



Tennessee Archives Management Advisory

1999

APPRAISAL AND DISPOSITION OF RECORDS

This advisory may be used by public records commissions, in addition to records schedules, as guidance to inform their decisions on whether to retain or destroy records. It offers principles and definitions that may be useful in their deliberations.

1. Appraisal and disposition function. Orderly and prudent appraisal of the retention value and proper disposition of records is an essential function of state, county, and municipal governments. All records of state and local government agencies—or of any institution, enterprise, or organization—should be appraised and their proper disposition should be authorized through records disposition schedules approved (in the case of public records) by a public records commission.

2. All appraisals are always debatable. Appraisal and disposition decisions are not and cannot be scientifically precise; but they do have costs and consequences that must be considered thoughtfully. The decisions are always compromises between what we would like to do and what we can afford to do; they are always compromises between what we think we can “get away with” and what is legally and publicly defensible. Reflection and debate according to certain principles can guide and inform decisions.

3. General principles of appraisal and disposition. The following general principles may usefully be applied to the appraisal of all state and local government records:

- If a legislative mandate requires permanent or temporary retention of any record, set of records, or class of records, then the record(s) specified in the mandate must be kept at public expense for at least so long as the mandate requires.
- A record or set of records should be retained by an agency so long as it is useful to performance of its routine functions.
- A decision to retain records beyond such active usefulness or legislative mandate is a decision to maintain them in such condition that they can be

- examined readily by the public. Such a decision requires a commensurate commitment of resources to continuous care and custody for the entire term of retention. ¹
- A decision for permanent retention is a decision for perpetual care.
- Records should not be kept beyond their useful life in the public interest.
- No record that is necessary to the public interest should be destroyed.
- Records that are retained beyond their active usefulness to the routine functions of an agency must be of sufficient public interest to justify the expense of keeping and administering them, and
- the justification should be clearly stated, understood, and agreed to before accepting the responsibility and paying the cost to retain the record(s).

The following kinds of records may all be appraised as having archival value for permanent retention:

- essential records that are needed to resume or continue operations or to recreate legal and financial status after disaster, or that are needed to protect or fulfill obligations,
- records that have lasting value as legal and fiscal evidence to account for responsible government, and
- records that are of such high evidential and historical value that they should be retained at public expense for the sake of a sound, reliable, and comprehensive understanding of the political, social, economic, and historical context of government and culture.

4. Definition of terms:

- **Active record** is any record that is being used or that must be retained by an operating agency under its immediate custody and control for reference in order to conduct current business of the agency.
- **Archives** is a secure repository for the permanent retention, maintenance, and public inspection of permanently valuable records. [It is not a “records center”, for which, see below.]²
- **Essential record** is any public record needed to resume or continue operations of state, county, or municipal government, to re-create the legal and financial status of government, or to protect and fulfill obligations to citizens.
- **Inactive record** is any record that is not an active record; we must decide whether to retain it for future reference at public expense or destroy it as unworthy of retention.
- **Records appraisal** is the examination of records to determine their value, and particularly to decide how long they should be retained and maintained at public expense in the public interest; it is also the resulting conclusion from such examination.
- **Records center** is a central repository, used by several agencies, for the

- temporary and relatively economical storage of inactive records that have not yet reached the end of their term of retention under agency control, before they are destroyed or transferred to an archives, depending on their proper disposition as authorized in a disposition schedule.
- **Records disposition** is what is done with records—their ultimate fate—whether that be retention and preservation of a record in whole or in part, by photographic or other reproduction processes, in active files of agencies, in records centers, archives, or other institutions, or whether it be outright destruction of the record.
- **Records disposition authorization (RDA)** is the formal, recorded approval of a decision to retain or to destroy a record or set of records, including formal decisions to approve records schedules covering several types of records, together with the justification for that decision; and, it is the official document used by an agency head to request authority for the disposition of records.
- **Records disposition schedule (RDS)** is a list of specific records or specific record series or classes of commonly-held records together with the term for which they must be retained in the control of their originating agency before being transferred to the archives or destroyed, depending on the appropriate records disposition authority.

5. Public records value. The value of a public record is the usefulness of a record to government and citizens. This value justifies records retention authorizations, and may be expressed as:

- **Administrative value** to mean the usefulness of a record to the current operations of an agency of government;
- **Evidential value** to mean the inherent usefulness and reliability of a record as legal, fiscal, or historical evidence;
- **Informational value** to mean the useful content information in a record that is apart from, incidental to, or in addition to its administrative value;
- **Intrinsic value** to mean the inherent usefulness of a record as marketable property, historical artifact, or cultural relic; or,
- **Permanent value** to mean that a record is of such enduring usefulness that it justifies the public cost to retain it, to preserve it as a reliable and authentic record, and to administer its future use for public inspection indefinitely.

The value of a public record may also be expressed as any of the following:

Archival value	[See “permanent value”]
Commercial value	[See “intrinsic value”]
Enduring value	[See “permanent value”]
Fiscal value	[See “evidential value”]
Historical value	[See “evidential value”, informational value”, and “intrinsic value”]

Legal value	[See “evidential value”]
Market value	[See “intrinsic value”]
Monetary value	[See “intrinsic value”]
Operational value	[See “administrative value”]

6. Commentary on the principles. Where there is no compelling agency need or legislative mandate, a justifiable reason must be found if we are to keep records for future reference at public expense. Justifiable reason is found by balancing cost of retention against public benefit gained from retention. It is not always an economic, rational calculation, for public benefit is not always manifest or measurable; but, the consequent costs³ are real and must be accepted as a responsibility of the authority to decide.

The following questions help guide the process.

- If the answer to a question is “**YES**”, then retention is justifiable, but not proven.
- If the answer to a question is “**NO**”, then the wisdom of keeping the record may reasonably be challenged by reasonable people.
- The more “yes” answers to these questions, the easier it is to justify retention at public expense.

<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	
_____	_____	1. Are the records likely to be needed for any sort of imaginable historical research?
_____	_____	2. Are the records likely to be needed for the sort of historical research that has commonly been done in the recent past?
_____	_____	3. Are the records likely to be needed for historical research into topics associated with agencies represented in the record(s)?
_____	_____	4. Are the records likely to be needed for historical research into the histories of agencies represented in the record(s)?
_____	_____	5. Are the records necessary to public understanding of the past in order to make prudent decisions in the present for the sake of confidence in the future?
_____	_____	6. Can the records be kept in good condition for future use? ⁴

7. Can the records be kept in good condition for future use at reasonable or affordable cost?

8. Can the authority charged with maintaining the record(s) afford the cost of maintaining them in good order and retrieving them for public inspection?

¹ Careless and negligent “warehousing” of records does not satisfy this requirement.

² The functions of an archives and a records center are different and should not be confused.

³ That is, the costs of maintenance if the records are kept and the costs to historical knowledge if they are destroyed.

⁴ There are cases, for instance, where the inherent deterioration of the records is so far gone that retention is futile; in which case, restoration, copying, or other means of preservation must be taken into consideration as a cost of retention.