

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Making the Best of a Sticky Situation

Among the things that fascinate me is the unintended consequences of technological innovation. A case in point is in the now ubiquitous Post-it note. In 1968 a 3M research scientist, looking for ways to improve on the company's acrylate adhesives, discovered an adhesive that worked well with paper, but not tape. Various applications were suggested, such as use on bulletin boards. It was not, however, until another 3M researcher began to use the new adhesive on scraps of paper to mark pages in his church choir hymnal that a marketable application was discovered. In 1980 3M introduced the Post-it note, which became an immediate success.

Like most technological innovations for the office, Post-it notes had a variety of consequences for recordkeeping. Since a small amount of the adhesive remained on the paper, once the Post-it note was pulled off, conservation concerns were raised. More importantly, while a Post-it note might contain substantive information about a document (for example, a supervisor's approval to release a draft), it is easy to remove.

These thoughts emerged as I reviewed the actions of the 2004 legislative session. Recordkeeping, linked to new technologies, once again figured prominently. Two legislative directives involve the state archives and municipal records. The first is "electronic document storage; pilot project" in Section 9 of the capital construction act. The other is the "land records commission" created in Section 78 of the appropriation act.

Both relate to technology. The first calls on buildings and general services, in consultation with municipal clerks, the state archives and others, to "develop and implement a pilot project designed to create a coordinated municipal filing system" including the "conversion of paper documents to electronic format, which conversion shall be designed to ensure compatibility with any state electronic document storage system that may be developed in the future." Five municipalities, including Colchester, will serve as test sites. A report on the implementation of the project, along with recommendations, must be submitted to the general assembly by January 15, 2005.

The second directive creates a municipal land record commission charged with proposing "standards for formatting, filing, recording and preserving municipal land records;" a uniform municipal land record indexing system; "continuing education requirements for municipal officials;" and a system for financing "all facets of municipal land

records management on a sustainable basis." In addition the commission is to analyze "the prerequisites for a municipality to digitize its land records" and examine "the related administrative and public policy issues," including privacy. The commission, to be convened by the state archivist no later than November 2004, must report to the general assembly by January 15, 2006.

Like Post-it notes, these technology-driven mandates create a sticky situation with non-technological consequences for recordkeeping. Clearly, given overlapping responsibilities under different timelines, coordination of effort is essential

My hope is that we step back from the technologies involved and articulate what recordkeeping goals should be achieved through these projects (and what unintended consequences we need to avoid). Some areas for discussion include:

1. While there is deep-seated unease about standards (see my September 2003 column), both acts envision standards-based compatibilities across individual offices (including compatibility with an as-yet-established state "document storage system." For better or worse, the question is no longer how you feel about standards, but which standards do we need to implement effective recordkeeping.
2. What goals do you want to achieve? The pilot scanning project is based, in part, on a goal of reducing the need for new municipal vault space (it requires the commissioner of buildings and general services, in consultation with the state archivist, to "arrange for the state to provide temporary paper document storage" for the participating municipalities). At first read this appears to be a questionable goal. Simply switching the costs of vault space from municipalities to the state neither addresses the cost issue nor the forces driving the growing volume of records. Scanning, for example, does not eliminate local storage costs and instead requires sustained budgets for training, upgrades of rapidly changing technologies, etc (some studies suggest that 40% or more of the original technology acquisition costs must be annually budgeted to meet the special needs of preserving electronic records).

So what goals do you see as essential, and how can we best achieve them? Equally important, what services do our users want, in what form?

3. What, if any, impacts will digital records have on traditional legal definitions of "public record," access, and actual cost for copies? This discussion is already underway, but what precisely are the qualitative differences between a paper-based public record and electronic public records that can be widely distributed? How do we address those differences without diminishing a citizen's right to know?

These are but a few of the questions we must discuss in the coming months. I will keep you informed and I encourage you to participate so that our needs as recordkeepers and the needs of the public we serve drive the process. Technology can allow us to do a host of things; the real question is what do we need it to do?