteer/dedicate their time and expertise to serving the system, and we want to ensure that they are making the most effective and efficient use of this precious time.

Specifically, RAILS wants to ensure that all our board members:

- Fully understand their roles and responsibilities
- Feel supported, valued, and appreciated
- Are engaged with RAILS and interested in system activities
- Feel thoroughly prepared with all of the knowledge necessary to be a productive RAILS Board member
- Have an ongoing knowledge of key RAILS programs/services so they can serve as ambassadors for the system during encounters with RAILS member library staff and member library trustees
- Are aware of the current issues/challenges facing RAILS libraries of all types (academic, public, school, and special)

This report will present recommendations for accomplishing all of these goals.

Data Collection Methods and Process

RAILS used the following research methods in compiling this report:

- Examined current methods used to recruit new RAILS Board members, including publicity about open positions, general information about board service posted on the RAILS website, and the RAILS Board Member Job Description, to ensure that candidates know what will be expected of them as a RAILS Board member
- Examined the current board application process and what RAILS requires of interested candidates to see how this process might be improved
- Examined current methods used to orient new RAILS Board members, including all documents, instructional materials, emails, in-person orientation activities, etc.
- Interviewed RAILS staff most directly involved in the orientation process (RAILS Executive Director and RAILS Executive Assistant) to get their recommendations for improvement
- Interviewed the more recently elected members of the RAILS Board to get their feedback on the orientation process. The results of these interviews will be highlighted in relevant sections of this document.
- Surveyed the current RAILS Board in March 2018 to get feedback on a number of issues, including their understanding of their roles as a board member, usefulness/relevance of materials they receive prior to each board meeting, knowledge of RAILS programs/services, etc. Eleven responses were received (out of a possible total of 15) and the results will be highlighted in relevant sections of this document.
- Researched board orientation and engagement strategies of other nonprofit organizations
- Reviewed in-person board development activities at RAILS Board meetings during the past year, including staff presentations on RAILS programs/services
- Determined topics it is important for the board to know about, including RAILS programs/services, legislation that is especially relevant to them as board members, current issues affecting RAILS member libraries, etc.
- Examined board operational reports for the past year to determine their effectiveness in communicating the impact of RAILS' programs/services on member libraries
- Analyzed and compared RAILS Executive Director's reports for the past year with board operational reports from that same time period to ascertain how these two documents could

work more effectively together and do a better job of showing the impact of RAILS programs/services on member libraries

The following are recommendations gleaned from this research for every phase of the RAILS Board engagement process.

Recommendations for Recruiting New Board Members

Board orientation and engagement starts with the recruitment process, as this is the stage when a potential board candidate seeks more information about serving on the RAILS Board and contemplates whether he or she will be a good fit for board service.

In the early days of RAILS, it was difficult to recruit board members. For this reason, when promoting board service, the system primarily used language such as “the time commitment is not onerous,” “board committees don’t meet that often,” and “you can phone in to board meetings.” In the past few years, RAILS has generated much greater interest in serving on our board - especially for at-large and type of library seat openings (academic, public, school, and special).

Moving forward, it is recommended that RAILS provide a more positive and accurate picture of what is involved in RAILS Board service, including being clearer about board member requirements and responsibilities. Candidates wishing to make a meaningful contribution to the system will want specific expectations for their performance. They will not only want to know how many meetings they must attend, but what attendance at those meetings will mean.

RAILS made the following changes to our recruitment process during the April/May 2018 board election to help us accomplish these goals.

Revised RAILS Board Member Job Description

RAILS revised the RAILS Board Member Job Description (see Appendix A) to more clearly outline board member expectations and responsibilities. Key duties and requirements in the revised description that were not previously emphasized when recruiting board candidates include:

- Attending and actively participating in board meetings, including the RAILS Bylaws requirement for board members not to have more than two unexcused absences from meetings during the system fiscal year. (It is recommended that the RAILS Board enforce this requirement moving forward.)
- Staying informed about RAILS programs/services through reading the weekly *RAILS E-News* and other means. (All board members must be subscribed to the *RAILS E-News* moving forward and RAILS will subscribe them.)
- Promoting the latest RAILS news to other RAILS member library staff and/or trustees
- Making it a requirement to attend an orientation session at the Burr Ridge service center

When candidates nominate themselves for the RAILS Board, they are now required to indicate that they have read the job description and that they will be able to meet all requirements/responsibilities if elected. Once elected, they will be asked to sign the job description.

