



# Preserving the Nation's Local Government Archives

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE  
LOCAL GOVERNMENT ARCHIVES TASK FORCE  
of the Council of State Archivists  
January 2008

[www.statearchivists.org/lga](http://www.statearchivists.org/lga)

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## Executive Summary

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The records that comprise local government archives document the most fundamental events in our personal lives and establish many of our legal rights. In this way they are truly “closest to home” with overarching significance to us as individuals and to the communities in which we live.

Stories of people who lost their homes in a disaster—whether by hurricane, tornado, flood, or inferno—always show victims searching through the wreckage of their homes looking for the items that are most important to them. Most often, they are looking for personal records—both the practical documentation needed to reestablish households and daily lives like insurance certificates and driver licenses, and those of long-term significance like photographs, diaries, letters, and other objects that connect them with their families and their past.

Local government archives play the same important role for entire communities—connecting citizens and businesses with each other and the governments and institutions that serve them. They document the major events and certainties of life—births, adoptions, paying taxes, and death. They also prove ownership of homes, businesses, and other property, as well as the outcomes of legal proceedings, such as marriages, divorces, probate, and court cases, both civil and criminal.

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## Challenges facing local government archives

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The Task Force identified a number of factors that present challenges to the establishment of sound archival programs that would provide for the long-term care of and access to local government records:

- There is an absence of widely accepted standards of what constitutes “adequate” or “sufficient” care and management of local government archival records.
- Records management, including the management of archival records, is not a priority of local government executives and legislators.
- Local officials may see archival records as a negative or burden.
- The federal government’s role is poorly defined and not recognized in this area. State archives and records programs have a much more substantial role, but face challenges from inadequate resources.

- There is a fairly high turnover of incumbents in positions with custody of local government archival records, such as town, city, and county clerks.
- Local government archives have their champions and advocates but, for the most part, they are not sufficiently well organized, versed in lobbying, or influential enough to effect major improvement.
- On the other hand, associations and groups that have the influence and power to get attention and effect change, such as associations of local government administrators and executives, usually do not have archives on their agenda.
- Local government archives are used extensively by genealogists and family history researchers; but they are underutilized by government itself, local history experts, other historians, legal researchers, and others.
- There is no national professional association devoted exclusively—or even primarily—to local government archival records.
- All of the above factors contribute to a fundamental, bottom-line concern: the absence of funding and other resources to care for archival records.
- Electronic archival records pose special issues and problems.
- Records management and archival functions need to find ways to relate to the operations of Chief Information Officers.

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## Products of the Closest to Home project

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**Report and Recommendations.** The Task Force’s report examines the challenges inherent in preserving essential local government records and presents a series of recommendations for local governments, the professional associations that represent them, and other interested groups to consider. In particular, it characterizes 2008 as “A Year for Action” and defines a 10-point Action Agenda energized by the momentum that developed during the project. Its success will depend on collaborations among professional associations, local governments, state agencies, and others who have a stake in securing long-term access to these records. (available January 2008)

**Case Statement.** The case statement is designed to educate key stakeholders about the value of local government archives, including why they are important (with specific examples) and why they constitute a national priority. The case statement is illustrated with photographs and compelling stories to convey how local government records affect the personal and business lives of individual citizens and enhance our communities. (available in draft)

**Awareness Toolkit.** The Case Statement will become a key component of a “toolkit” that will also include a PowerPoint presentation and accompanying brochure that can be customized to fit local circumstances; (2) a checklist for evaluating the quality of local government archives; and other materials that local government archivists and state archives employees can use to educate local government officials about the importance of sound archival programs. (in development)

**Critical Issue Reports.** The Task Force has identified four areas of special interest and engaged consultants to research, analyze, and prepare reports on each of the following topics. They are available for review on the project's website at [www.statearchivists.org/lga](http://www.statearchivists.org/lga).

- Sustainable Funding for Local Government Archives – Geof Huth
- Raising Awareness and Strengthening Advocacy – Bruce Dearstyne
- Training in Managing Local Government Archival Records – Jami Awalt
- The Impact of New Technologies – Gregory Hunter

**Overview White Paper.** The white paper provides context for our current efforts by summarizing previous projects related to local government records and describing the range of issues now confronting local government archives. Complementing this overview is an **annotated bibliography** on local government archives and records. There is also a selection of "**Milestone Documents,**" key reports and statements on local government records and archives from the 1960s through the 1990s. All are available through the project's website at <http://www.statearchivists.org/lga>.

**Survey of State Programs and Services for Local Government Archives and Records,** completed in March 2006. Results are available at <http://www.statearchivists.org/lga/>

**Local Government Archives Listserv** established in January 2006, now has 191 subscribers. To join the list, see instructions at <http://www.statearchivists.org/lga/listserv/>.

**Two meetings with representatives from local government associations** in February 2007 and February 2008 to discuss issues identified by the project and help shape the Task Force's recommendations. Task Force members made presentations at the International Institute of Municipal Clerks annual meeting in May 2007. Articles about the issues raised by the Task Force have been published by the International City/County Management Association and the National Association of Counties. We expect to make additional presentations and exhibit at IIMC, ICMA, and NACo in 2008.

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## Recommendations

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Significant bodies of local government records with long-term value are at risk if we cannot find a way to address these issues. Therefore, the Task Force challenges concerned organizations and individuals to work together on the following long-term objective:

### **National objective**

Most local government archival records will be cared for in place by their local governments through programs that meet minimum expectations or in state archives or other appropriate repositories.

