

Does your municipality have all of the legal and administrative records it needs to sort out property disputes, plan for future growth, establish community programmes, and generally work efficiently on behalf of its citizens?

Having trouble collecting municipal taxes on a piece of property because your assessment records are incomplete? Trying to prove that a piece of land was deeded to the municipal fathers a century ago for park space?

Your municipality has experienced rapid growth and residents complain that the area has no “identity”. Your Chief Administrative Officer wants to promote the role of heritage in fostering community identity, and the City Clerk is on side. Can the city find the records and background information that support establishing a municipal heritage programme?

Waste disposal has become a critical issue for your municipality. Can you prove that 10 years ago the province promised, in writing, to assist with the expropriation of a tract of land for this purpose? Lawsuits are pending and your department must deliver the documentation.

Planning and establishing a good system of records control and preservation will allow you to address these types of issues and benefit your stakeholders, including the citizens you represent and serve.

Let us show you how....

MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES

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Introduction

This booklet has four purposes:

- to introduce archives management as an integral part of proper records keeping
- to discuss the importance of preserving permanently valuable archival records
- to outline some of the requirements for an archival program
- to provide information on where to obtain additional assistance

I Your Records and Their Management

Records as Assets

Records and the information they contain are valuable assets to any municipality. They are used to:

- document deliberations, decisions and activities. They are also used as the basis for other future decisions and to develop new community programmes and services: “Why did the council refuse that zoning change?” or “Does the old public sewer system meet current environmental requirements, and should it be replaced?”
- establish legal precedents and establish rights and obligations: “Can we prove that we own the seniors home which was established 50 years ago by a religious charity?”
- develop heritage programmes and celebrate important historical events so that residents will know more about what life was like in the past: “Can we assist the school board with their plans to include more local history in the school curriculum?” or “Can we prepare a display on the history of the municipality for the opening of the new Municipal Hall?”
- document public works projects with specifications, project records and drawings: “Where are the architectural plans for that viaduct, and can we prove that the lowest tender was accepted?”

- record planning processes and decisions. “Was there community involvement in the creation of the Official Municipal Plan?”

Types of Records

Every municipality produces records in many physical forms, including paper, photographs, videos, blueprints, maps, drawings, sound recordings, and electronic information. There are two broad categories of records.



Kaslo City Council, 1905. (British Columbia Archives, C-02860)

Administrative records document the routine activities carried out within any organization, and relate to personnel, finance, facilities, equipment and supplies. Examples of such records are vouchers, purchase orders, employee files, requisitions, invoices and receipts, equipment maintenance and repair logs, payroll information, etc. Few of these records need to be retained permanently.

Operational records are those that document the core functions of a municipality. These records reflect the way municipalities, large or small, develop and grow. They document essential activities,

decisions, legal obligations, policies and procedures, and responsibilities. Many of these have long-term or permanent value. Examples of these records are by-laws, minutes of council and committees, legal agreements, planning documents, taxation records etc.

Record-keeping Systems

All information should be managed in an effective, efficient and secure manner. Every municipality should maintain a filing system that:

- identifies the municipality's records and their location, particularly those vital records whose existence will enable the municipality to continue should a disaster occur (fire, flood, etc.)
- classifies the information the records contain by subject or function, to allow for ease of retrieval
- controls access to records and monitors their use
- contains retention and disposal information for each record or group of records

All records have a life span or life cycle. Information is received or created, used and disposed of according to the needs of the region, city, town, or village. Most records can be destroyed when they are no longer needed for the purposes for which they were created, or for legislative or regulatory needs. However, a small percentage of municipal records will have enduring value and should be transferred to an archive. The retention and disposal process must be completed in an authorized systematic manner as part of an established, documented business practice. Disposal should not be carried out haphazardly or without legal authorization.



*Vancouver City Hall, ca. 1935.
(British Columbia Archives, A-01539)*

II The Value of Keeping Municipal Archives

Why should a municipality have an archives?

A municipality is created by a community of people who elect a council of representatives. Their goal is to establish a government that will manage its affairs efficiently, provide local services and allow the municipality to grow and plan carefully. Good record keeping is an essential part of this process—without it important policy and planning decisions are made without the benefit of necessary background information. Councillors and committees cannot work in a vacuum and need to have reliable and quick access to previous deliberations and decisions. While certain records such as by-laws and minutes of council are often preserved under statutory regulations, the supporting documentation and other records which document the day-to-day business of a municipality can often be vital to preserving and protecting the rights of the citizens and the municipality. Ensuring that the right archival records are kept can help the municipality fulfill its responsibilities.