Current board members will also be asked to sign the job description if they apply for re-election. (Current board members will not be required to attend an orientation session at Burr Ridge, but are always welcome to do so as a refresher if they desire.)

Nomination Process and Publicity

RAILS also made changes to the April/May 2018 nomination process for potential new board members and to the publicity surrounding this process. As an example, we changed the nomination form to ensure more consistent data collection from all candidates. Prior to this change, some candidates submitted pages of information about their experience (much of it unrelated to prospective RAILS Board service), while others submitted a brief paragraph or two. The streamlined, revised form calls for a statement of interest (100 words or less), and a section to indicate relevant experience (200 words or less).

As indicated above, candidates are now also required to indicate that they have read and understand the RAILS Board Member Job Description before they are able to submit their nomination form.

Other Board Recruitment Recommendations

Recent RAILS elections have generated great interest from at-large candidates as indicated above. Interest in the academic, school, and special library seats is also relatively high. It is most difficult to generate an extensive slate of public library trustee candidates. To help improve this situation, it is recommended that RAILS make board member recruitment more of an active ongoing process throughout the year by:

- Building an ongoing pool of potential board candidates, including those who express interest in getting more involved with RAILS, those who ran (unsuccessfully) in previous elections, etc.
- Asking RAILS staff and board members to contribute names of people they think would be good candidates for the board based on their encounters with these people throughout the year
- Keeping a permanent board recruitment page on the RAILS website that includes general information about board service and its benefits, a link to the revised board member job description, a mention to watch upcoming issues of the *RAILS E-News* for information on board vacancies, and a form to fill out to be notified of upcoming board opportunities
- Enlisting the help of the RAILS Board Nominating Committee to recruit potential board members as needed, especially public library trustee candidates
- Continuing to aim for a RAILS Board member makeup that is diverse in terms of geographical representation, experience, skills, ethnicity, age group, and other factors

Recommendations for Orienting New RAILS Board Members and Providing Ongoing Refresher Training for All Board Members

RAILS recognizes the importance of making new board members feel welcome from the start. The RAILS Executive Director contacts them to congratulate/welcome them and also to schedule a visit to their library at some point in the near future. New board members also receive information via email from the RAILS Executive Assistant prior to their first board meeting.

Because there is a vast amount of information for new RAILS Board members to absorb, the following recommendations are designed to help them digest and retain this information more effectively and to prevent them from feeling overwhelmed in the process.

Executive Assistant Email

It is recommended that the Executive Assistant send one streamlined email to new board members (after they have received the congratulatory email from the Executive Director). This streamlined email should only include information essential for them to know prior to their first board meeting, and should be similar in structure to the very successful emails currently sent by RAILS to new member library directors.

Other information previously sent via the Executive Assistant's emails can be included in the board portal referenced below or disseminated in other ways. For example, RAILS publicity materials previously sent via these emails, including the seasonal *What's New at RAILS* flyer and a link to the RAILS programs/services booklet, should be distributed to all board members at monthly board meetings.

