

Records of the Office of City Council

Full Report on the Disposition of Records in the Care of the Office of Council



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Contents

State of Records as of December 2019 2

Records Maintained by the Office of Council 3

Records Retention / Filing System 4

Initial Records Priorities Accomplished in the First Six Months 6

 Organization of the Clerk’s Office 6

 Rough Organization of the Cage..... 6

 Creation of Clerk’s Binder..... 6

 Records Database / Master Ordinance Index..... 6

 Rules of City Council Decodification..... 6

 Codified Ordinance Recodification 7

 Retention Books for Legislation 7

 YouTube Organization..... 7

Priorities Moving Forward / Council Record Goals 7

 1 Year (by Summer 2021)..... 7

 2 years (by Summer 2022)..... 8

 3 Years (by Summer 2023)..... 8

In December of 2019 City Council appointed an interim Clerk of Council after that Office had been vacant for more than a year and hired him as full Clerk in April of 2020. Upon assuming the role of Clerk Mr. Young also assumed custody of a large volume of public records which are by law under the care of the Office of City Council. The following report is a summary of the state of those records when Mr. Young assumed custody, how record retention policy has changed in the Office of Council over the past six months, and the top priorities for future retention.



State of Records as of December 2019

As of December 2019 records of the Office of Council were stored in five locations: The Clerk of Council's Office and supporting cabinets in the hallway, the Finance Department's safe, the Council cage storage area in the basement of City hall, the City's Legal_share server, and the City of North Canton's YouTube page. These records covered a wide variety of topics and information, but suffered from flaws in organization. The Council office also housed important reference material such as the Codified Ordinances of the City of North Canton.

The City's YouTube page was the most organized storage location due to its limited capacity. The YouTube page stores only the livestreamed video records of the meetings of City Council and other municipal bodies. These videos were available in chronological order, but no organized folders or playlists had been created.

While drawers of paper files were generally labeled, the contents did not always match the labels, and documents stored were frequently duplicates, obsolete, or unnecessary. In addition to the lack of referencing, documents were generally disorganized, and drawers were overloaded as shown in Figure 1 below. It was clear that a coherent and consistent records retention schedule had not been followed or maintained for many years. Records from the period of 2010 to 2019 were in a particular state of disorder.

Electronic records stored on the Legal_share server were organized and contained primarily legislative records from 2005 and later. However, the server folder structure was overly truncated making it difficult to locate records, and similar to paper files many duplicates existed. In addition, due to improper computer usage, files that had been ported over from the previous Clerk's computer also contained 3 gigabytes of corrupted memory files. That is equivalent to approximately 225,000 pages of information.

Council's permanent records, including the Record of Legislation and Council's Journal in both bound and microfiche form were housed in the Finance Department's safe. These records were placed in the safe in order to protect them in case of a fire, but in early 2020 Mr. Young was informed by the Director of Administration that the safe was no longer fireproof. Upon deeper inspection of these permanent records, several issues were found. In the Record of Legislation, three different number systems had been used and never reconciled leading some ordinances to even have the same number such as Ordinances 3506. There was no coherent searchable record of all legislation in order to easily locate documents. Finally, a not-insignificant amount of ordinances had not been properly bound into books for permanent retention. In Council's Journal, books were poorly labeled making it difficult to locate records, committee minutes had been frequently left out of the journal, and one journal volume, No. 37 covering May 2011 to November 2012, is missing completely. In addition to the issues of human error, these records also suffer from typical and expected issues, most notably deterioration over time. In particular, records from 1920 and earlier, being now 100 years old or older, are in poor shape and desperate need of preservation and rebinding.

Figure 1: Unsorted Drawer in Council's Office



Lastly, in the performance of the Clerk's duties, certain documents maintained by Council's office such as Council's docket tracker and the Codified Ordinances are referenced frequently. Over the course of using these documents, it quickly became apparent that they had also been somewhat neglected and become increasingly outdated and overly complicated as the years went on.

Records Maintained by the Office of Council

The first priority in preserving Council's records was to generate a complete, accurate, and valuable records retention schedule by inventorying the records maintained by the office. Once a record retention schedule was generated work could then begin on auditing and reorganizing Council records. Four broad categories of Council records were identified: legislative records, office records, zoning or land records, and permanent/historic records.

Legislative records cover all records relating to the regular activities of Council in order to pass legislation including agendas, legislation drafts and requests, public notices, press releases, etc. These records are generally not of a permanent nature and will usually be stored for retention digitally in the same manner they are created, usually by the Clerk.

