

Time to Change Our Thinking: Front-End Public Records Management

by Matt Daugherty

Why do we continue to struggle with records management? It is true that managing Florida's public records is an increasingly difficult task. Florida has one of the most open governments in the world. Our state constitution guarantees the right of every person to inspect and copy the public record. "Government in the sunshine" is not a hollow phrase, and all public agencies are responsible for ensuring compliance with an array of statutes, rules, case law and legal opinions.

But however difficult it may appear, successful management of the public record is not impossible. It's important to understand how fundamental records management truly is to a city and its operations. With today's public records requirements, records management should be high on the priority list, creating increased efficiency, cost avoidance and legal compliance.

The best approach for a city to take is a pro-active "front end" approach. Front-end records management can best be demonstrated by asking the following question: "Is it necessary to create the record?" Asking this question illustrates an understanding of the responsibility associated with records creation. It is an acknowledgment that once a public record is created, it must be maintained according to an array of state requirements for retention, disposition and access – an often-costly prospect.

In contrast, the back-end approach is reactionary records management; it is often dictated by individual departments and by a need to make space, whether physically or digitally. It is inefficient and ineffective. The back-end approach treats records management as an afterthought and devalues its importance. It results in a continuous game of catch-up as records managers struggle to address the ever-increasing records load.

A front-end approach allows for a more efficient method of managing records. By narrowing what we create, we can concentrate our resources on what's left.

To manage records on the front end, it's important to establish a comprehensive and systematic records program. Programs must be established for the city as a whole to ensure that all departments are operating under the same guidelines. In addition, active interdepartmental communication must be encouraged to ensure that processes are not duplicated and that duplicate records are not unnecessarily created and retained.

To guarantee there is no communication gap, records-management program guidelines must be written, and there must be coordination and monitoring to ensure compliance with policies and procedures. It should be stressed that this is the organization's plan of action for establishing an effective records program, and it must be followed.

Without a comprehensive plan of action, decision making can be hindered by a failure to consider public-records management mandates. This is especially true in the adoption and use of new technologies. Cities must consider future records-management requirements before implementing new technology initiatives. This includes, but is not limited to, ensuring continued access as technology changes; retention according to state requirements; compliance with technical standards established in Rule 1B-24, Florida Administrative Code; and the ability to purge data once records have met retention requirements.

Consider social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Municipalities are increasingly using these tools to communicate with the public. The result has been increased questions on how cities will meet their obligations under the public-records law while using these tools. These questions must be considered *before* a city puts these tools to work.

With front-end records management, implementation of these tools would be guided by a written plan, with input from records managers to ensure that issues are addressed at the beginning. Questions on the type of information being communicated, the retention of this information, and the level of public interaction hosted on these sites should be addressed before creating an official city social-networking site. Again, the act of asking questions illustrates an understanding of the responsibility associated with records creation and is the essence of front-end records management.

Lastly, and most important to the success of any records program, is management support. Elected and appointed officials must be willing to support records initiatives. Without support from the top, records managers will find it difficult, if not impossible, to establish compliance across the city.

A proactive, front-end records management program promotes efficiency, effectiveness, and reduces costs and legal liability for your city. Establish a plan of action and make it happen.

Matt Daugherty is an independent records and information management consultant with SML Inc. Clients include municipalities, counties, state agencies and professional associations throughout Florida. Mr. Daugherty can be reached at (813) 528-2705 or mattdaugherty@msn.com.