

## The Overall Value Proposition

Part of the feasibility study and the investment plan presented to the ISB was a summary statement of the both citizen and state and local government benefits expected from the WSDA (See Table 3). This table of benefits captures the WSDA project team's initial vision and expected value of the WSDA to both the government and citizens. In addition, it also captures the benefits that the WSDA project team needed to communicate to the state and local government agencies that were keepers of public recorders in order to mobilize their support and participation.

**Table 3. Benefits of the Digital Archives to Both Citizens and State and Local Government from the WSDA Feasibility Study and Investment Plan(14)**

Cost Savings	Cost Avoidance	Cost Recovery	Intangible Benefits
	Legal fines and sanctions	Copies of certified records	Improved public access
	Growth in storage facilities for paper records	State recoveries from lawsuits and settlements (e.g. Tobacco settlement)	Legal compliance
			Public trust in government
			Preservation of state history
			Staff efficiency
			Improved record security

The absence in this table of attention to cost savings and the little attention given to cost avoidance or recovery emphasizes the strong public value orientation of this initiative. The identification and apparent emphasis on the "intangible" citizen and government benefits is unusual in government IT projects generally. Even most of the cost avoidance and recovery items mentioned are related to the intangible benefits. Moreover, the way the intangible benefits are stated does imply fairly direct ways that they can be documented and in some cases measured (see Table 2 above). The improved level of access can be measured in both user behavior and in the proportion of any record series available remotely. The value of improved historical preservation and improved records security are more difficult to quantify, but were clearly an important citizen as well as government value in this case. Simply archiving large volumes of state records and email, which would otherwise have been destroyed, is a demonstration of preservation value and providing a backup storage capability for state and local government agencies is a demonstration of security value.

The fact that over 100 amateur genealogists have volunteered to transcribe thousands of family history records for the WSDA is strong evidence that a specific public value is associated with the preservation part of the WSDA. Documentation and analysis of this kind of public activity can be an important part of the overall assessment of public returns. According to Secretary Reed, "Vital decisions in government are now reached through e-mail conversations and electronic document transfers. Many of these seemingly insignificant records have been erased with the delete button and lost forever. The WSDA now captures and preserve all of these valuable interactions for our future generations, giving us the technological ability to preserve for our children what previous generations have done for us."(15)

When viewed overall, the WSDA project demonstrates a strong connection between the initial high-level public value proposition that motivated the project and its realization in the performance of WSDA itself. The ability to maintain that connection over the four plus years of the initiative is an important achievement given the inherent complexity of the problem, the vagaries of politics, and often-tortuous path of IT innovation. Part of the reason for the evident public value of the results is the simplicity of the basic logic: namely that preserved records are inherently valuable to the public. The value is self-evident to the key players in the process and is a widely accepted assumption. The key conflicts over the term of the project were not in what the value was or how to demonstrate it, but rather how to keep the cost of implementation in acceptable bounds. Moreover, there was clearly a direct logical connection between the desired value and the basic technology needed to achieve the value return: if digital records require digital archiving, and if archiving all records is the state's legal responsibility, then the state must create a digital archives. The complexities of operationalizing these concepts did not distract

the planners and leaders from the basic underlying logic. The benefits to the government agencies can also be demonstrated in fairly straightforward ways: local cost savings due to shifting of the access point for many types of records from a county office to the Web, efficiency gains in business processes, etc. But these just enhance the overall demonstration of public value.

As shown in Figure 2 below (modified from Figure 1 in the introduction), in terms of the overall value proposition for public returns, there appear to be considerable returns of almost all types. The returns to the state and local governments are represented in the internal agency returns and secondary performance gains below. Direct citizen returns are evident in greater access to their own and public records generally, as well as in enhanced transparency, accountability, and trust in government. These are benefits to individual citizens (e.g., genealogists) and the public at large. Vendor and local industry returns were documented in the collaboration between the State and Microsoft in developing the new information sharing and archiving capabilities. Also, there were clear political returns to Secretary of State Sam Reed and his administration as evident in his election to a second term in 2004. Since the WSDA delivers value to County Auditors as well, it is plausible that some of them received some political returns in the form of electoral support as a result of improved local services or improved records access. A survey of auditors or citizens by county could be used to document such returns.

### Index:

Unshaded = Direct and documented returns

Hatched = Indirect or potential returns

Shaded = Not applicable or lack of foreseen indirect or potential returns at this time

### Figure 2. Types of Documented and Potential Returns

The remaining issue of returns to general economic development is shown as shaded in the Figure 2 – Types of Documented and Potential Returns above because no direct evidence of this kind of return was available. However it is highly plausible that general economic development returns could be documented with appropriate methods. Access to land records, for example, are an important part of real estate sales and development. Improving access to these records is of substantial value to buyers, sellers, brokers, and developers. This was mentioned by the Snohomish County Auditor in reference to the booming housing market in his county, but no additional data on these indirect returns was available. The public value in the form of returns to individuals or firms in these and other commercial transactions, such as business licensing, employing digital records can be substantial. A simple set of surveys of users of these records would be sufficient to document returns of these types.

What may be the most important public return may also be the most difficult to assess: the public satisfaction and cultural and historical value from public record preservation and access. This does, however, remain a focus of attention of the Secretary of State, as illustrated in a March 3, 2006 press release. In that release, Secretary Reed commends lawmakers for further protecting the record of government, "I commend the Legislature for recognizing that these publications must be preserved and accessible to protect the record of government...The Digital Age has caused a flood of these electronic state publications that document how state government conducts business." "This Legislation helps to further secure our history for future generations."

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(14) Copies of the WSDA Feasibility Study and Investment Plan can be viewed and downloaded at <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/Content.aspx?txt=background>.

(15) See March 23, 2006 Secretary of State news release at [http://www.secstate.wa.gov/office/osos\\_news.aspx?i=QoJVZIT9w8Ook0XBsKqb7Q%3d%3d](http://www.secstate.wa.gov/office/osos_news.aspx?i=QoJVZIT9w8Ook0XBsKqb7Q%3d%3d).