

September 15, 2008

Comments from Allan Nilson

At the last Structure Study Committee meeting there were some public comments/questions that I feel the need to comment on. No importance should be applied to the order that I answer the comments/questions other than I believe they are in the order they were made at the meeting.

The question was raised as to why the affirmations were omitted from the Adhoc Advisory Committee's document of questions to the Structures Committee, which was distributed for the meeting. An accusation was made that the affirmations were left out as an attempt to separate out the public library directors. There was also a statement about the development of a "we/they" attitude. In answer to the initial question, every member of the Structure Study Committee received a complete copy of the Adhoc Advisory Committee's document shortly after it was first submitted. Every member of the Structure Study Committee was well aware of the affirmations. The meeting was called to address the questions though, so that is what our working document consisted of. There was no attempt to separate out the public library directors or diminish the work of the Adhoc Advisory Committee. If that had been our intent, we could have achieved that far easier by accepting the document and then moving on to other business without ever having addressed the questions and comments at all. It is leaping to conclusions without first determining the facts that empowers the "we/they" attitude between SELCO/SELS and library directors. The Structures Committee sent the proposal out for discussion to do just that, to gather information. The Structures Committee members understand that they are human and make mistakes or can fail to notice an important aspect of a problem or issue. That is why the proposal was sent out for public comment. We wanted to know what facets and viewpoints we had failed to consider. To say that the proposal is a plot to diminish the role of public libraries and/or their directors is unfair to a group of people whose sole aim is to improve our regional library system.

It was asked, "why are we doing this"? That depends on what 'this' is referring to. Is it the structure study as a whole, the merger, or the advisory committee?

Structure study:

Over the years several members of the board of directors as well as some public library directors have mentioned they felt the board was too large and inefficient. Recently, best business practice studies looking at non-profit boards say there is not a single optimum board size, but that 15 or less was the most common size among boards considered to be "well run". This question of inefficiency was the impetus for the structure study. As one of the directors that believed the board was too large, I entered the study with the firm intent of shrinking the board. Obviously that didn't occur and main reason for that is that the committee made the assumption that public libraries wanted to maintain at least their current level of participation in governing SELCO/SELS. It's possible the assumption is wrong, but comments made in the past would suggest that it was valid.

Merger:

Talk about merging SELCO and SELS has been around since the two boards were combined in the late 1980s. With the growing costs associated with two separate audits, especially in light of the small SELS budget, an actual merger seems to be a fiscally responsible decision. It has been suggested that the savings is so small compared to the total budget that it's not worth the effort. My response is that one of the boards' responsibilities is to create a budget and make sure money is properly spent. It's my opinion that it's the boards' responsibility to examine any possible savings, no matter what the size.

A fear that I have heard is that money intended for public libraries is being used to support SELS libraries and the merger is being proposed to make that support easier. We are audited every year so any major transfer would be detected at that time and there has never been a problem. It's true the merger would eliminate the SELS audit, but we would still have the same protection against misuse. In the merger SELS money would be handled similarly to the way LSTA funds are handled today. The audit would check to be sure SELCO / SELS / LSTA monies are spent only in their respective areas. Are there grey areas, of course there are, but they would be the same in the future as they are now. A workload analysis study is performed

each year in part to maintain the proper SELCO/SELS workload balance. I can assure everyone that the SELCO staff and board are working hard to make sure public library monies are spent only on public libraries.

Advisory Committee:

I'll accept major responsibility for this one, but I believe the question I wanted answered was still valid. Over the past couple of years the attendance at the Advisory Committee meetings has been dropping. I had also heard from several library directors that in their opinion the meetings were a waste of time. With that in mind I wanted to know if the library directors wanted to eliminate the committee. The rest of the Structures Committee agreed, and it was included in the proposal. In hindsight we should have handled this separately as a question and not as part of the proposal. At the time it seemed justified because the Advisory Committee is part of the SELCO structure and we were examining potential changes to that that structure. This was a potential change so why not include it with the proposal for comment and discussion. The reason we shouldn't have is because it made it appear that that's what we, the Structures Committee, wanted to do, when its real intent was to determine if that's what the Advisory Committee wanted to do. It has been suggested that since the committee couldn't find a way to cut the board size it chose to cut the Advisory Committee instead. In no way was this a case of the committee feeling the need to cut something. It was a straightforward question to the public library directors to see if there was still enough need and interest for the committee to continue. The public library directors have made their opinion known and we have heard. Any ill feeling that this question may have created was certainly unintentional and I apologize for any misunderstanding of its intent.

A statement was made about it being difficult to find the structures documentation. It's true the structures committee has a separate blog, but to the best of my knowledge the libraries were informed of its existence and location. The committee certainly never tried to make it a secret. We wanted this process to be as open as possible. At the beginning of the process anyone could submit a new structures model; in fact we were practically begging people to do so. Even disregarding this earlier opportunity, the statement that we avoided input from library directors seems to discount the fact that that's what we're doing now. I fail to understand the idea that a document sent out for public discussion and comment is set in stone and cannot be changed. If it was unalterable, why did we send it out for public discussion? No one on the committee expected the proposal to be submitted to the board to be the same after public and library director comments. I applaud the work done by the adhoc advisory committee. Their questions and comments are exactly what we wanted and needed. I am dismayed though, at reports from both committee representatives and library directors, that some librarians were rude and hostile at a previous meeting. It has been said they were just being passionate about their library. That may be true, but being passionate about something is not an excuse for not being professional. We all need to be able to sit down and examine an issue dispassionately and objectively because we are all after the same thing. Librarians are not the only people who are passionate about libraries. Why do you think so many ordinary people volunteer their own time to be on a library board? I assure you it's not the perks, it's that they love and see the importance of libraries just as much as any librarian.

My last comment is about the accusation that we had released the SELCO/SELS logo as if the merger was already complete. The organization has three logos that it uses, SELCO for just SELCO business, SELS for just SELS business and SELCO/SELS for business such as the SELCO/SELS board of directors. The SELCO/SELS logo has been in use since 2004 and found in board packets sent to public libraries each month.

Allan Nilson

Structure Study Committee Member FY 2007 - present

SELCO/SELS Board President FY1993 – FY1994 and FY2002 – FY 2004

SELCO/SELS Board Member FY1990 – FY1995 and FY1999 – FY 2007