

## **BRANCH FRIENDS – Q AND A**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the Oakland Public Library's family of support groups! The Oakland Public Library has an active Friends of the Oakland Public Library 501(c)(3) organization which consists of members from Oakland, Piedmont, Emeryville and throughout the state. This existing Friends group advocates and raises funds for the entire Oakland Public Library system. In addition, there are a number of neighborhood Friends groups which support specific branches or collections.

Friends groups are not policy-making bodies. They do:

- Advocate for the library
- Donate their time as volunteers for the library
- Raise funds to help support the collections, programs and other service needs of the library
- Sponsor programs

The purpose of this overview is to answer many of the questions you might have about establishing a Friends group or serving as a member. Membership forms for the Friends of the Oakland Public Library (FOPL) are available on their Website: <http://www.fopl.org>. You may also check out one of the resources cited at the end of this document to obtain further information about Friends of Libraries organizations.

### **Q. WHY DOES THE LIBRARY NEED A FRIENDS GROUP?**

**A.** A Friends group has two main purposes:

1. To serve as an advocate for the library in the local community and with local, state and federal elected officials.
2. To raise funds to supplement the Library's budget in order to provide additional materials, special programs, equipment or services not funded through the Library's regular budget.

### **Q. HOW DOES THIS ROLE DIFFER FROM THE LIBRARY ADVISORY COMMISSION?**

**A.** Members of the Library Advisory Commission are appointed by the City Council and are charged with reporting and making recommendations to the Council on library policies. Friends are residents who value public libraries, but recognize that they do not perform an advisory role in policy-making for the library. Anyone who agrees with its mission can join a Friends group as long as they abide by the rules of the organization.

### **Q. IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FRIENDS AND REGULAR VOLUNTEERS?**

**A.** While the Library does count Friends' members as "volunteers," Friends work through the Friends of the Library organization. Regular volunteers report directly to a library site supervisor.

## **Q. HOW DO WE START A FRIENDS GROUP?**

- Enlist the help of the branch manager. They know who frequents the library most often – contact them.
- Decide what the function of your Friends group will be.
- Get in touch with FOPL and partner with an existing Branch Friends for ideas.
- Make yourselves visible, create an eye-catching flyer, bookmark. Ask the library staff to provide them to patrons. Ask staff to mention joining the Friends group at the end of popular programs.
- Join the OPL Branch Friends Network to talk to other Friends and find out what's happening. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BranchFriendsNetwork>
- Attend the bi-annual Branch Friends Network meetings.

For other ideas, consult one of the resources cited at the end of this document.

## **Q. DO WE NEED TO HAVE BY-LAWS?**

**A.** By-laws will help your organization run smoothly and efficiently. By-laws are required to open a checking account and in order to obtain tax-exempt status.

## **Q. DO WE NEED TO OBTAIN TAX-EXEMPT STATUS?**

**A.** No. Tax-exempt status (501c3) may be desirable for Friends who handle larger amounts of monies and receive large donations from donors who wish to receive a tax write off. FOPL and several branch friends groups have obtained tax-exempt status. Resources for obtaining 501 (c) (3) tax-exempt status are listed at the end of this document.

## **Q. HOW CAN FRIENDS GROUPS RECRUIT NEW MEMBERS?**

**A.** There are many ways in which Friends groups can solicit new members. It helps to first have a clear mission so that people know why they should join your organization. You may also want to consider offering special incentives to new members, such as discounts on book sales, etc. Besides word-of-mouth, a basic membership tool, such as a flyer, brochure or letter to reach prospective members should be created. Information about your group and the times you hold meetings should also be available in the library. Bookstores or reading clubs in the area are also natural places for recruitment of members. You can announce your meetings or membership drive in community newsletters and local papers. For other ideas, check out the additional resources cited at the end of this document.

## **Q. CAN FRIENDS GROUPS MEET IN THE LIBRARY?**

**A.** Yes. Check with the Branch Manager for details and for information about the Library's meeting room policy.

**Q. HOW DO WE ESTABLISH AN INTERNET PRESENCE FOR OUR GROUP?**

**A.** Presence on the Internet is vital to almost all organizations today, and a library friends group is no exception. If your group has a reliable, regular volunteer who can set up and maintain a website you are in luck! However, even a simple Facebook page will allow your group to have some place online where others can read about your activities and establish contact with you. The most important thing is to make sure the information you post on any site is current and accurate. For some examples of what other Branch Friends groups are doing online, visit <http://www.fopl.org/wordpress/branch-friends>.

**Q. CAN LIBRARY STAFF COLLECT DUES AND SERVE AS THE FRIENDS' TREASURER OR OTHER OFFICER?**

**A.** No. Friends should handle their own dues and bookkeeping. The Branch Manager generally serves as a non-official member of the board.

**Q. AS ADVOCATES, HOW CAN WE BEST SUPPORT THE LIBRARY AND OUR SPECIAL UNIT OR BRANCH?**

**A.** Library advocacy has become an important role for Friends groups to play. The first step in effective advocacy is being well-informed. Consult with library staff regarding current or pending legislative and budgetary issues that may affect your library. Friends may also network with other Friends groups to identify common issues. Writing letters to elected officials or to editors of local papers, and speaking out at public hearings are all important ways to influence our decision-makers. Additional resources about library advocacy are available on the "Advocacy" section of the Friends of the Oakland Public Library's Website, <http://www.fopl.org>.

**Q. IN SETTING FUND-RAISING GOALS, HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT THE LIBRARY NEEDS?**

**A.** Ask the Branch Manager or contact the Library's Manager of Grants and Development at (510) 238-6932. They can let you know the priorities for donations and needs at any given time.

**Q. HOW CAN WE FUND-RAISE FOR THE LIBRARY?**

**A.** Ideas for fund-raising are available in the resource section the end of this document.

**Q. MAY WE USE THE LIBRARY'S PREMISES TO SELL ITEMS OR TO SPONSOR A BENEFIT EVENT?**

**A.** Yes, subject to Library policies and space. Check the Library's Meeting Room policy (<http://oaklandlibrary.org/services/meeting-rooms/meeting-room-policy>).

**Q. HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT FOPL AND OTHER FRIENDS GROUPS ARE DOING?**

A. The Friends of the Oakland Public Library (FOPL) welcomes representatives of other Friends groups at their meetings, held the first Wednesday of every other month at 5:15 p.m. Contact FOPL for details (<http://FOPL.org>). Join the OPL Branch Friends Network to talk to other Friends and find out what's happening (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BranchFriendsNetwork>) and attend the semi-annual Branch Friends Network meetings.

**Q. DOES THE LIBRARY WANT TO KNOW WHO OUR MEMBERS ARE AND WHAT WE'RE DOING?**

A. Yes! Send a current list of their names, phone numbers, and email addresses to your Branch Manager; also include your mailing lists for agendas, meetings and other activities. FOPL is also interested in what you are doing and may be able to offer assistance.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

California Public Libraries Advocates CPLA (<http://www.cpladvocates.org/>) has two helpful publications that can be downloaded which cover useful topics, such as Starting, Re-energizing, Pitfalls, Attracting Members:

- 1) Friends of the Library Answers to Ten Key Questions by Miriam Pollack.
- 2) How to Start a Friends of the Library courtesy of United for Libraries (ALA)

Obtaining tax-exempt status

IRS: <http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Charitable-Organizations>  
California Office of the Attorney General: <http://oag.ca.gov/charities>

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