

Are Town Records a Casualty of the Modern Era?

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ARE town records a casualty of the modern era? Here in New England—this homeland of American town government—the question has significant professional interest for archivists and records managers. But from a few town officials in New York State of whom I asked the question recently, the inquiry evoked first bewilderment and then some rather vigorous denials.

At the outset we must accept the fact that even town records may be considered from divergent points of view. The archivist, for example, may see town records, or at least a part of them, as the official documentation of the town—the central core of factual information around which the history of the town can be written. The records manager may see them as a body of information that should be better organized and managed to improve the operation of town government while reducing costs. And the town official usually sees his records as working tools—something to be created, used, and discarded or forgotten when they have ceased to be of value to him. He is not a historian and he knows little of records management. He frequently is aware of problems in handling those tools, but his main job is getting today's governmental business done today.

Casualty is defined as "chance; accident; contingency; also that which comes without design or without being foreseen; an accident." In the light of that definition town records do not yet appear to be a casualty of the modern era. But the public records created or received by town government in the course of its operation present a serious problem. Unless attention is paid to town records now, they will unquestionably become a bigger problem in the future.

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What specifically is the nature of this town records problem? During the past few decades records have increased in volume in town government just as in the Federal and State governments. With some conspicuous exceptions, towns have not yet learned to handle this records growth.

Indications of the problem are readily apparent in town offices and in the records offices of other units of local government. I need enumerate only a few:

1. All records saved, with no attempt to determine which are valuable and which are valueless.
2. Office files jammed with records seldom used.
3. Inactive but still valuable records stored and forgotten in basements, attics, closets, and other unsatisfactory areas.
4. Inadequate controls maintained, with the result that desired records cannot be found when needed.
5. Valuable records left unprotected.

There is no need to dwell upon these aspects of the problem; you have probably encountered them before. They are the conditions that trouble the archivist and the records manager. They mean that all or at least a large part of the records of many towns can be used only with great difficulty. They mean that offices of record are not functioning effectively in an era when the control and utilization of governmental information are becoming more and more important.

Why have such conditions been allowed to develop? Let me cite a few causes:

1. Changes in population, particularly the rapid shifting of population from urban to suburban areas, and the increased number of new functions that towns are having to perform for their citizens are presenting real problems. These growth phenomena are not only creating more records, but they are also presenting new and complex administrative and financial problems to town government. As a result many towns, while not ignoring their records entirely, rate records far down in their scale of governmental responsibilities.
2. Town clerks, or other official custodians of town records, can seldom be classed solely as recordkeepers. Most of them are burdened with many other administrative duties that must be performed daily. Some of them are quite indifferent to the condition of their records. Yet I believe that many of them consider their records important. They know that valueless records should be destroyed and that the rest should be better controlled, stored, and protected. Unfortunately, however, few of them know how to accomplish this.
3. Few professional records analysts have used their knowledge to help town or other local officials handle their records effectively. Ignoring local

records problems will not make them disappear. Much sound and constructive work must be done soon by professional records managers in the field of local public records.

Is there a solution to the public records problems of towns and other units of local government? Unfortunately, there is as yet no panacea, neatly packaged and labeled, that will eliminate inertia and indifference or that will quickly solve unceasing shortages in personnel, space, and funds for maintaining local records.

But I believe there is a way to eliminate or greatly reduce the records problems in many towns and other units of local government. I think the way lies in educating records custodians in local government to manage their records effectively. I believe their management education should include at least the following:

1. *Disposition of valueless records.* Local public records that have insufficient administrative, legal, fiscal, research, or historical value to warrant their continued retention should be destroyed. Authority to destroy any public record should be based upon a disposition statute, and the disposition procedure should be understood and followed by local officials.

2. *Segregation of active from inactive records (those records that still have value but are seldom used) and the storage of inactive records in records centers or other storage areas until they become valueless and can be destroyed.* The disposition of valueless records and the segregation and separate storage of inactive records will go far toward reducing the difficulties encountered in handling records in local offices. I believe the key to handling records is to keep the volume of records that must be managed as small as possible.

3. *Careful control of inactive records.* By the above statement on segregation I do not mean to imply that inactive records in a records center or storage area do not need to be controlled. They must be, or they will cause trouble. But there is a particular need for controlling active records that are used frequently either by town officials or by the public. The term control as used here means the ability to file and particularly to find a needed record or item of recorded information with a minimum of delay. Adequate filing and indexing systems designed specifically for local offices will help local officials maintain control over their records.

4. *Adequate protection for valuable records.* Protection of records against destruction by fire and other hazards is a perennial problem in local offices, primarily because the adequate protection of records is expensive. Unprotected records are an invitation to disaster. Today, local records can be protected either by duplication and dispersal of security copies or by storing the records in fire-resistant vaults or insulated storage equipment. Protection should not be a hit-or-miss affair, but should be based upon recognized records protection standards that local officials can understand.

5. *Utilization of new records-handling techniques.* In the past, local records custodians have often been slow to adopt new techniques and methods for handling their records. This hesitancy has been due largely to lack of

information, legal restrictions, limited funds to spend on records and, with some custodians, the feeling that certain techniques and methods do not apply to the records in their offices. Today, with records causing them trouble, many officials are more receptive to new and useful records management ideas. To advise and encourage local officials to adopt new techniques and methods naturally requires considerable knowledge of local records problems, but this is an area where much worthwhile records work can be done.

To many of you such a local records program may sound like a tall order. Some of you, however, may be wondering how such a program could be initiated and carried out in your State. Let me suggest three possible ways:

1. *By a State records or archival agency.* To me this seems the logical way for several reasons. Relationships usually exist between State and local governments that could provide the basis for establishing such a program. In fact, many State departments and agencies have a direct interest in records in local offices. Some records techniques developed in State agencies may be adapted with few changes to fit records in local offices. A State agency, in my opinion, is in a better position than a private organization to encourage uniform records practices in local offices and to initiate and operate a long-term local records program.

2. *By a college or university* through its department of government or its extension service. Several universities now sponsor conferences or training schools for local public officials. Out of these might well come short annual training courses for local officials in managing their records.

3. *By associations of local officials*, such as the associations of town officers that now exist in many States. These groups are usually interested in the problems of their members. Such an association might employ records consultants to work out the technical aspects of the program, leaving to the association the responsibility for disseminating the information to its members.

How such a program should be operated will naturally depend upon the scope of the program, the number of local offices to be served, the specific records problems encountered, and the personnel available to operate the program. Time prevents me from commenting upon these, but I would like to mention briefly one operational problem that is almost certain to arise—the problem of disseminating information to local offices. It is primarily a communications problem. Our experience in New York indicates that no single method is entirely satisfactory. Several methods—such as speeches, printed articles, visual aids, newsletters, and personal visits to local offices—are used. But probably the most successful method we have used to date is a series of “do-it-yourself” manuals covering various records problems.

Will such a program work if it is established? Will it justify the time and money that must be put into it? These are logical

questions that should be raised in evaluating any governmental program.

Such a local records program is currently functioning in several New York towns. Various parts of the program—records disposition, filing and indexing systems, protection, etc.—are operating satisfactorily in many more towns and other units of local government. I know of no reason why comparable programs would not work in other States.

Today local government is rapidly becoming a big and expensive business. It is creating records at a faster pace than ever before, and those records are already causing trouble. Any program that will help local officials manage their records more efficiently and economically is worth while. In fact, it is more than that. It is necessary.

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