Information included in RAILS Executive Assistant's introductory email to new board members should be limited to:

- Information about their RAILS Board email account, including why a separate account is necessary and the importance of checking this account regularly
- When their first board meeting will be held, where/how they can attend this meeting, and information about travel reimbursements. (As mentioned elsewhere in this document, new board members should be strongly encouraged to attend their first meeting at the RAILS Burr Ridge service center.)
- The need for the board member to sign the RAILS Board Member Job Description (Appendix A)
- Information needed from the board member prior to their first meeting, including a photo for the RAILS website (if available – otherwise RAILS staff will take a photo)
- The need to schedule an orientation session at the Burr Ridge service center with a mention that the Executive Assistant will send a follow-up email with potential dates for this session
- A link to the proposed board portal described below (when developed)
- Who to contact if they have any questions prior to their first board meeting

Orientation Session at Burr Ridge Service Center

It is recommended that the required orientation session at the Burr Ridge service center for all new board members be scheduled as soon as possible after their election. Other attendees at this orientation session should include the RAILS Executive Director, Chief Financial Officer or representative, and any other appropriate RAILS staff members. Veteran board members should also be invited to attend these orientations if they missed their own orientation, if they want a refresher, etc. The session should be relatively informal and as interactive as possible, with plenty of opportunities for board members to ask questions.

The following are suggested agenda items for the orientation session, which would last approximately 3 ½ - 4 hours. (Some of these items were suggested by the more recently elected RAILS Board members

who were interviewed as a part of this project. None of these interviewees attended a formal orientation session at Burr Ridge prior to their first board meeting.)

- Welcome and introductions, including new board member(s) introducing themselves and talking briefly about their experience
- Background on library systems in Illinois – how they are funded, relationship with the Illinois State Library, system members, etc.
- RAILS’ mission, vision, and strategic plan – how the RAILS Board fits into the picture and the value they bring to RAILS, how RAILS’ programs/services flow from the strategic plan, etc.
- RAILS Board member responsibilities, including a review of the board member job description, serving on board committees, need for a separate RAILS email account and the need to check that account regularly, brief overview of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Open Meetings Act (OMA) and how they relate to RAILS board service, etc.
- Explanation of RAILS financials and how to read them, explanation of the different funds
- Practical details new board members need to know, including where they can attend board meetings, how they are reimbursed for travel to board meetings, etc.
- Brief demo of the board portal (when available) and the information it contains
- Tour of the RAILS Burr Ridge service center and the opportunity to meet RAILS staff
- A one-on-one with RAILS IT staff if necessary to set up the board member’s RAILS email account

RAILS Board Portal on RAILS Website

It is recommended that RAILS develop a board portal on the RAILS website that includes all of the information related to board service in one place. Only RAILS Board members and appropriate RAILS staff would have access to this portal. The portal could be introduced in beta form and expanded/ revised in response to RAILS Board member feedback.

The information on this portal can include:

- Information on the current RAILS Board, including terms, contact information, areas of expertise, etc.
- Information on RAILS Board meetings, including the current calendar, past board meeting documents, and a link to the board meeting travel reimbursement form
- RAILS Board committee options and information on upcoming committee meetings
- RAILS Board member requirements, including the revised job description, a link to the Governance section of the RAILS Bylaws, the Board of Director requirements from the Illinois Library System Act, etc. Related documents, such as the Executive Director’s job description and goals for the current fiscal year (since the board is responsible for evaluating the Executive Director) could also be included.
- A section with information of particular interest to new RAILS Board members (including information from the Executive Assistant’s introductory email described above)
- Important laws/policies, including the conflict of interest policy/form, board attendance policy, policy on attending board meetings via electronic means, Open Meetings Act, Robert’s Rules of Order, etc.
- Training and other educational/informational resources, including RAILS trustee training opportunities, information on the RAILS FOIA/OMA hotline, important library-related acronyms and definitions, etc.

- General information about RAILS, including background/history, organizational chart, member information, programs/services descriptions, talking points board members can use when talking to others about RAILS, etc.

July RAILS Board Meeting

It is recommended that RAILS use the first board meeting of the new fiscal year (July) as a refresher orientation session and that all RAILS Board members attend this meeting at the Burr Ridge service center. Since there will likely be several new board members present, prior to each agenda item, brief explanatory information on that agenda item should be provided.

