

Historical Context

The public value proposition for the WSDA has both deep historical roots and links to current conditions. The archival and preservation value of the WSDA is rooted in the historical role of government as record keeper, while the digital contribution is linked to more current technological developments. The public value of archiving and preserving government records is central to the public value of government itself. State and local governments in the US are the keepers of the authentic and legally binding records of major social and economic activities of the people and of the government itself. The public depends on government records to establish and maintain personal identity, property ownership, citizenship, marriage, and even ancestry. Responsibility for the creation, legitimacy, and integrity of these and many other kinds of public records has been the concern of state and local governments from colonial times in the US. The trust in government that is central to democracy depends on the integrity and legitimacy of records of elections, laws, court decisions, budgets, etc. Long-term preservation is central to the value of birth and death records, land records, and many others that retain their significance over many generations. Thus the public value of effective archiving is woven into the fabric of government and of social and economic life. The fact that in stable societies the role of government in this regard is often taken for granted does not diminish the importance of the archiving and preservation function.

The digital aspects of public value for the WSDA are an extension of the historical value proposition. The growing adoption of IT systems by Washington state and local governments greatly expanded the volume of records created in digital form. Washington state has long been recognized as a leader and innovator in IT development and adoption, so the emergence of digital records may have been a bit faster there than in other locales, but the process has been a general one in US state and local government. However, these IT developments began and developed slowly, in a largely unplanned way, without standards or general recognition of the particular preservation problems posed by digital records. While paper record management and archiving provisions were well developed before the WSDA project, the digital counterparts were not. In addition, digital record growth was not consistent across local governments, and not well integrated with state IT development or planning. As a result, according to Office of the Secretary of State estimates, the State of Washington is missing more than half of its electronic records. Archivists believe that many of these documents, including letters from former Governors and other elected officials, as well as ancestral records, may never be recovered.(2) Lack of digital archiving capabilities also precluded providing Web-based public access to records and historical material.

This was the situation prior to the election of Sam Reed as Secretary of State in 2000. During his preceding five terms as Thurston County Auditor (County Clerk in other states), Reed had direct experience with the challenges of electronic records. In 1995, his office began creating digital records that they wanted to store in the State Archives. In spite of the potential value of digital archiving at the state level, however, when presented with a disk containing some of these records, the State Archives staff did not have any digital archiving capabilities at that time, and were unable to accept the disk. Because the potential value had become quite clear to Thurston County Auditor Reed, it was an understanding he carried with him into this new statewide position. He pointed out that, "If Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on a laptop we may not have it today," He also noted that, "Electronic records have been disappearing at an alarming rate because we've had no means to preserve them. These are records we need to make public policy, to conduct day-to-day business, and to prepare for the future."(3)

In the period leading up to Secretary Reed's election, appreciation for the value of digital technology had been growing generally in both state and federal government as well. By 2000, Washington state had developed a reputation as a pioneer in digital government innovation. In **Governing** magazine's 1999 survey of state government IT performance, Washington was the only state to receive a grade of A.(4) The State Archivist at the time of Reed's election had pioneered work developing computer-based record management and location capabilities. But this work was aimed more at improving current access to government records and did not extend to a digital archiving program. The financial value of record preservation was highlighted when the State of Washington won a \$4.5 billion settlement as one of the states participating in the tobacco litigation of the late 1990's. The success of the state's claim depended in part on its ability to retrieve records from the 1940's and before.

At the federal level, Congress appropriated \$99.8 million in December 2000 to begin development of an overall digital archiving strategy for the nation. At that time, however, the emphasis was not on state and local government records.(5) Thus by late 2000, the situation in Washington state was conducive to a digital archiving initiative for government, but there was not a specific program or strategy in place. Secretary Reed's election in the fall of 2000 provided the needed catalyst for a digital archiving program to begin.

