

To: Peter Wosh and Publications Board Colleagues

From: John Slate and Kaye Lanning Minchew

Re: *Management of Local Government Records* proposal

Date: July 14, 2010

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify a number of things about our proposal and to answer your very good questions. We've answered your questions below as presented in your email message of July 6th:

First, several members were hoping that you would be able to flesh out the section concerning electronic records a bit more. As we all know, this is the most problematic and underdeveloped area of archival practice at present, since professional procedures are so much in development. It seems especially difficult for local governments, many of which have very modest budgets or no systematic archival program at all, to deal with this issue. It struck us that inexpensive solutions, and perhaps outside partnerships, need to be considered when developing these kinds of programs, and there are lots of complexities. We wondered whether you might want to consider an outside author or contributor for this section who has developed an electronic records program for local governments, or if you have any thoughts about how this section might be addressed.

Response:

We believe any book-length treatment of local government archives requires some level of discussion of electronic records, though neither of us recommend writing with too much specificity as this will quickly date the book. Our goal is to make this book as bullet-proof as possible so it retains as much relevance ten years from now as it does at the present. Because prescriptive measures for the preservation of permanently valuable electronic records are, as you mention, an ongoing and evolving process we think it best to discuss the simplest things that should be done with electronic documents and records.

Establishing standards and best practices (formats, file name consistency, storage requirements and redundancy, for example) is probably the most important thing an archivist can do. We agree that stressing inexpensive or low cost solutions in local governments is essential, since very few have budgets that allow for anything beyond the basics. Because administrators often believe solutions require great expense, we propose to spend more time on the most basic elements of electronic recordkeeping – the preservation and migration of files, the integrity of file directory structures, and file sizes with regard to digital photography.

Partnerships and consortia are almost undoubtedly here to stay as we witness the growth of digital libraries and collections that cross governmental boundaries, so that would definitely be something to be addressed. There will also be a discussion of various practices already in use by local governments as they seek to care for their electronic records. One additional note: A series of phone calls and emails made this May by Kaye

to staff members of major city and county archives across the country revealed that no one thinks their government is close to developing an answer to electronic records issues. We will seek to convey this situation and provide basic steps and practices that should be in place as electronic records programs are developed.

We fully agree that an outside contributor or consultant would be helpful for this specific chapter.

Second, we were hoping that you might be able to include issues relating to funding and support somewhere in the project. It would be really helpful to review possible methods for funding local government archives (such as the New York State and New Jersey PARIS models), review successful arguments that archivists have made to establish or expand local government programs, and provide some concrete assistance with advocacy issues.

We agree that funding, support, and advocacy must be addressed in the book. Descriptions of the New York State, New Jersey, and Kentucky programs would make good case studies. Likewise, providing examples of successful enabling legislation from around the country can provide insight and suggestions for firmly rooting archives and records programs within the laws of local government entities. We will also discuss how to proceed if you are in a state without such a program and with little hope of establishing one. We'd also like to draw some ideas from our colleagues in the Council of State Archivists and from recent SAA annual meeting sessions on advocacy and funding that have offered a number of strategies for advocating and supporting archives.

Third, a couple of members raised questions about the organization. One wondered whether there is enough substance in Chapter IV to make it worthwhile and was not sure if enough differences actually existed between these archives to justify a complete chapter. Two felt that the Chapter IX title ("Intellectual Issues") did not really convey the substance of the content (which seems to focus on the archival fundamentals) and that this chapter needed to appear earlier in the book.

We believe very strongly that Chapter IV, "Types of Local Government Archives" is relevant to the book as a whole. More specifically, we wish to explain the differences in the organization and kinds of recordkeeping found in various sorts of local governments. School districts, transportation authorities, and public utility authorities (water districts, river authorities) operate very differently from county or city governments. Many are, in fact, quasi-governmental and, because of their unusual status, do not have the benefit of a larger governmental body to look to for direction with regards to permanent records.

The records management field has come a long way with these entities, but the management of archival materials within them lags far behind. We think these are some

of the most neglected bodies of archives, ones which exist in every state and territory in the Union.

We also believe we must address the matter of alienated government records, of which many live in historical societies, library special collections, and museums. In numerous cases, permanently valuable local government records have been abandoned or pawned off to these defacto archives without any legal action or authority given by the creating government. Regardless of legalities or where the records actually live, it's important to make non-governmental repositories aware of their responsibility as stewards of public records.

Chapter IX, "Intellectual Issues", could be more clearly titled. We agree the chapter could appear earlier, though we recommend it be close to Chapter VII, "Physical Issues of Local Government Archives" as these two sets of subjects go hand in hand.

Fourth, one board member wondered if you could elaborate a bit more on how the approach in this book will differ from previous publications. Is there something fundamentally different about local government recordkeeping today that requires new and creative thinking?

Schellenberg and Jenkinson's works notwithstanding, most book-length treatments of archives practices are written from the standpoint of repositories that contain primarily papers of individuals and business entities and not governmental bodies, much less local governments. Local government archives are an animal unto itself, with some kinship to the records management field but less in common with the archives in universities, museums or religious institutions, for example.

As stated in our proposal, there are really no book-length treatments of archives in local governments. H. G. Jones' 1980 book *Local Government Records, An Introduction To Their Management, Preservation, And Use* was a landmark book for its day, though it barely begins to address the range of topics we propose to introduce. It's lighthearted and easy to read, but does not provide the practical information we believe is lacking. Bruce Dearstyne's 1988 book *The Management of Local Government Records: A Guide for Local Officials* is a good book but is aimed at supervisory level functionaries. It is also a bit too philosophical.

Finally, NHPRC recently granted some money to the Municipal Clerks Education Foundation to revise and republish IIMC-NAGARA's archives and records management technical bulletin series, which will provide municipal and county officials with basic guidelines for caring for historical records. The list of topics for individual bulletins seems to cover a fair amount of the same ground. Could you talk a bit about how your publication will differ from this project and whether it will hit a slightly different audience?

A book on local government archives is sorely needed – not just for local governments, but also for staff at sites that have taken on the responsibility of caring for irreplaceable local history. We don't believe NAGARA will penetrate that territory.

We believe strongly that our book will reach a much wider audience than NAGARA's bulletin series. The national and regional municipal clerks associations are one avenue for delivering information about archives, though if you've read their literature, they are very general and provide little or no theory. Without insulting NAGARA's well-intentioned efforts, we feel confident our book will make much deeper inroads into the overlooked and neglected area of local government archives. Our volume will provide an overview to local government records issues in one volume and in a consistent format, thanks to having two authors. The technical bulletins will be 20 pages or less and will all be written by different authors. Our volume will also provide a bibliography plus some general archival theory and a brief history of past practices. It will be a more long-lasting guide and will be easier to use in classroom and work settings than multiple technical bulletins.

Chief among our interest in working with SAA is the benefit of an established, widely-respected catalog and distribution network. While NAGARA's technical bulletins will reach its target audience, we are aiming for not just professionals, but also the paraprofessionals who are mostly in charge of our nation's local history heritage. Because we know many local governments may never have formal programs or professional staffing, we believe this book can serve as a model of best practices and provide some hope for an often hopeless subject.