

# Municipal Archival Programs

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OUR SUBJECT is the management of municipal archives. We have heard today a great deal about municipal records management programs but surprisingly little about municipal archival programs. A stranger attending this meeting would assume — and very properly so — that we have many municipal records centers and few, if any, municipal archival establishments. He would also assume — but improperly — that we are not concerned with preserving the archival materials of our cities but only in saving space, reducing the purchase of file cabinets, and throwing away as much as possible as soon as possible.

It is not my intention to get involved in a discussion of the relationship between the archivist and the records manager. This has been argued by persons far more competent than I. To the layman, there is virtually no difference and I suspect that the distinction is important principally to ourselves. The ethical records manager and the archivist are dealing basically with the same problem and their goal is the same. That is to reduce the vast bulk of records to the relatively small core that constitutes the archival documentation. The basic argument seems to be how that reduction is to be achieved and by whom and what constitutes the essential core.

Obviously, there are archives in our municipalities, because there are records at the local level that should and will be preserved for long periods of time. Probably the permanent records at the local level are of somewhat greater relative volume than they are in other government jurisdictions or in business — approximately 16 percent in New York City, for example. In some instances, municipal archival materials are carefully identified, described, and serviced; in others — and more frequently — they are buried in a municipal records center and are identified only by the code letter *P* (for

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permanent) in the carefully locked and secured card-control index. Even then, if these permanent records are not used sufficiently, their permanence is subject to "review." And, in addition, the *P* (for permanent) does not always reflect the archival value of the records series concerned; it may mean nothing more than that someone lost the argument with a conservative, stubborn, and uncompromising operating official.

We *do* have municipal archives, and they certainly are or should be something more than what is left after everything possible has been thrown away. The archivist must face the fact, however, that archival materials not only in municipalities but elsewhere are being selected by persons other than archivists. Further, many archival series have been and are being irretrievably and unalterably changed by the practice of records management upon them as to form, arrangement, and so forth. At the same time, the records manager must recognize his responsibility for the selection and preservation of archival documentation and must concede the interest of the archivist in the records with which they are both concerned.

It is interesting that three of the four cities reporting at this session approached their mountains of paper from virtually the same point of view: they started with an inventory, received disposal authorization, destroyed what they could, and moved all but the most current records to an economical storage facility. The program, in all cases, was precipitated by stacks of paper that were higher than the Empire State Building, Washington's Monument, or what have you, or by vast amounts of space — usually expensive space — that were occupied by records. In each case, the material economies that would result from a program to control these records were of infinitely greater significance in the decision to proceed than was the fact that archival materials would be identified, segregated, and preserved.

Many cities are indulging heavily in microfilming. Consultants are customarily accused of being antimicrofilm; we are antimicrofilm only when it is improperly and wastefully used. Microfilm should be used to reduce volume and to save space only when it is the most economical way to do so. According to its own statistics Portland, for example, has filmed approximately 2,200 cubic feet of records at a cost of \$63,826. Thus Portland has spent between \$25 and \$30 to film each cubic foot of records. This expenditure can be justified only if it would cost more than \$25 to \$30 to store the same cubic foot for the required period of time in its original form. The cost of storing a cubic foot of records for one year varies considerably,

but a cost of \$1 to \$1.25 can be used as a rule of thumb. In other words, unless Portland had to retain the records it filmed for a period longer than 20 to 22 years, it wasted money by filming them. Each application of microfilming should be costed individually, but microfilming should not be used unless it represents the most economical approach to the problem.

I would also like to observe that we would have found a discussion of the records program of a small municipality of great interest. A small municipality — and by small I mean anything with a population of 100,000 or less — has a records and archival problem that varies from the problem of New York or Philadelphia only in degree, and its records problems can assume gigantic proportions largely because of its lack of resources. The volume of such records is small — several years ago I examined in a preliminary manner the records of a city of about 50,000 population. Its records totaled about 5,000 cubic feet, including rather extensive police files. Its archives and inactive records would fit into an area of 500 square feet in the basement of a new city hall. It had archives — although the city manager referred to them as the “old junk in the attic” — and it had what was, to it, a serious problem. In such an instance, the already overworked city clerk or city manager does not have the time, information, or experience to bring these records under control. If an outsider is retained to establish a control system, its maintenance and operation subsequently becomes a part-time job for a person who already has too much to do.

I believe that our Society's Municipal Records Committee could perform a real service to these smaller municipalities by developing a guide to identify the archival materials that normally exist in a municipal government. This would of course have limitations and would of necessity be extremely general in nature, but it might protect archival materials that would otherwise be lost. We should recognize, too, that we are talking about more than municipal records when we consider local archives. We have counties, school districts, hospital districts, mosquito abatement districts, flood control districts, bridge districts — the whole range of jurisdictions that seem to be such a necessity of contemporary government. I merely want to suggest that these are part of the picture, too.