

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
March 17, 2021
Virtual Meeting**

**Proposal to Form a Sustainability Committee
(Prepared by the Preservation Section Steering Committee)**

BACKGROUND

The Preservation Section of the Society of American Archivists has spent the last few years looking at sustainability and what other cultural heritage member institutions have done to study and encourage sustainable practices. Of the major cultural heritage groups in the United States, the Society of American Archivists is the one organization that lacks a formal body focused on issues of sustainability. Individual members, institutions and sections have done some amazing work examining specific aspects of sustainability, but sustainability as a focus has no home within SAA itself.

Over the last few years sustainability has been understood even more broadly than initial concepts of it as an environmental issue, evolving to include much broader concepts of equity and balance in systems. This can be seen in some of the goals and discussions found in the following global initiatives:

- 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) adopted as part of the 2030 Plan—concepts of equity, gender equality, diversity
- [2015 Paris Agreement](#)
- [The Future of Our Pasts: Engaging Cultural Heritage in Climate Action](#)

Staff Note: This proposal was first presented at the Council's November 2020 meeting; however, time did not allow for discussion and the item was postponed for a future meeting agenda.

HISTORY

Over the last fifteen years, cultural institutions have hosted symposia, written books and articles, adapted standards and guidelines, and formed committees/action/interest groups surrounding sustainability issues. One of the earliest efforts in the cultural sector to discuss these issues came in 2007 at a symposium at the University of Texas at Austin, [From Gray Areas to Green Areas: Developing Sustainable Practices in Preservation Environments](#). A few years later, the theme of the 2009 SAA Annual Meeting was Sustainable Archives. In 2011, the 25th Anniversary of the National Archives's [Preservation Conference](#) focused on preserving collections and the environment.

The last decade has seen a dramatic increase in the advent of sustainable practices throughout the cultural heritage community, ranging from redefined standards (e.g. [ISO/TR 19815:2018: Information and Documentation--Management of the environmental conditions for Archive and Library Collections](#); ASHRAE Applications Handbook, 2019, Chapter 24, “Museum, Galleries, Archives, and Libraries”) and best practices to broadened discussions and understanding of what sustainability means in the context of collecting organizations, including archives, museums, and libraries.

In recent years, SAA has been incorporating sustainability into their publications, programs, and section activities. *American Archivist* published several articles in the last few years regarding preservation and sustainability. The forthcoming 2nd edition of *Archival and Special Collections Facilities--Guidelines for Archivists, Librarians, Architects, and Engineers* will include a section on sustainability. The National Disaster Recovery Fund for Archives supports many institutions affected by global sustainability issues. The Preservation Section has considered the topic in several programs and webinars over the last few years, including last spring’s [Preservation Week](#) webinar. And there are many other sections (Issues and Advocacy, Electronic Records, International Archival Affairs, to name a few) whose members might have interest in these issues. But no single, holistic group or section is responsible for leading SAA’s role in this area. Moreover, sustainability is beyond the responsibility of one section or group. Sustainability is an issue that we as a profession have to consider, and its role in our jobs and organizations will just increase as time goes by. This will best be accomplished by the SAA Council designating a group of professionals across the organization with different expertise to focus on sustainability issues for our organization and our members.

DISCUSSION

Other cultural organizations have an official group prioritizing the issues of sustainability (e.g., AIC has had a sustainability track for the last few years at their annual meeting, the Sustainability Roundtable always has programming at ALA). Although each cultural heritage organization has taken slightly different approaches to what sustainability means, they are all dedicated in one way or another to sharing ideas and moving their members toward taking some actions to address issues of sustainability at the individual, institutional, and organizational level. Some examples of organizations and their sustainability efforts include:

- American Institute for Conservation: Sustainability Committee
<https://www.culturalheritage.org/membership/committees/sustainability>
 - Aims to promote sustainability as an equal factor in decision-making processes.
 - Creates and publishes new research, while highlighting and contributing to work done by our colleagues.
 - Provides resources for AIC members and affiliated professionals regarding sustainable approaches to the preservation of cultural heritage, including conservation, restoration, collections and preventive care.
 - Defines research topics and suggests working groups as needed to explore various aspects of sustainability and conservation.