Specific agenda items for the July board meeting should include:

- Introductions – including every board member introducing themselves and saying a few brief words about where they are from, how long they have been on the RAILS Board, their areas of expertise, etc.
- Board President talking about general meeting guidelines, including the importance for all board members to participate and ask questions about anything that needs additional clarification, the need to leave pauses to hear from those participating at remote videoconference locations, the need to speak loudly and clearly with no rustling of papers, etc.
- In addition to that month’s financial report, a brief introductory explanation to the different RAILS financial reports the board will be receiving at monthly meetings and what they include. (A more detailed explanation of these reports will take place at the required Burr Ridge orientation session as referenced above.)
- Explanation of different RAILS Board committees, including charges, why RAILS has each committee, how board members can indicate interest in serving on a committee, etc. (A more detailed explanation of these committees will take place at the required Burr Ridge orientation session.)
- Executive Director update or summary on any current issues facing the board that new board members may be unaware of, and carryover issues from the previous fiscal year. (This information could be provided via the Executive Director’s Report or as a “cheat sheet.”)
- Board member orientation by Executive Director (under New Business) to include:
 - RAILS communication with board members and meeting attendance
 - A reminder about RAILS Board email and the need to respond punctually. (Inform the board that response deadlines will be included in the email subject line as specified below.)
 - RAILS strategic plan overview
 - RAILS organization chart
 - RAILS facilities
 - RAILS Board member portal (when available)

Board Orientation Checklist

It is recommended that RAILS have an internal orientation checklist to ensure that all steps in the orientation process have been accomplished, including the welcome message from the Executive Director, the Executive Assistant’s introductory email, the Executive Director’s visit to the board

member's library, subscribing the board member to the *RAILS E-News*, scheduling the Burr Ridge orientation session and the completion of this session, etc. (See Appendix B for a suggested checklist.)

Other Board Orientation Recommendations

The following are additional recommendations from current RAILS Board members regarding the orientation process:

- Assign new board members a more experienced board member as a “buddy” or mentor. The buddy could help provide guidance on questions/issues the new board member did not feel the need or comfort level to raise formally at monthly board meetings and provide more background information on items discussed at meetings as needed. It is recommended that the current board discuss this possibility to see if there are volunteers willing to serve as buddies for new board members.
- Make a conscious effort not to use so many acronyms, at least in the very beginning of the board year when new members are trying to get acclimated to all things RAILS. Though board members are provided with a list of acronyms and what they stand for, it can still be difficult to decipher them during the course of a board meeting where so much new information is being presented.

Recommendations for Engaging All Board Members at Monthly Meetings

Meeting Attendance/Participation

One of RAILS' biggest ongoing challenges is getting our board members to indicate (in a timely manner) whether they are going to attend an upcoming meeting and how/where they are going to attend the meeting. In addition to emphasizing the importance of a timely response during the new board member orientation process and at the first meeting of the fiscal year, it is recommended that RAILS include a “please respond by” date in each relevant email subject line as a further reminder that prompt response from board members is essential to the smooth operation of the monthly board meeting process. The deadline for response should also be included in the body of the email.

It is also recommended that RAILS provide opportunities for RAILS IT staff to help board members merge their RAILS email with the other email on their smartphones, so that all email messages will be in one place. For example, IT staff could provide hands-on assistance at the required Burr Ridge orientation session for new board members and/or at the first board meeting of the year (and other meetings as necessary). Board members may find it easier to reply to RAILS email if they do not have to log into a separate email account each time.

Having participated in meetings at videoconference sites during this research project, as well as observing videoconference and phone participation at monthly meetings, it is clearly an advantage to attend a RAILS Board meeting in person. It is easier to participate in the discussion or even to make or second a motion when participating in a meeting in person (the majority of motions and seconds come from board members attending in person).

RAILS appreciates the difficulty for those who are located far afield from the Burr Ridge service center to attend each board meeting in person. The following are recommendations for engaging the participation of all board members during a meeting, no matter where they are attending.

- Strongly encourage all board members to attend the first meeting of each fiscal year (July) in person at the Burr Ridge service center. It is very important for the board to start building a strong relationship as a team from the very beginning and it is easier to build these relationships if everyone can interact face-to-face at least once during the board year. Emphasize that RAILS will pay all travel expenses for board members to attend this meeting in person.