## **Leadership and support in moving toward this objective**

1. Establish criteria and provide guidance for local governments seeking to establish sound archival programs for the records they create.
2. The state archives should play a clear leadership role.
3. National associations representing archivists, records managers, and local government officials should provide attention and leadership.
4. The federal government's responsibility and role should be revisited and redefined.
5. The circle of concern and influence at the national, state, and local levels should be broadened.

## **Strategic approaches for moving toward this objective**

6. Increase funding for local government archival records.
7. Strengthen advocacy for local government archives.
8. Publicize existing publications and educational opportunities and develop new ones where needed.
9. Address the concerns raised by and capitalize on the opportunities offered by electronic information technology.
10. Draw creatively on the power of the network of interested professionals.
11. Develop a web site focal point for interest and activity.

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## **2008: A Year for Action**

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Making progress will mean that organizations, state agencies, and others need to step forward and play a leadership/coordinating role. The Task Force, which concludes its work at the end of 2008, has identified an 11-point Action Plan for the final year of the project. This effort is intended to generate both specific products as well as momentum that will carry on after the project concludes. The issues are too important for us to lose any time!

The Task Force's full report contains more detailed descriptions of the leadership and coordination needed to achieve our goals, plus suggestions for which organizations should take the lead on each. This does not mean, however, that we expect these entities to do all the work; in fact, we know that cooperation is essential to progress. The designations are meant to suggest organizations to play a more general leadership role: getting things started, defining goals, assembling the resources, getting people and organizations to work together.

Another factor affecting our Action Plan is the \$2.6 million that FEMA has awarded to CoSA for the Intergovernmental Preparedness for Essential Records (IPER) project. IPER will develop and deliver records-related emergency training to state and local government agencies nationwide and gives all of the state archives an opportunity to expand significantly the services available to their local governments. CoSA will be working closely with local government associations during the IPER project, offering further opportunities to expand awareness of the need for proper care of the most essential records in counties, cities, and other localities.

**Action Plan for 2008.** With these considerations in mind, the Task Force has selected the following activities to pursue in 2008. Responsibility for a few of them will rest primarily with the Task Force, its consultants, and staff, but most will require the active involvement and commitment from a broad range of organizations and individuals to succeed.

1. **Publish this report and distribute information about the Task Force's findings and recommendations widely.**
2. **Contact representatives of local government associations that have demonstrated particular interest in the goals of this project**, starting with the National Association of Counties (NACo), the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), and the International Institute of Municipal Clerks (IIMC), to discuss their involvement as this project moves forward.
3. **Seek opportunities to integrate the goals of the Local Government Archives Task Force with the IPER project.**
4. **Convene a meeting of representatives of local government associations** in early February 2008. Participants will include those associations that sent representatives to a similar meeting held in February 2007 (which included NACo, ICMA, and IIMC, among others) as well as representatives from additional local government associations.
5. **Establish a Coordinating Council on Local Government Archives** to include representatives of national associations of local governments and local government archivists.
6. **Develop a strategy and toolkit to help state archivists work with state affiliates of national local government associations** in cooperation with national association staff.
7. **Prepare a checklist of the basic elements of a local government archives program** and promote awareness about its availability through local government associations, SHRABs, and other organizations. Work with SAA and NAGARA local government roundtables on this.
8. **Commission and publish booklets on specific topics of high interest** including:
  - managing local government archival electronic records
  - the business case for local government archives
9. **Develop a coordinated plan for a portal to provide access to web-based resources on local government archives**, starting with sections already available on the NAGARA and CoSA web sites, and seek support and input from the local government associations.
10. **Make presentations at meetings of local government associations** about the findings of the project and the importance of establishing and sustaining local government archives.
11. **Carry out, in concert with other groups, other Action Items selected from those advanced in the Recommendations, above.**

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## About the CoSA Local Government Archives Task Force

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The **Closest to Home** project began its work in January 2006 under the direction of the Local Government Archives Task Force of the Council of State Archivists, supported by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. The Task Force set out to identify issues and problems related to the identification, preservation, and use of the nation's local government archival records, and to identify strategies for improving their care and management. The Task Force held a number of open meetings, conducted two online surveys, organized three expert panels, and engaged five outside consultants to advise it in its deliberations. Our objective in issuing this report is to provide a basis for action that makes a substantial difference in the years ahead.

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### Members of the Local Government Archives Task Force

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#### Co-Chairs

Kaye Lanning Minchew  
Director, Troup County Archives

Roy Tryon (through fall 2007)  
State Archivist and Records Administrator,  
South Carolina Department of Archives and  
History

Jodie Foley (beginning fall 2007)  
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#### Task Force Members

Paul Bergeron  
City Clerk, Nashua, NH

Joan Decker  
Records Commissioner, City of Philadelphia

Virginia Fritsch  
Local Government Records Archivist,  
Wisconsin Historical Society

#### *Ex Officio*

Howard Lowell  
National Archives and Records Administration

Richard Cameron  
National Historical Publications and Records  
Commission (through October 2006)

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## For more information

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We welcome inquiries and ideas from individuals and organizations that share our interests in ensuring long-term preservation of local government archival records.

Local Government Archives Task Force website: <http://www.statearchivists.org/lga>

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