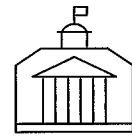


Valuing and Protecting Local Government Records

MAKING THE CASE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT ARCHIVES

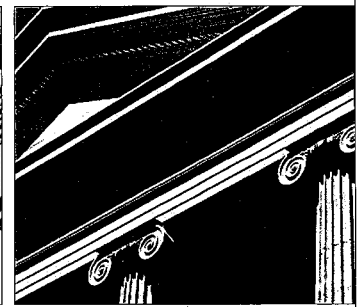
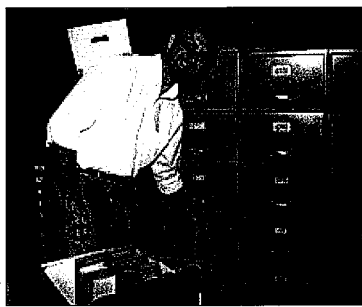


COUNCIL OF STATE ARCHIVISTS
**Closest to Home
and to You**
Archival Programs for
Local Government Records

Protecting archival records is the responsibility of local government officials and individual citizens.

Archival records are vulnerable to disaster, neglect, and the impact of changing technology. Archival records require special care and consideration if they are to be preserved.

A fundamental, yet often neglected obligation of local government is to effectively maintain, manage, and ensure the accessibility of those records that are closest to home and have lasting value to the community and its citizens – to you. Strong, adequately funded local government archival programs – established by local government and supported by citizens – are crucial to ensuring that essential information is preserved and protected today, tomorrow, and every day!



When was the last time you went to or called your county courthouse, city hall, or other local government office?

- To get a copy of your birth certificate?
- To register to vote?
- To apply for a marriage license?
- To pay your taxes?
- To file a property deed or mortgage papers?
- To serve on a jury or testify in a court case?
- To research family or community history?
- To apply for a permit or business license?

In each case, you used or helped create an archival record!

Did you know that every day local governments across the United States, including counties, cities, towns, villages, school districts, and police departments, create and collect records that document the rights of citizens and the actions of the government that serves them? Many of these records are considered archival and must be retained permanently because they have long-term value.

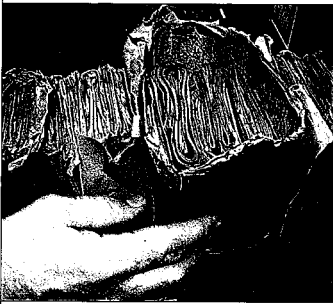
Archival records include information that is essential to sustain both government operations and the lives of individual citizens – like you.

A reference archivist in Wisconsin received an inquiry from a recently widowed elderly woman now living in Salem, Oregon. She was naturalized under her maiden name in Dane County, Wisconsin, in the 1940s and needed to document her citizenship to receive certain Medicare benefits. The archivist was able to provide a certified copy of her naturalization in the Circuit Court for Dane County, Wisconsin.

Local government records are important because they....

Prove our identity and protect our rights.

People interact with their local governments in many ways and much of this information is not available anywhere else – when they are born, educated, taxed, buy or sell land, regulated (licenses to do business in a town, for example), receive public assistance, get married, and pass away. A few unfortunate individuals may generate police, court, and imprisonment records. Records kept by local governments serve to prove identity and document many of our fundamental rights. They also connect citizens and businesses with each other and the governments and institutions that serve them.



The cost of losing a lawsuit can easily run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars and the cost of discovery in a local government without a good records program could be in the tens of thousands of dollars. A large school district in upstate New York once saved itself from a fine in the tens of thousands of dollars merely because it was able to quickly retrieve records that proved it had complied with state regulations regarding one of its buildings.

Ensure government is efficient and accountable to its citizens.

Accurate reporting of election results, documentation of how decisions are made, taxes are assessed and funds are budgeted, among other actions of government are the cornerstone of government by representation. Governments need to systematically create, organize, preserve, and access their records in order to provide services and be accountable to citizens. As a taxpayer, you have an investment in the effectiveness of your government and good record keeping saves time and money. In addition, state as well as federal laws require proper management and disclosure of public records, yet these "sunshine" laws are only as effective as the programs that are in place to ensure that those records are retained and retrievable.

Document our heritage and enhance our communities.

Local records also provide us with a tangible link to our past and can have a lasting impact on a community's future. Tracing family roots requires access to a wide variety of local government records, and the path of a citizen's search may be unexpected. Local historians and educators use records to illuminate how their communities developed. Preservationists use records to support site nominations for the National Register of Historic Places. The availability of local records can also provide economic benefits to communities. Property owners use records to guide renovations of historic homes and buildings and to apply for tax credits. Community leaders consult a variety of records when developing downtown revitalization plans and heritage tourism promotions.

A CALL TO ACTION

Doing your part for the records that are Closest to Home and Closest to You



COUNCIL OF STATE ARCHIVISTS
**Closest to Home
and to You**
Archival Programs for
Local Government Records

What are local government archives?