Having all or as many of the board members attend the July meeting in person would also allow for an informal “meet and greet” to help board members get to know each other, a written suggestion by a RAILS Board member on the March 2018 board survey.

- Before starting each meeting, have the board president check in to verify that everyone is able to see, hear, and speak properly. Remind everyone about not rustling papers, clicking computer keys, etc., especially if seated by a highly sensitive RAILS microphone.
- At the start of each meeting, have the board president encourage all board members to participate, to ask questions about things they are not familiar with, etc. Some may feel reluctant to admit that they do not know something they think they “should” know. Have pregnant pauses at key intervals to make sure hesitant board members have time to speak up and to allow for the time delay at videoconference locations.
- Have the board president stop regularly during the meeting to check in with those participating via videoconference, especially if they have been silent throughout the course of the meeting thus far. While very outgoing board members may not have difficulty “interrupting” the conversation of those participating in the meeting face-to-face, it can be difficult for others to get in a word edgewise. Checking in with videoconference participants regularly will only take a few extra minutes and will help them feel more engaged in the meeting.

It is also recommended that the board president formally check in with all videoconference locations where RAILS Board members are present when a major issue is under discussion and during the RAILS Board Member Reports section of the agenda.

- Discourage board member participation by phone. Videoconference participation makes it difficult enough for all board members to have a chance to participate equally in each meeting, and adding phone participation makes it even more of a challenge because any opportunity for face-to-face communication is gone. This was verified by a comment on the March 2018 RAILS Board member survey regarding phone participation: “The audio is not that great and I feel like I miss a lot of the meeting. Additionally, I feel more connected if I can see others in the room.”

While it may be necessary for board members to occasionally participate via phone, it should be discouraged as a usual, ongoing practice.

If board members are attending by phone, it is recommended for the board president to check in with them periodically, especially if they have been silent throughout the course of the

meeting thus far. It is also recommended that the board president formally check in with each board member participating via phone when a major issue is under discussion and during the RAILS Board Member Reports section of the agenda.

Board Packet Reports/Documents

As referenced above, this research project included an examination/comparison of the RAILS Executive Director's report and the operational reports included in the monthly board packet to determine how these documents might better work together to tell the ongoing RAILS story and reflect the impact of our programs and services on RAILS member libraries.

Since there was some duplication between the two reports, RAILS decided to combine them in a "This Month at RAILS" report, with the Executive Director's report as the lead document, followed by the latest news on select RAILS' programs/services, including a brief explanation of the program/service and its impact on RAILS members. Information will not repeat from month to month and a program/service will only be included if there is something new to relate to the board.

The goals of the combined report are to:

- Give the board a clear, easily understood report of ongoing/major activities, why RAILS is involved in those activities, and what impact those activities have/will have on RAILS members
- Demonstrate to the board that RAILS is following the strategic plan and achieving our mission
- Demonstrate to the board that RAILS is achieving the goals the board established for the fiscal year
- Make the compilation process less labor-intensive and the resulting document easier to read for board members

The new report debuted at the March 30, 2018 RAILS Board meeting and has thus far generated favorable reviews, including at the March board meeting and via a positive comment on the March 2018 board survey.

In addition to the "This Month at RAILS" report, it is recommended to provide separate, periodic updates on RAILS' progress in meeting the goals outlined in our strategic plan (once it is revised). These updates should include tie-ins to actions the board authorized, whenever relevant, to help the board see how they are working with staff to move the RAILS strategic plan forward.

Other recommendations regarding monthly board documents as indicated by board members on the March 2018 board survey and via board member interviews include:

- "It might be helpful to have a quick summary of any action items on the board agenda."
- "I would appreciate the addition of a combined PDF for the monthly board packet. It would save time when I access the packet and make it easier to keep track if there was just one file for each month's meeting."
- "Ask board members if they prefer a hard copy printout of the monthly board packet or if they would like to receive a link to the packet via email."