Office records cover the non-legislative activities of the Office of Council including, but not limited to, liquor permits, bankruptcies, member files, general correspondence, and union contracts. These files can be permanent and may be paper or digital depending on whether they are received or generated by the Office.

Zoning or land records cover important city records that may have corresponding legislation but are unique pertaining to real property in the City including annexations, vacations, zoning changes, and appropriation of property. These documents are frequently permanent and often received in paper form by the office of Council.

Permanent/historic records are those records which generally document the important history of the City or actions of Council including the Council Journal, the Record of Legislation, the Codified Ordinances, and master databases. These documents are all permanent and frequently have requirements to be published or maintained in book form. The high volume of important information maintained in these records is what enables most other Council records to be non-permanent due to overlapping information. These records are the most valuable to the City and community and therefore the most important to maintain properly.

A fifth sub-category was also identified as the Clerk's files. These records are typically process documents such as templates, blank forms, instructional pages, and other such documents subject to frequent updates or changes that do not necessarily document the activities of the City or Council.

From these categories, a retention schedule containing 26 record categories unique to the office of Council was completed and submitted to the Records and Archives Commission for approval in 2020. This new retention schedule has been used as the guiding document for all subsequent efforts to reorganize and preserve Council records and can be reviewed as "Exhibit A" attached hereto.



Records Retention / Filing System

In performing the audit of records a second issue in the system was identified that the Office of Council had no centralized record of the documents in its care, and where or how they were stored. If a public records request were to be received for a document from 1998 for example, the Clerk would have no way of knowing if the document was still in the Office's possession or where to find it except for spending hours searching through boxes. To address these issues a coherent and practical filing system was created based on the new records retention schedule taking into account the ability to accommodate continued records creation in the future. The filing system is also adaptable to both electronic and paper retention where applicable. The best way to represent this new filing system is by examining the new file structure of Council's electronic records.

The Office of Council's server now contains five parent folders, one for each broad records category. Within the legislative folder, records are first organized by year because these records are generated on a yearly basis in conjunction with a session of Council. Titles for sub-folders reflect this organization i.e. "2019 (89th Council 2nd Session)". Files are then organized by document type to facilitate proper maintenance under the records retention schedule. Once the retention period has expired for all non-permanent records in a given year the remaining documents are migrated to the legislative records hard drive, or for paper records to the Council basement storage, and kept under lock and key for permanent retention. In addition, a uniform naming system has been adopted where all non-legislation's name begins with the eight-digit date of the Council meeting for which it was generated and then a clear description of the item. For example, "06.15.2020 Council Meeting Agenda". Legislation begins with the three-letter legislation type abbreviation followed by a "modern" legislation number reflecting the fully reconciled listing of legislation, and then a brief description. For example, "Ord. 37-1984 Authorizing the Mayor to enter a contract for the installation of 'Big Brother'". Legislative documents are most often requested by date or specific legislation number and can now be easily referenced and searched by these common identifiers.

Within the office folder, files are first organized into sub-folders based on the type of document as office files are not necessarily generated annually and are generally requested by type or topic. Sub-folders include liquor permits, research files, correspondence, ethics filings, employment, labor union contracts, and bankruptcies. Within sub-folders files are generally organized by topic or occurrence with the exception of correspondence which is organized chronologically with one folder for each retained year and using an eight-digit date naming system like legislative files as at least some correspondence is generated every year and are frequently referenced by date received or sent. Non-correspondence files are named descriptively such as "2012 Fire/EMS Labor Union Contract" or "Applebee's Liquor Permit". In all such descriptive titles, both the specific instance and the type of document are used to accommodate logical reference searches using standard query language.

Zoning or land is organized in the same manner as the office folder with sub-folders for the type of record organized within by occurrence using descriptive file naming. Sub-folders include zoning changes, annexations, vacation, appropriations of property, sale of property, and lease of property.

Permanent/historic records have a much more unique retention structure due to the nature of these records as either physical or databases. The databases are stored on the Council server and are password protected to prevent accidental editing or tampering. No sub-folders are needed except for the Codified Ordinances, the base documents for which will be maintained on the Council server in this folder following the



2020 recodification.¹ Databases stored here include historic elected officials, the Master Ordinance Index, and the Master Council Information Database. Paper permanent/historic records in book form are kept in specific locations. The official Codified Ordinances are kept in the Clerk of Council's office in a clearly labeled and fully tabbed binder.