- American Association for State and Local History: Sustainability Task Force: <https://aaslh.org/sustainability-task-force/>
 - Provides messaging for the field and the public about why this is important and relevant to our missions.
 - Identifies best practices and encourages them.
 - Shares (and builds) a variety of tools to assess, guide, and support learning and practice.
 - Creates educational pathways for all levels of interest and ability.
- American Association of Museums: Environment and Climate Network: <https://www.aam-us.org/professional-networks/environment-and-climate-network/>
 - Builds alliances and partnerships within and outside of the museum field.
 - *We Are Still In* coalition planning, joining, and implementation.
 - *Sustainability Excellence Awards*’ previous winners and application information.
 - Resources related to climate action and environmental stewardship and sustainability.
- ALA: Sustainability Roundtable: <http://www.ala.org/rt/sustainrt>
 - Provides resources for the library community to support sustainability through curriculum development; collections; exhibits; events; advocacy, communication, library buildings and space design.

Why should SAA create a Committee on Sustainability?

The creation of an SAA Sustainability Committee would affirm the organization’s commitment to doing its part to help support individual archivists, archival institutions, and the communities in which they live and work make progress toward larger sustainability goals. It would help SAA as an organization and individual members and institutions answer the following questions:

- How do our actions, as archivists and a body that advocates for archives, need to be adjusted moving forward?
- How do we interact with our communities and other groups?
- What can cultural heritage as a community do to participate in these goals?

It would provide SAA with a portal/space for efforts and resources to be shared, a space for discussion of the issues, and a space to coordinate advocacy. Moreover, as sustainability is a set of challenges that extends beyond the archival profession alone, a standing body within SAA would allow better coordination with other member organizations and their sustainability work. In fact, many SAA members already have experience working on these issues in other member organizations, which may make cross-organization collaborations easier.

What are the potential cons?

- Administrative costs of supporting one more committee—this might divert resources (people and overhead) away from current groups.

- Over time, the committee may need financial support in order to better coordinate with other organizations or to create resources to support the committee's work, which would require more financial resources.
- Not all our members believe that sustainability should be a priority.

Alternatives:

1. The SAA Council might decide to do nothing, ignoring this issue that affects us all and is currently being addressed in an *ad hoc*, uncoordinated fashion; publications, programs, and section activities regarding sustainability would likely continue, but perhaps lack the holistic efforts that the issue warrants.
2. Instead of the Council creating a committee within SAA to focus on these issues, the Council could appoint a liaison to work directly with their equivalent groups at other member organizations to create a single cross-institutional effort. However, that leaves the work of representing SAA's needs and perspectives to one individual, which might not be enough to adequately support the needs of the entire SAA member population. A cross-institutional effort might be more effective *after* SAA joins the rest of the member organizations by having an internal group focused on these issues first, *and then* providing a representative to a cross-institutional body.
3. Members could create a Sustainability section to focus on this work. A section wouldn't have the same authority/ability to work with other cultural organizations as a committee, nor would the Council be able to create a charge for the group.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

THAT the SAA Council create a Sustainability Committee that will:

- **Create a broad definition/understanding of sustainability for the SAA community;**
- **Gather and generate resources for members to learn more about the issue;**
- **Collaborate within SAA and outside of SAA to advocate, educate, and develop sustainable practices; and**
- **Refine the activities and goals of the committee as needed.**

Impact on Strategic Priorities: Although the creation of a Sustainability Committee would support all four goals of SAA's strategic plan, it would most strongly support Goals 2 and 3.

- The work of a Sustainability Committee would assist Goal 2.2 of Enhancing Professional Growth by providing content that reflects "the latest thinking and best practices in the field"; could provide that content in accessible, affordable ways as directed by Goal 2.3 and foster communities for professional interaction on this topic, as described in Goal 2.4.

- Regarding Goal 3, Advancing the Field, a Sustainability Committee would support Goal 3.1 to identify the need for new standards, guidelines, and best practices related to sustainability and lead and participate in their development; it would support Goal 3.2 to foster and disseminate research in and about the field of sustainability; and could address goal 3.3 by participating actively in relevant partnerships and collaborations related to sustainability to enhance professional knowledge.

Fiscal Impact: It is possible that this committee would request funds for future activities, but this initial request would not require dedicated funds, other than the standard administrative support provided to other committees. The estimated staff time associated with this activity would be typical for that which SAA provides to newly formed committees.