Board Development Topics

RAILS Programs/Services

It is recommended to include brief (no more than five minutes) RAILS Service of the Month updates at each board meeting. Board members are likely to be more engaged with RAILS if they have a strong understanding of our programs/services and how they impact their library and/or type of library. Also, if board members are to be ambassadors for RAILS as indicated on the revised board job description referenced above, they need to have a basic knowledge of RAILS programs/services. This knowledge will also make it easier for them to participate in discussions about those programs/services during board meetings.

Each service update could include a brief explanation of what the service is, who can use it, and how it impacts each board member and each board member's library type. A one-page "cheat sheet" for each service could also be provided with information on where board members can find out more if interested.

The March 2018 board survey included several questions relating to board members knowledge of current RAILS programs/services and whether they would feel comfortable providing basic information about those programs/services to other staff or trustees at RAILS member libraries.

Survey results indicated that some board members would like more information about RAILS BiblioBoard offerings, Find More Illinois, the availability of RAILS discounts/group purchases, the Cataloging Maintenance Center (CMC) operated by the Illinois Heartland Library System, and how RAILS members and/or trustees from RAILS member libraries can find out more about RAILS programs/services in general. These topics could be included in the service of the month updates.

One board survey respondent also indicated interest in hearing from other RAILS staff at monthly board meetings, in addition to the key staff they normally have contact with. It is recommended that different staff members and/or department teams make the monthly service presentations whenever possible.

One of the board interviewees also expressed interest in understanding more about RAILS services from start to finish, for example, how someone gets an item through interlibrary loan and RAILS' involvement in this process.

Keeping all of these suggestions in mind, possible service of the month topics include:

- RAILS BiblioBoard offerings
- Find More Illinois overlay project
- Continuing Education – how RAILS selects CE topics, locations, and different presentation formats; impact of RAILS CE on member libraries, etc.
- Trustee training opportunities available through RAILS
- Importance of RAILS conference exhibit booths as a member engagement tool
- Availability of RAILS discounts/group purchases for member libraries
- Cataloging Maintenance Center and RAILS cataloging services for member libraries (including information on how different libraries catalog items, the importance of high-quality cataloging for libraries, etc.)

- How RAILS members and trustees from member libraries can learn more about RAILS programs/services
- How RAILS connects and engages with all types of member libraries and helps these libraries connect/engage with each other
- Resource sharing picture in Illinois – the difference between consortia, standalone, and non-automated libraries and what RAILS does to help all of these libraries share resources (in addition to Find More Illinois)
- The changing delivery picture in Illinois – how RAILS keeps daily delivery running smoothly while introducing innovations to make delivery even more efficient and effective
- How interlibrary loan works from start to finish – from a person requesting an item not available at his/her library to the delivery of that item
- The RAILS IT infrastructure and how it keeps other RAILS programs/services running smoothly even though members rarely hear about the infrastructure itself
- RAILS financial processes and internal controls
- Member library certification – what it is and why all libraries need to know about it
- What RAILS does to serve all types of libraries
- Strategic plan goals (cover one goal per board meeting once revised plan is in place) – how it impacts our members, what RAILS is doing to address the goal, etc.

The following are additional recommendations for keeping the board updated on the latest news about RAILS programs/services:

- Distribute “hard copies” of RAILS promotional materials to board members at monthly meetings as appropriate. (One board interviewee also suggested supplying board members with multiple copies of promotional materials so they could take them back to the library they represent or distribute them to other members from their same library type.)
- “Tell stories” about RAILS programs/services via the “This Month at RAILS” report referenced above
- Include one or two suggested items in each Executive Director’s report that board members can share at their library’s board meeting (for public library trustees) or with other members from their type of library via relevant mailing lists or via in-person encounters. (For example, the January item could be about library certification.)
- Provide board members with brief talking points about specific RAILS programs/services that they can use when talking to other member library trustees and/or staff members from different types of libraries. These talking points could also be included in the board portal referenced above.