They are important records created or collected by counties, cities, towns, villages, school districts, and other units of government. They contain information for and about individuals, families, properties, businesses, and organizations in the community. They must be retained permanently because they have long-term or archival significance.

Local government archives matter because...

They prove our identity, document many of our fundamental rights, ensure government is efficient and accountable to its citizens, and tell the story of our heritage and our communities.

Local government archives are vulnerable...

To disaster, neglect, and the impact of changing technologies.

As a citizen who cares about your records...

You have an important role to play in protecting and preserving these essential, yet vulnerable local government records. Ask your local officials and members of your state legislature to make records a priority:

- Increase resources for state and local governments to manage records
- Improve access to information needed by residents and governments alike
- Protect records of continuing value through proper storage facilities
- Include the protection and recovery of records in emergency preparedness plans

Find out what challenges your local government officials face in managing and making public records available.



How do they identify and protect records of continuing value? Are their storage facilities adequate? What resources do they need to protect their records and provide access?

Seek like-minded citizens—educators, local historians, genealogists, journalists, and preservationists working to restore historic homes and neighborhoods.



Ask about their experiences in gaining access to public records or interactions with state and local associations. Do they understand the challenges faced by local officials and the need for additional resources?

Support efforts to increase resources for state and local governments to manage records, improve access, and protect records of continuing value.



Use this brochure to make the case in your community to direct resources to the care of local government archives and records management. Download from www.statearchivists.org/lga.

As a local government official charged with care of records...

Make support for records management and the long-term care of records of continuing value a priority.

Identify the records of long-term or permanent value maintained by your office. Check your records retention schedule and make sure it is up-to-date. If you do not have a records retention schedule, contact the records manager for your jurisdiction or your state archives and records management program to learn how to create one.

Make certain that those who handle the records are familiar with best practices and legal requirements. Provide training if necessary.

Most states have specific laws and regulations about which records must be retained and for how long. Many also set standards for paper, microfilm, and other media used for long-term retention and offer training programs to local governments.

Develop an emergency preparedness plan for records needed in an emergency.

Get started by creating a Pocket Response Plan www.statearchivists.org/prepare

Contact your state archivist for information about records of long-term value.

Find contact information for all state archivists at www.statearchivists.org/statearchivists.htm

If local government agencies in your area need help with any of these, contact your state archives. Most state archives offer support that can include storage of records, expertise and services in microfilming and in digital guidance, as well as basic education in records management and archival administration. If they can't help with the problem you're experiencing, they will know where to find the resources to do so.

More information

Council of State Archivists www.statearchivists.org/lga/

For additional information about the **Closest to Home Project** and more information on archival programs for local governments and how you can help promote the preservation of local government records, visit the Council of State Archivists web site at <http://www.statearchivists.org/lga/>

Additional copies of this brochure are available for download at www.statearchivists.org/lga/ or by writing to the Council of State Archivists, 308 East Burlington Street #189, Iowa City IA 52240. Email: lga@statearchivists.org. Telephone: 319-338-0248.



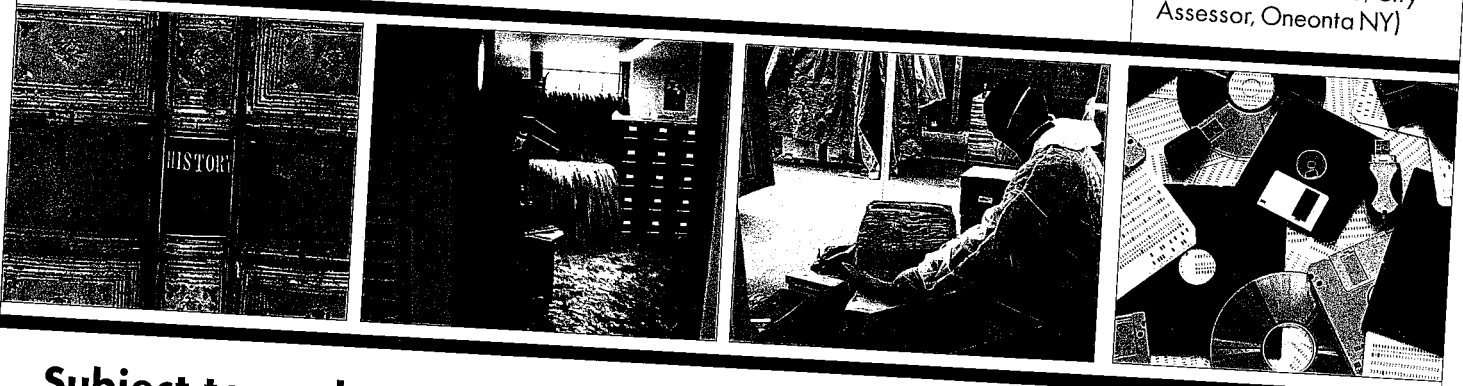
The **Council of State Archivists (CoSA)** established the **Task Force on Local Government Records** in December 2005. CoSA charged the Task Force with leading its **Closest to Home Project** to analyze current conditions and determine what services, standards, and funding strategies would work best to ensure the long-term preservation of and access to local government records. This brochure is one result of their work. The project and publication of this brochure were supported by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC).

