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## **Intrinsic Value of Local Government Archival Records**

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### **What is Intrinsic Value?**

“Archival records” are those worthy of permanent retention because of the continuing importance of the information they contain for administrative, legal, or fiscal purposes, or for historical or other research.<sup>1</sup> “Intrinsic value” is the term used by archivists to describe the various qualities archival records may possess which necessitate their retention and preservation in their original format. “Intrinsic value” may derive from either the age of a record, its physical form, the information it contains, or a combination of these elements. Almost all records with intrinsic value are archival records, but not all archival records possess intrinsic value. Archival records of local government are dealt with in greater detail in publications available from the State Archives.

This publication explains the characteristics that give records intrinsic value. Determining which records possess intrinsic value is a subjective process. Local Records Management Officers (RMOs) should consult with their records advisory board, local government historian, archivists and other local governments with archival programs in determining which records possess intrinsic value.

Local governments may need to retain certain records permanently in their original form regardless of whether or not the information in these records is preserved on microfilm, transcribed, photocopied, automated, or otherwise reformatted. Officials sometimes ask which records should be retained in their original form, and for what reasons. A common reason to retain records in their original form is intrinsic value. On occasion records may need to be retained in their original form following reproduction even if they do not possess intrinsic value, for convenience of access and use.

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<sup>1</sup> Section 57.19 of the Arts & Cultural Affairs Law (the “Local Government Records Law”) requires each local government to identify and properly administer these archival records.

## Characteristics of Intrinsic Value

All records having intrinsic value possess one or more of the following characteristics:

- **Age that provides a quality of uniqueness.** While age is a relative rather than an absolute quality, it is sometimes more important to retain records of an earlier date than more recent records of similar type because there is less chance that other records of an earlier date exist to document government functions.

The State Archives does not permit disposition of local government records predating 1910 without special permission which, upon application to the State Archives, may be granted on a case-by-case basis. See Publication #41: *Retention and Disposition of Records: How Long to Keep Records and How to Destroy Them*, for a copy of this form and additional information.

- **Physical form of significant interest. Certain records should be preserved in their original form** as evidence of changes in record keeping technology, media, and formats. A 17th century lease written on parchment, a late 19th century stereoscopic slide, and a wax cylinder sound recording from the early 20th century are examples of formats no longer used to record information. Retaining a small sample of such formats may be sufficient to document and illustrate their use.
- **Unique physical features.** Certain records may possess unique features, such as wax seals, paper watermarks or printed letterheads that cannot be reproduced and may warrant preservation in their original form. Usually retaining examples of selected records will be sufficient to preserve examples of these features.
- **Artistic or aesthetic quality.** Certain records may possess notable aesthetic qualities. These records may include hand-drawn and colored maps, architectural sketches, lithographed bonds and certificates, and artistically appealing photographs. Records with intrinsic value can often be for used for educational purposes and exhibits. The visual appeal of some records renders them very useful as illustrative or educational materials.
- **Need for physical examination.** Records containing colors, special markings and other peculiar physical characteristics, such as maps and architectural and engineering drawings, may be difficult to reproduce accurately. In such cases only examination of the ink, paper, handwriting, scale and other characteristics of the original record may solve questions about the record and the information it contains. Some original records may be needed for legal reasons because they are of doubtful authenticity, or contain erasures, forged signatures or other alterations.
- **Public interest because of direct association with famous people, important events, places or issues.** These are qualities that may require an entire series of records to be permanently retained as archival. But which individual records in this series possess intrinsic qualities requiring they be retained in their original form? Correspondence of a large city mayor, for instance, may contain certain communications involving important state and national officials. Individual items in otherwise routine series may be especially noteworthy, for instance, because of direct association with famous people or events. Some examples include a campaign financing statement of a local official who later became a United States Supreme

Court Justice, the first proclamation in the state of a city mayor honoring Vietnam War veterans or blueprints of a county's present modernistic office building.

### **Preserving Records That Have Intrinsic Value**

Because of the importance of these records in their original form, an overall plan for their preservation should be developed that is integrated in the overall program for archival records. Microfilming or otherwise reproducing these records is useful because it can reduce handling of original records and thereby preserve them for use in education and exhibits. Some records may be significant enough to warrant specialized and sometimes costly individual conservation treatment by a professional document conservator. A thorough need and cost analysis should be completed before any conservation treatment is undertaken. Contact the State Archives for advice and additional information on archival microfilming.

### **Disposition and Loan of Records Having Intrinsic Value**

Generally records having intrinsic value should not be disposed of or destroyed. In cases such as engraved bonds and notes, examples may be retained and the balance disposed of at the end of their retention period as specified in the appropriate State Archives' records retention and disposition schedule. "Disposition" of records having intrinsic value does not necessarily imply their destruction; the engraved bank notes, for example, could be donated to a local historical repository. Local governments should establish comprehensive archival programs and retain physical custody of all their records with enduring value. However, space and budgetary restrictions and the costs of professional conservation treatment occasionally may make it advisable to loan some of these records to appropriate historical records repositories where the records can be better preserved. Such a loan agreement must meet criteria established by the State Archives prior to its implementation.

### **For Additional Information**

Determination of which specific records possess intrinsic value cannot be answered by this informational leaflet and must be addressed on a case-by-case basis by officials of the local government. This leaflet is only meant to explain the concept of intrinsic value and provide examples. It is based in part on *Intrinsic Value in Archival Material*, Staff Information Paper 21, published in 1985 by the National Archives and Records Administration. For additional information on the application of the principles of intrinsic value to specific series of local government records, contact:

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