
CITY OF ROCHESTER HILLS



Susan Galeczka, Deputy Clerk

DATE: June 24, 2008

TO: Jane Leslie, City Clerk

RE: Microfilm v. Imaging

The Records Reproduction Act (MCL 240401-24.406) regulates the reproduction of public records by Michigan government agencies at all levels and is intended to help state and local governments ensure the integrity and authenticity of their records. The Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries (MHAL) is responsible for providing recommended Best Practices for local governments to help with the management of its records in all medias.

By this Act, the City is required to ensure that public records are not rendered unusable because of changing technology before their retention and preservation requirements are met, regardless of the media. Therefore the City is responsible for the selection and implementation for appropriate record keeping systems for the City's records.

Records must be authentic, reliable, have integrity and be usable regardless of the format and the media they are contained on. With local governments being challenged to "do more with less" and with pressure from customers to perform services in a more convenient and seemingly efficient ways, the idea of converting records to an electronic media usually comes to the front of the solution list. However, that is not always the correct answer.

Through the RAMP (Records and Archive Management Program) the City has identified its records and business processes; objectives have been defined with recommended practices to be put in place. In addition, staff has been working with MHAL to ensure that we are meeting the standards set forth by the State. RAMP is a multi-facet program that addresses all segments of records management including Records Retention and Policies that govern how the City handles its records to ensure the City is able to meet the requirements of the law.

As one segment of this Program is long-term and/or permanent storage, which has been analyzed, and solutions identified. The City currently stores records in three formats: paper, microfilm and electronic. It has been determined that the one of the solutions for long-term and/or permanent records is microfilm.

The discussion at Council centered on the obsolescence of microfilm and need to move forward into electronic storage of records. The question becomes whether imaging is a better choice than microfilm.

Microfilm systems are less voluminous than paper and satisfy the storage requirements for long-term retention, low activity records and permanent records. Systems require relatively low maintenance and can be easily replicated. They provide a mechanism for disaster recovery and have established standards for creation, use and storage. In addition, Microfilm is human readable.

Digital Imaging benefits lie in access and distribution of active information. This includes high-density storage, multiple user access, rapid retrieval, ease of distribution, ease of updating and duplicating. However retrieval needs are often confused with records retention requirements, which are two separate and distinct issues. Imaging systems are primarily designed to provide rapid retrieval and distribution for active documents.

A common misperception is that imaged records will be available as long as the physical media used to store the images last. That is the case for paper and microfilm, but imaging systems have limited stability and depend on particular hardware and software configurations. Due to rapid pace of changes in technology, it is unlikely that a single set of imaging components will be able to satisfy both retention and access requirements for any public record, especially long term and permanent records. In addition, failing to migrate electronic records can be problematic, because new generations of technology are not always compatible with those they are replacing. Migration of electronic records can be very time-consuming and expensive; and for long-term electronic records, it may need to be repeated many, many times.

Eliminating microfilm and maintaining records exclusively in electronic formats would require an ongoing financial commitment and an allocation of human resources by the City. This would require routine and/or required software hardware maintenance, replacement of media and system components to achieve cost effectiveness and migration of data and images to future systems.

Because the media supporting an imaging system is conservatively estimated at three years, while records retention and access requirements often exceed this short lifecycle other long-term storage options, which are less costly need to be used. Frequent migration costs, unpredictable storage costs and unpredictable conversion costs has not been determined as the best solution for records that require long-term retention or are permanent documents. The cost of imaging these documents would far exceed the benefit and would not be a wise choice for the City.

As RAMP continues its process, benefits of imaging are being explored for appropriate records and business processes. If Council determines it is in the best interest of the City to move forward with electronic storage rather than microfilming, it needs to allocate appropriate resources, both financial and staff. At this time, however, City of Sterling Heights and City of Troy will “piggyback” on the City’s microfilming contract when approved.

As a side note, in agencies where computer generated reports are voluminous and where storage space is a major factor, Computer Output Microfilm (COM) is being considered as a viable option by agencies.