Local government records are vulnerable because they are ...

Threatened by disaster.

Every year, essential records are lost to disasters. Fires, floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes occur with little warning. Sometimes the consequences are devastating and go beyond the loss of home and belongings, as in the case of Hurricane Katrina. Many communities along the Gulf Coast also faced a loss of essential records necessary to resume daily life and reestablish business and government operations. Local governments and their citizens must prepare and protect those records that will uphold their rights and prove their identities after a disaster.

The City of Oneonta, New York, lost over 300 Real Property Record Cards when flash flood waters poured through a window (photo below, 2nd from left). Those that were salvageable were recovered using a vacuum freeze drying process that cost in excess of \$12,000. The cards that could not be saved had to be reconstructed by personally inspecting and appraising those properties — at significant additional cost to the city. (Mario Arevalo, City Assessor, Oneonta NY)



Subject to neglect.

Less dramatic than a disaster, day-to-day neglect is equally destructive. A dripping faucet or a broken pipe can destroy essential records as thoroughly as a flood or a fire. Sometimes neglect can be inattention to good record-keeping practices. Simple mishandling—keeping files and ledgers in basements or attics where they are subject to extremes of heat and humidity and in the likely proximity to rodents and pests—destroys records as well and can also affect the health of persons handling those records.

Local governments are often hard-pressed by increased demands for services and stagnant or shrinking budgets. This may lead to neglect of records management, making needed records inaccessible or resulting in their unwarranted destruction. In addition, failure to destroy records of short-term use takes space and resources away from records of long-term value.

Challenged by rapid technological changes.

From the largest county to the smallest hamlet, local governments use computers and the Internet to manage and deliver information and services. It is an era of new efficiency but also of new challenges, not the least of which is digital preservation. Electronic records are vulnerable to rapid deterioration or technological changes that make them unusable in just a few years. Power failures and hacking by unauthorized persons can delete or alter records.

Over time hardware and software becomes obsolete and the information is no longer accessible or readable. Especially challenging is retaining integrity and authenticity when migrating records during hardware and software upgrades—critical to the value of records as evidence.

What will happen to the retired government employee who in 30 years cannot collect a pension because no system exists to read today's computerized payroll records? How will a municipality renovate a deteriorating bridge in the future when the Computer Assisted Design (CAD) drawings were stored in a proprietary system by a vendor long defunct? What will happen to a seriously ill person at a county hospital whose digital X-rays deteriorated in an improper storage environment and are now unreadable for comparison with current images?



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Additional information about the Closest to Home project and a downloadable copy of this brochure are available at www.StateArchivists.org/lga/ or by contacting the Council of State Archivists, 308 East Burlington Street #189, Iowa City IA 52240. Email: lga@statearchivists.org. Telephone: 319-338-0248.

To ensure that local government records survive ...

We need sound archival programs for local governments.

Archival programs ensure optimal care for those records that are important enough to be kept permanently and well-run archival programs are an asset to the local governments themselves and to their communities. They

- **Provide secure and environmentally sound storage** for the records that matter most to the history of the town, city, or county.
- **Organize and describe the records** so they can be used by a variety of researchers.
- **Reduce the day-to-day burden in clerk's and recorders offices** by shifting research use to the archival staff who are trained to respond to these kinds of inquiries.
- **Help elementary and high school teachers** to incorporate original public documents in their curriculum.
- **Work with chambers of commerce, community groups, and tourism offices** to promote the community through its history/heritage.
- **Ensure the preservation and availability of key records** needed by the government itself.

Caring for archival records requires special considerations and expertise. The space must have adequate temperature and humidity controls and have protection against natural and man-made dangers. In addition, the archives must have staff that can retrieve and make available information and have sufficient knowledge of laws governing public records. At least one person should have special education or training in archival administration.

Some local governments have sufficient resources to operate their own archival programs. If state law permits, some transfer older and permanent records to nearby colleges or universities, public libraries, or local historical societies, provided that they have appropriate resources of space and staff. In some states, the state archives is willing, able, and authorized to receive local government records of long-term value. Although strategies are many, the goal is that somebody takes responsibility for the competent care of these important and irreplaceable records that are **closest to home and closest to you.**

We must all do our part.

Both private individuals and government officials have important roles to play in protecting and preserving essential, yet vulnerable, local government records. See the Closest to Home project's Call to Action to learn what you can do to protect local government records.

For more information on archival programs for local governments and how you can help promote the preservation of local government records, visit the Council of State Archivists web site at www.statearchivists.org/lga/.

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