Road crew, Fredericton, N.B. (City of Fredericton, Communications Section)



Vancouver's water system, ca.1895. (British Columbia Archives, I-51530)

Archival records can answer questions such as:

- Why was a policy developed?
- Why did the municipality make that purchase?
- Why was a community care facility built in that location?
- What steps has the municipality taken to safeguard public health?
- What was the justification for the change in mill-rate?

Information is an asset. It makes good sense to protect records with permanent value, and thus invest in the future of your organization.

Who uses municipal archives?

Archival records are of primary importance to the municipality that initially created and used them. They will be needed by the municipal council, you and your employees, including those in the Legal, Human Resources, Planning, Public Works and City Clerk's departments. The policies, facts and figures they contain can be quickly retrieved, and the reasons for decisions can be easily reviewed.

Your municipal archives may also be used by members of the public who often have certain rights of access under Freedom of Information legislation, or who are interested in the history of the public programmes which you implement. Students of public administration, history, health and social policy may all find valuable information for their studies in your records. Genealogists are also avid consumers of the information found in municipal records. Researchers might include:

- historians writing the official history of the municipality
- writers doing background research for a novel set in your area
- academics conducting studies of municipal welfare programmes
- biographers writing about the life and work of a former employee or resident
- architectural historians preparing heritage planning documents for local business associations
- environmentalists and land use planners conducting environmental surveys on parcels of land

Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation may direct some aspects of your records management programme, and may restrict some public access. However, there are many benefits to allowing public use of your archival records. Careful appraisal and selection followed by good care and management will allow users of your archival records to profit from the implementation of an archives and records management programme.



Victoria Fire Department, ca.1915. (British Columbia Archives, F-025560)

III Other Archival Records Relevant to a Municipality

In order to maintain a proper historical record of the activities of a municipal government, it may be necessary to preserve records from other organizations, businesses and individuals who contributed in some way to the growth and development of the area. It might be useful to collect the records of any group that has a particularly local focus, such as a fair board, or community group. Individuals who were prominent in the community might also be persuaded to deposit records with a municipal archives. Records created by business leaders, local politicians, or “personalities” might all have value. The documents that they have created will reflect the larger community issues of the period. Records transferred from other levels of government can also help document changes that have occurred in the area.



The Municipal World Magazine building, St. Thomas, Ontario, ca.1945. (Elgin County Archives, EPHS #976)

The personal records of the key decision-makers such as the Chief Administrative Officer, Mayor or City Clerk, may also contribute to our future knowledge of the way in which the municipality evolved, and provide a more personalized view of its history. The more complete the archival record, the better the understanding of how and why change occurred.

IV Why Do You Need an Archivist?

Archivists are knowledge-management professionals. They have specialized training in both making the most of and protecting your information assets. They manage permanently valuable records by:

- appraising records with the help of those who originally received, created and/or used them. This process identifies which records have long term value, and allows for their transfer to the archives.
- arranging and describing these selected records in order to allow efficient and effective access and retrieval
- preserving records and applying conservation techniques to those which are damaged or deteriorating
- providing expert advice on the care and management of specialized media, e.g. electronic records
- providing assistance to a variety of researchers who wish to make use of records in many different ways
- meeting legal obligations in areas such as copyright, and privacy and freedom of information



Demolition (DigitalVision stock photo)

V Establishing an Archival Programme

Once your municipality has decided to preserve its archival records, you must determine whether to establish your own archival programme, or to develop a contractual arrangement with an established archives for the preservation of your material.

An Internal Programme

A successful archival programme needs a professional archivist and adequate financing for supplies, computer hardware and software, furnishings and space for storage and research.

Where does an archives fit into your organization? In the City Clerk's Department? Reporting directly to the Chief Administrative Officer or the City Business Manager? In the legal department? In an information management section? To flourish, archival programmes should be associated with the unit responsible for access to records within the corporation that can also provide appropriate support, and where the records will be used to best advantage.