Library Advocacy/Legislation

The March 2018 board survey results included a request for “pertinent federal and state legislative updates.” Major needs expressed in the April 2018 RAILS Member Needs Assessment (conducted in conjunction with the revision of the RAILS strategic plan) included help from RAILS in “telling the library story,” assistance with advocacy-related issues, and help communicating the value of libraries to elected officials. Ensuring that the RAILS Board had current information on state and federal legislative issues could help meet these needs as well.

It is recommended that RAILS include federal and state legislative updates on each board agenda (as appropriate), either as a separate agenda item or as a part of the RAILS Executive Director's report.

Other Topics

It is also important for the RAILS Board to stay informed about other important trends in the outside environment affecting the system and/or system members. This includes issues that RAILS members identified as being of importance to them during the April 2018 needs assessment survey referenced above.

It is recommended to use the Board Development item on each board agenda to update the board on these issues, including brief background on the issue, how it affects different types of libraries, and why it is important for all RAILS Board members to have a basic understanding of the issue. A one-page cheat sheet could also be provided with key information on each topic.

Possible topics include:

- Challenges facing academic libraries, including what RAILS is hearing from academic library members and a report from our academic library board representative(s) – to include how academic libraries are funded
- Challenges facing school libraries, including what RAILS is hearing from school library members and a report from our school library board representative(s) – to include how school libraries are funded
- Challenges facing special libraries, including what RAILS is hearing from special library members and a report from our special library board representative(s) – to include how special libraries are funded
- Separate reports (one topic per board meeting) on the following common concerns indicated by RAILS members on the April 2018 RAILS member needs assessment:
 - How to help the unserved in Illinois (as presented at the January 2018 RAILS Board meeting)
 - Net Neutrality (as presented at the April 2018 RAILS Board meeting)
 - Protecting library user privacy/confidentiality (possibly present at April board meeting to coincide with the American Library Association's annual Choose Privacy Week in May)
 - Importance of teaching information literacy and digital literacy skills
 - How libraries are dealing with social issues in light of other social service organizations having to close their doors (homeless/unsheltered populations, serving those with special needs, etc.)
- Reports on different library-related conferences, including hot topics/major issues discussed at those conferences and why board members should consider attending. (Conference information could be included the RAILS Executive Director's report referenced above as appropriate.)

Conferences include:

- Illinois Library Association Conference
- Association of Illinois School Library Educators
- Association of Rural and Small Libraries Conference
- Health Science Librarians of Illinois Conference
- Public Library Association Conference

- Reaching Forward
- Reaching Forward South
- American Library Association Midwinter Conference
- American Library Association Annual Conference
- Special Library Association Annual Conference
- Association of College and Research Libraries Conference
- Illinois Association of College and Research Libraries Conference

Other Engagement Strategies

The following are additional strategies RAILS can experiment with to engage our board members and to help our board members engage with each other:

- Conduct periodic board self-assessments (every two to three years) to help the board evaluate its effectiveness as well as areas where they need more information. Topics covered could be similar to those covered on the April 2018 board survey. All survey responses would be kept confidential. Questions could cover:
 - Each individual board member’s understanding of their roles and responsibilities as a member of the RAILS Board
 - Usefulness of materials received prior to RAILS Board meetings
 - Comfort level in participating in RAILS Board meetings
 - Knowledge of RAILS programs/services and what programs/services board members would like to know more about
 - Other topics board members would like to see covered at RAILS Board meetings
- Have the RAILS Executive Director check in with board members individually at periodic intervals to gauge how they are feeling about the system and/or to address specific questions and concerns. This includes thanking board members for their work on specific board agenda items, work on RAILS committees, etc.
- Recognize board members publicly at board meetings for awards and other accomplishments related to their individual library board service or their RAILS Board service

Conclusion

RAILS Board communication and engagement is an ongoing process. RAILS will continue to test and refine the strategies outlined in this document and to develop new strategies as appropriate to more fully engage our board members and to make their service and experience on the RAILS Board as effective and enjoyable as possible.

