

# Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

## Minute by Minute: An Archival Challenge

It started as a simple project. After the Archives law of 2003 gave us administrative control over the state's archival records, we created a database of all record series currently identified as archival. An online version of that database is available at: <http://vermont-archives.org/research/database/series.asp>.

We now are consolidating fragmented record series under single entries. For example there were multiple "series" for the minutes of a single board. What could be simpler than moving these fragments under a single board minutes series so they would be easier to locate? Little did we know.



The first fragment was for the board's minutes, contained in six volumes, from 1913-1959. In addition there was a "series" consisting of security microfilm of board minutes from 1959-1969, though there was no mention of a reference copy of the film. There were then a number of discrete "series," broken down by time periods, entitled "taping recordings" for board meetings from 1969-1972; 1970-1979; 1971-1977; 1971-1980; and 1972-1975. The tape recordings were designated as exempt public records, unavailable for public inspection. The cited reason was that some tapes might include recordings of executive sessions.

To further complicate things we located two additional series that were not designated as archival but which contained related material. One was a "series" consisting of a single microfilm roll containing "commissioner's inactive files;" the other was called "supporting material" for the board. A look at the container lists for each series revealed that both series held board minutes. The department within which the board operated has retained minutes from 2000 to the present, presumably some of which are in digital form. The department, however, was unclear about what older minutes it had, where, or how to access them.

Our "simple" task was rapidly unraveling. Why did the tapes have overlapping dates? Why were executive sessions (exempt) captured on the same tapes as open meetings? Were there official minutes for those recorded sessions? Were the thirty-plus-year old tapes still viable and was there still equipment available for listening to them? Why were the series described so differently instead of being consistently identified as minutes? Indeed, why were so many distinct series created for the minutes of this one board?

I have not identified the board because its long term "record keeping" practices are not uncommon across government and because, no matter how idiosyncratic its recordkeeping, it managed to preserve 94 years worth of minutes. Finding and accessing the minutes is the challenge.

All of which leads us to the use of information technologies. All too often we focus on the *technology* not the *information*. Yet from my professional perspective effective IT systems must be based on effective recordkeeping systems. Unfortunately, Vermont has lagged behind professional record and information management practices, creating an uncertain foundation upon which to build effective IT systems.

The case of the board minutes provides numerous examples of issues that must be addressed in planning for record and information systems. To cite a few:

- Record types must be consistently identified and managed as a unit. In this case there should have been a single record series for board minutes. This in turn supports the need for controlled vocabularies so the series was clearly identified as board minutes and not variously described as "tape recordings," "supporting material," or "commissioner's inactive files." Inconsistent nomenclature would be a challenge to search engines.
- Record formats and media must be constantly managed. Just as analog tapes decay and market forces move away from audio tape technologies, digital records depend on being migrated across generations of hardware and software. Some of the tape records are over 30 years old and may be decaying, while reel to reel and cassette tape players are becoming more difficult to find. A digital format certainly would not survive thirty, or even five, years without a management plan.
- Changing formats present challenges for keeping related records associated. The board minutes are captured on paper, analog tape, microfilm, and digitally. In a digital world related records may be captured as text, e-mail (plus attachments), databases, etc; how are those relationships maintained over time so the records are known and accessible?
- What legal requirements need to be addressed, and how, in recordkeeping systems? How can exempt public records be readily identified and segregated in responding to a public records request? Recording open meetings and executive sessions together without a means of segregating them presents interesting problems in responding to a legal discovery request. So would the failure to associate digital records with any legal conditions governing access.



These are important considerations for paper and digital records. What brings them to the fore is government's commitment to information technologies and pressures upon administrators to roll out IT systems as quickly as possible. The sustained planning needed in developing a digital environment is often seen as an impediment; we believe that somehow the technologies by themselves will automatically supply solutions. As last month's column on data processing in 1957 demonstrated, however, the need for long term, sustained planning for information projects has been understood for decades.

To better understand the pressures to implement new systems consider that over the past seven years the state has spent over a hundred million dollars on IT. There are over 330 IT positions within state government. In contrast, there are four records and archival management positions (three in the Archives and one in Public Records). That places a burden on the records program to convey management tools without being perceived as impediments as well. Such record and information tools must be developed and shared in an environment without a tradition of good recordkeeping.



Despite this imbalance we are making progress. As noted in previous columns, tools for managing records and information are being regularly added to the Archives' "managing records" web pages at <http://vermont-archives.org/records/>. The voluntary collaboration among the Archives, Public Records, and the Department of Information and Innovation, known as iSTART, is also developing

tools that are made available through its newsletter at <http://vermont-archives.org/records/iSTART/newsletter/>. We are excited by the opportunities though success may take more than a few minutes.