Alternative Approaches

If you are a small municipality, you may wish to partner with a municipality similar to your own. Such an arrangement might involve sharing facilities, professional staff and budgets. Costs could be shared equally or on a proportionate basis. Each municipality would retain control over its own records. This can work well when local municipalities exist within regional municipalities or counties.

Or, you may wish to donate or deposit your records with an established archive if it meets current archival standards. A formal agreement can be drawn up to cover the provision of archival services such as appraisal, acquisition, arrangement and description, storage, retrieval and access. Some agreements cover records management as well as archival services. Donating records to an established archive usually means that ownership

and control is transferred as well, but each agreement takes into account the needs of both the archives and the municipality. This approach may be less expensive than establishing an internal programme, and could be a cost-effective solution to your information management needs.

VI Frequently Asked Questions

How do I know if my region, city, town or village needs an archival programme?

Every organization creates permanently valuable records. They are worth being preserved and made available. Do you have control over these information assets? Do you have difficulty finding and using records? If so, then an archival programme is a necessity.

Our municipality commissioned a local historian to write the definitive history of our area last year. Why do we need to keep the old records any longer?

While it is true that archival records should be used in producing histories, they are also used in on-going operations where historical knowledge is crucial to current and future planning and decision-making. Archival records may also be used by many different types of researchers, and their value and significance may change with time. For example, records relating to water-quality management studies produced twenty years ago may not be of much use to the writer of local history, but might contain vital evidence of prudent planning on the part of a municipality threatened by lawsuits.

Why do we need a professional archivist to do this work? We have local residents and retired municipal employees who know the history of the area well. Why not use them to preserve our records?

Volunteers and local historians can provide valuable assistance in preserving and interpreting municipal records, but they are not a substitute for dedicated professional staff whose job it is to establish and sustain the archival enterprise. When Council, the City Clerk, Chief Administrative Officer or City Solicitor wants

information, they usually want it immediately. A volunteer who is “not in this week” is not a substitute for an employee who is on the job. Likewise, a volunteer will be able to retrieve files, but may not understand the context in which they were created, accumulated or preserved. Privacy and Freedom of Information concerns may also prohibit the use of volunteers. Archival management is information management. It requires professional skills and knowledge, especially in the new digital age. History “buffs” or volunteers are not trained and experienced information management professionals.

Why should we make records available for research purposes? If we have maintained the records we require to operate, and comply with Freedom of Information legislation, why make archival records available to the general public?

Archival records are most valuable when they are used. A municipal government does not exist in isolation from society. By making archival records available for research, municipalities demonstrate good citizenship and contribute to society’s understanding of itself. Preserving and protecting the documentary heritage of a community is a good way to raise the profile of a municipal government, and demonstrate to taxpayers that their money is wisely spent. A government is accountable to its taxpayers, and offering access to archival records enhances its public image.

Should confidential records be preserved in an archives?

Yes. Confidential records, even those which contain personal information, should be preserved in an archives. The important consideration is whether the information contained in the record is permanently valuable. If it is, then it should be preserved as an archival record. The archives will enforce access restrictions as part of its mandate. As time passes, the confidentiality of most of the records will diminish and the records can be made accessible.

Surely not all of our records are permanently valuable! We can't keep them all. How much material warrants permanent preservation?

Not all records are permanently valuable. In fact, permanently valuable records constitute only between 5% and 10% of the records received or created by most organizations. A records survey and a quality records-scheduling process which includes archival appraisal will identify the permanently valuable records in your organization. Many mistakenly believe that archival records are always 'old' records. The value of information does not depend on its age.

My government is under constant pressure to cut costs. What expenses will I incur if I establish an archival programme?

Costs will vary depending on the volume, complexity and diversity of the archival record, and the size of the organization. In most instances, the costs are small relative to that of receiving, creating, using and storing other records. If records are efficiently managed throughout their life cycle by a trained professional, costs may actually be reduced. Valuable storage space is released through the destruction of non-archival records. Some archives are using their facilities and collections to generate revenue through cost-sharing programmes with other governments, and licensing agreements that collect fees for the commercial use of records.

Where can I get advice?