As stated in other sections of this document, RAILS very much appreciates the time and expertise all of our board members dedicate to helping RAILS achieve our overall goal of being the best library system in the country! We welcome any additional suggestions board members have for further improvements to our board engagement/communication strategies.

Appendix A – Revised RAILS Board Member Job Description

RAILS Board Member Job Description

General Description

The RAILS Board of Directors is composed of 15 individuals who work as a team on issues affecting the long-term future of the Reaching Across Illinois Library System (RAILS) and its member libraries. The board includes:

- Eight board members from RAILS public libraries
- One individual employed by a RAILS academic library
- One individual employed by a RAILS school library
- One individual employed by a RAILS special library
- Four individuals elected at large and currently employed or current members of the governing board of a RAILS public, academic, school, or special library

All board members represent the overall interests and needs of RAILS member libraries as a whole across a 27,000 square mile area, rather than individual libraries, institutions, or specific communities/regions.

Board members are elected by the RAILS membership and serve without compensation. (RAILS reimburses board members for travel and other necessary expenses.) The RAILS Board may also appoint board members to fill vacancies between elections.

Term

The term of office for a RAILS Board member is three years. No board member may serve more than a total of six years unless two years have elapsed since the sixth year of service.

General Duties/Responsibilities

- Attend and actively participate in 11 board meetings per year either in person or at a [RAILS videoconference location](#). (RAILS will reimburse all travel and lodging costs to attend board meetings.) Review agendas and all supporting documents prior to each meeting.
- Actively serve on at least one [board committee](#)
- Monitor the system's finances and overall financial health and approve all budgets and expenditures
- Establish, review, revise, and approve policies for the effective management of the system
- Hire and evaluate the performance of the RAILS Executive Director

- Stay informed about RAILS programs/services by reading the weekly *RAILS E-News* and other means
- Promote the latest RAILS news, including information about programs/services, to other staff and trustees at your library and/or to other RAILS members from your type of library
- Serve as an ambassador and advocate for RAILS, RAILS member libraries of all types (academic, public, school, and special), and for libraries in general

Requirements

- Cannot have more than two unexcused absences from board meetings during the system year
- Must be a legal resident in the RAILS geographic region
- Complete Open Meetings Act training within 90 days of being seated on the RAILS Board
- File an annual Statement of Economic Interest as required by the Illinois Governmental Ethics Act
- File an annual Conflict of Interest form
- Maintain familiarity with Illinois library system laws*, the Freedom of Information Act, the Open Meetings Act (OMA), the Public Officer Prohibited Activities Act, the State Official and Employees' Ethics Act, and with Robert's Rules of Order
- New board members must attend an orientation session (approximately four hours) at the RAILS Burr Ridge service center prior to beginning service on the board or shortly thereafter. RAILS will reimburse all travel/lodging costs.

Acknowledgement

(To be signed after election/appointment)

I acknowledge that I have read this job description and can meet the responsibilities and requirements listed.

Signature

Date

*See additional information about board service in the Reaching Across Illinois Library System Bylaws, [Article Five](#) and the Illinois Library System Act, [section 3030.250](#). Proposed New RAILS Board Member Orientation Checklist

Appendix B – Sample New RAILS Board Member Orientation Checklist

Activity	Champion	Timeline
Contact new board member to congratulate/welcome them. Inform them of Executive Assistant's email with more detailed information to follow.	Executive Director	When election results are public
Send introductory email to new board member including only what they need to know prior to first board meeting	Executive Assistant	After Executive Director welcome email
New board member signs RAILS Board Member Job Description	Executive Assistant	Return signed document prior to first board meeting
Schedule orientation session at Burr Ridge	Executive Assistant	As soon as possible after elected
Schedule visit by RAILS Executive Director to new board member's library	Executive Assistant/ Executive Director	Within first three months of service
Sign new board member up for <i>RAILS E-News</i>	Communications Director	When election results are public