Institutional Context

The public value of record keeping is rooted in the institutional and legal core of Washington state government. The Washington Secretary of State is independently elected state-wide and second in line of succession to the Governor.⁽⁶⁾ He is the state's chief elections officer, chief corporations officer, and supervisor of the State Library and Archives. His constitutional and statutory duties make the Office of Secretary of State the most logical site for a digital archiving initiative. The key statutory duties with respect to digital archiving are:

- Collecting and preserving the historical records of the state, and making those records available for research;
- coordinating implementation of the state's records management laws.

Each of the records that result from the exercise of these responsibilities carries great social and economic consequences, for the parties directly connected to the records as well as for overall public trust in government and public order.

The relationship between state and county government in Washington is central to the public value proposition because both the content and development strategy of the WSDA are tied to the counties. County governments are creatures of the state. In legal and institutional terms, Washington's 39 counties are subordinate to the state, and form the basic unit of local government.⁽⁷⁾ And the great majority of records to be archived originate at the county level. As the general government unit, the county is responsible for originating, recording, and preserving records of births, marriages, deaths, elections, land ownership, court actions, business licenses, and some of the other record keeping listed previously in the Secretary of State's responsibilities. The county-level records are the official versions of these documents. But the responsibility for long-term preservation and access to these records is shared with the Secretary of State, in part through the Secretary's records management function.⁽⁸⁾ A digital archiving capability thus supports the institutional roles of both state and county governments, which were the basis for the development strategy.

Political Context

The opportunity for Secretary Reed and his staff to move from a vision of the value of digital archiving to a successful digital archiving initiative depended on some major strategic factors. Perhaps the most important was the political resources of the Secretary of State. These derived in part from his close association with County Auditors, having been elected one for five terms, and his activities in the statewide County Auditors Association. As locally elected officials, County Auditors are in a strong political position, with close constituency ties, frequent and significant contact with voters, and linkages to their local legislators. As Secretary Reed pointed out, "Every legislator has an auditor in his home district." Thus the Auditors were in a position to have a powerful role in any initiative affecting their record operations, either as an ally or an opponent. A second important condition was Secretary Reed's status as a constitutional officer. This put him in a position to set his own priorities and begin a major project on his own initiative. Thirdly, he was newly elected and enjoying the "honeymoon" period in which the legislature was more likely to be receptive to his initiatives than in subsequent years. In addition, his chairmanship of the Washington Territorial Sesquicentennial (1853-2003) Commission provided a statewide platform for advocating improved archiving of and access to historical material and public records in digital form.

(2) See Mach 23, 2006 Secretary of State news release at http://www.secstate.wa.gov/office/osos_news.aspx?i=QoJVZIT9w8Ook0XBsKqb7Q%3d%3d.

(3) See October 4, 2004 Secretary of State news release at http://www.secstate.wa.gov/office/osos_news.aspx?i=zHTslCZdWYmm4l8lNjnhPw%3d%3d.

(4) Katherine Barrett and Richard Greene, "Grading the States 1999: A Management Report Card." *Governing.com*, Feb., 1999 (<http://www.governing.com/gpp/1999/gp9intro.htm>).

(5) This program, known as the National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (NDIIPP), initiated a specific effort aimed at improving digital preservation capabilities for state and local government in 2005. (<http://www.digitalpreservation.gov>).

(6) All US state constitutions provide for the function of a secretary of state, but office holders vary in title and may be appointed or elected.

(7) In the US constitutional system, state governments have what is referred to as "residual powers," i.e., all powers that are not specifically allocated to the Federal government or delegated to local governments by state constitutions and statutes. Article X of the US Constitution states: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people."

(8) The WSDA feasibility study states: "The Secretary of State's Division of Archives and Records Management is mandated by statute to insure the proper management and safeguarding of public records and facilitating citizen and government accessibility (RCW 40.14.020). This mandate encompasses a wide range of responsibilities including centralizing the archives of the state of Washington, developing retention schedules and insuring the maintenance and security of all state public records regardless of format." (p. 10)