

## Library Lines

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### The Role of a Neutral Public Library in a Political Society

In an increasingly partisan and divided society, the Public Library's role as a neutral forum that presents all sides has become even more important. Recently our District's role of neutrality, in relation to our meeting room policy, came into question. Our meeting room policy, while allowing non-profit groups of all sorts to reserve rooms for meetings, does have some restrictions about political campaigning. We also restrict marketing and fundraising activities and give guidelines about use of the rooms and advertising of the programs. We are happy to provide a neutral forum for debate between candidates, but we do not host partisan, one party, or single candidate events.

Our response in the two recent cases illustrates our role as a public forum, free of partisan promotion. In the first case Senator Bennett, who is also a Democratic candidate, held a town hall meeting in the Delta Library meeting room. Originally he had intended these Western Slope stops to be campaign events, and we requested that the library meeting room be used as a "meet and greet", or town hall style meeting, rather than a partisan campaign event. We are always happy to offer an elected official a venue to meet constituents and we feel this is an important role for Public Libraries to fill. In this case, over ninety persons attended of all backgrounds and persuasions and were able to speak with Senator Bennett and ask questions. Actually the event provided a broader and deeper perspective than the usual campaign stop.

In the second case, a local Republican women's group holds their regular meetings in the Delta Library meeting room. After a request, we informed them that our meeting room would not be available for campaign meetings for candidates representing only their party. We explained that the library is a neutral place and that we welcome events with candidates of more than one party, but the Library District cannot appear to take a partisan position in support of one candidate or party. We encouraged the group to participate in development of a neutral forum or debate between candidates of different parties that could be hosted at the library.

In both cases, we were accused of limiting freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Actually neither charge is accurate. We are protecting freedom of speech by providing a neutral forum for civil debate. We provide factual information, such as printed materials provided by the League of Women Voters, and we offer access to all sorts of materials that provide various viewpoints and opinions.

We are also a Public Library District, a division of local government, much like a school district or other taxing district. We provide information on all sorts of subjects, but we cannot take a partisan political stance as an institution. We avoid appearance of partiality or partisanship. Our staff members may participate in all sorts of political and campaign activities on their own time, but they may not campaign in the libraries or on Library District time. For well over 100 years, public libraries have been places where people learn good citizenship. Often classes are provided for new citizens about how to vote,

about how government works, and about how to be active in local government. In many communities, basic citizenship and language classes are offered to new arrival populations. Libraries always have materials about participation in government and often are locations for voter registration. We look for ways to be a forum for civil discourse and debate, and for ways to educate the populace about how government and politics work. Programming in libraries strives to be diverse and to present a variety of viewpoints. Collections are developed with the same diversity in mind.

Our District mission is “Informing and empowering the community; providing resources for life, leisure and learning.” Our political neutrality allows us to be a place for trusted fact finding, a place for true civil discourse, and a place for forums and discussions.

We hope that our meeting room policy will foster access to more information and that our buildings, materials and staff provide bridges that transcend partisan politics. Delta County Libraries are committed to providing places of political neutrality. Copies of the District meeting room policy are available at any of our libraries.