Advice and assistance are readily available. Each province and territory has a provincial or territorial archives and a professional association of archivists or council of archival institutions. All are willing to assist. National institutions or organizations such as the Association of Canadian Archivists, the National Archives of Canada, the Canadian Council of Archives and the Association des archivistes du Québec are willing to provide advice and support. Advice is also readily available from other municipal archives. A list of other archives in your area is available from the organizations mentioned above and in Appendix I.

VII Conclusion

Municipal governments across the country are moving towards greater accountability and accessibility, and good record keeping is an integral part of this process. Taxpayers want more information about how their tax dollars are spent, and local governments must be able to demonstrate that they are efficient and responsible. Without proper records management and archives programmes, governments can appear secretive and incompetent. Speed, efficiency and accuracy in service delivery to clients has become critical. Good records are key in protecting your municipality's important legal rights and obligations. The establishment of an archival programme will preserve an essential asset, and can provide significant cost savings to your municipality by reducing records storage requirements, eliminating duplication of effort, and accelerating information retrieval time. Using the latest information management methods and products will reduce costs and increase efficiency.

Continued developments in the area of computer-based information systems offer new challenges. Municipalities must be able to take advantage of new technology. Preserving information that is stored on a wide variety of media requires someone with specific skills and training. An experienced archivist/records manager can ensure that your valuable information resources are protected, preserved and accessible in the long term.

Finally, there can be no history without documentary evidence of the past. Biographers, writers, historians, public administrators, planners, genealogists, sociologists, scientists, economists and many others use archival materials to analyze the past, understand the present and prepare for the future. The story of your municipality is worth preserving and telling. Secure a place in the future for your municipality and your citizens—keep a record!

Appendix 1

National Associations and Councils

Association des archivistes du Québec (AAQ)
C.P. 423
Sillery, QC
G1T 2R8
www.archivistes.qc.ca

Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA)
P.O. Box/C.P. 2596
Station/Succursale D
Ottawa, ON
K1P 5W6
aca.archives.ca

Canadian Council of Archives (CCA)
344, rue Wellington Street
Room/bureau 1009
Ottawa, ON
K1A 0N3
www.cdncouncilarchives.ca

Appendix II

Sample Archives Mandate

The mandate of the archives should be set out in the form of a by-law passed by the municipal council. It should provide the archives with a legal entity, a place in the municipal hierarchy and should outline the purpose or mission of the archives. For example, the Victoria City Archives prepared the following mandate in 1990:

Mandate

Passed in Council on November 22, 1990

The purpose of the Victoria City Archives is to identify, acquire, preserve and make accessible archival material in the form of civic and private records documenting the history of the City of Victoria.

1. *It is the responsibility of the Archives Division to provide services that ensure proper management and control of all civic records from their creation to final disposition as required by federal and provincial legislation and city by-laws, policies and procedures.*
2. *The Archives will provide proper facilities, environment and resources to preserve the archival material in its care for as long as possible.*
3. *It is the responsibility of the Archives to ensure the preservation and accessibility of the City's archival records: those records which are identified for permanent retention through the archival and records management process. The Archives Division is the official repository for all inactive civic records of permanent administrative, legal, fiscal or historical value to the City of Victoria.*

4. *Private or non-governmental records which document the history and development of the City of Victoria are also acquired and preserved by the Archives. Private records include those of elected civic officials, those of boards and commissions related to the administration of the City and those of other organizations and individuals that detail the history of the City.*
5. *The Archives is a public institution and therefore open and equally accessible to all classes of researchers. Archival material will be available for research under conditions in accordance with sound archival practices, the available resources, any legal or ethical obligations and the physical integrity of the materials.*
6. *The Archives endeavours to promote a greater awareness and appreciation of the heritage of the City of Victoria through the acquisition and presentation of archival records and co-operation with other heritage organizations and archival institutions.*

The mandate may also outline the role and responsibilities of the archivist. For example:

The archivist will administer the archives, and will:

- *systematically identify and acquire records of long term or permanent value*
- *assist council in determining the disposition of all records and coordinate the identification of materials of long term or permanent, and therefore archival, value*
- *serve as a member of appropriate committees, especially those concerning the management of information*
- *make archival records available for research*
- *ensure the arrangement and description of archival materials in accordance with professional archival standards*
- *ensure the preservation of archival materials through the implementation of appropriate conservation measures*
- *foster awareness of the archives, its functions and research uses through presentations, tours/and displays.*