The Record of Legislation books are also kept in the Clerk's office in a dedicated filing cabinet under lock and key. These records are to be printed on 8.5x14 archival quality paper and bound in hardcover books using plastic posts to prevent degradation over time. Each book contains both ordinances and resolutions with recently bound books placing resolutions at the end. Currently, the City uses *Wilson Jones* archival materials. Each book is then labeled with a volume number, the ordinances it contains by number, and the period it covers as shown below on both the spine and cover. Modern volumes generally contain one calendar year.

Record of Legislation
Volume 40
 Ord. 01-2020 to 97-2020 and
 Res. 01-2020 to 10-2020
 January 2020 to December 2020

The Council Journal, otherwise known as the record of proceedings, was historically bound similar to legislation in volumes. This method created consistency between the two, but was inefficient for the referencing of minutes which is typically done by date. Such archival quality binding is also unnecessarily expensive due to the easy replicability of modern meeting minutes with computer technology. Minutes will now be bound in semi-hard cover bindings and labeled on the cover by Council and years as shown below. No book may cover more than one calendar year in order to improve searchability and reflect the filing system of the digital back up of all minutes that will be stored on the Council's hard drive. Once all digital backups are completed minute books no longer need to be maintained in the finance safe as any book that goes missing or becomes damaged can be easily reprinted by the City. While the original minutes do bear signatures authenticating them as approved by Council, they do not bear the same force of law and historic importance as legislation and therefore do not necessitate the same security of storage. The final retention location of these books has yet to be determined but for now they will remain in the finance safe.

Record of Proceedings
 of the
90th Council, 1st Session
 Book 1
 January 2020 to June 2020

The final permanent/historic record is the Council docket tracker which as of April 2020 has been shifted to the City of North Canton's AirTable account in order to facilitate efficient use and reference by the Clerk, Council, and the public.

¹ Note: annual codification updates are kept in legislative records.



Initial Records Priorities Accomplished in the First Six Months

In addition, to the creation of a retention schedule, standard filing system, and new docket tracker the following records priorities have been accomplished in the last six months.

Organization of the Clerk's Office

One of the first tasks accomplished by Clerk Young was the organization of the Clerk's Office. Nearly every drawer was full of files, poorly labeled, and largely unusable in their initial state. All drawers have been audited, cleaned, reorganized, and labeled. The office now contains primarily working files, all drawers are clearly labeled with their contents and a schedule of the contents of drawers is posted in the Clerk's Office.

Rough Organization of the Cage

Council's cage storage was in a similar state to the Clerk's office. Little usable space remained due to poor organization of files making it difficult to search for records. An initial organization of the Cage has been completed with boxes of files sorted by type, shelves designated for the future record storage scheme, and boxes condensed where possible. The cage still needs a lot of organization and an in-depth audit.

Creation of Clerk's Binder

In order to preserve the institutional knowledge of how to perform the role of Clerk of Council a binder of duties and best practices has been created and is frequently updated as the policies and procedures of the Office of Council continue to evolve. In conjunction with this project work has also begun on the creation of a Councilmember's binder to aid Councilmembers in navigating their role in municipal government and understanding the resources available to them.

Records Database / Master Ordinance Index

In order to improve records tracking and retrieval the scaffolding for a records database, in particular for ordinances and minutes, has been created using the database management tool Microsoft Access. This database will eventually cover all legislation ever passed in North Canton as well as some other related records in a searchable form free of the bias of traditional ordinance indexes. Traditional indexes were organized alphabetically by a one-sentence summarization written by the clerk, the new master index records the official title of the ordinance, the topic, the original and modern numbers, and the date of final action all of which can be searched individually or using combined queries to easily locate legislation and records instead of searching through books based on a rough hunch. So far all legislation up to 1930 has been entered into the database.

Rules of City Council Decodification

Currently, the rules of Council are codified as part of the City's standing law making them difficult to amend and granting the Mayor undue authority over how the legislature conducts its business. As one piece of the larger effort to improve the City's Codified Ordinances, newly revised and decodified rules of Council have been drafted in conjunction with the Chair of the Ordinance, Rules, and Claims committee and will be formally introduced to Council for adoption in the Fall of 2020.



Codified Ordinance Recodification

While interacting with the Codified Ordinances in the performance of the Clerk's duties it became evident that the standard to which such an important document should be maintained had become more relaxed as new material was continuously adopted. In mid-2020, in light of the COVID-19 epidemic, City departments were asked to reexamine expenses and cut unnecessary spending. The outsourcing of ordinance codification was identified as a potential way to cut unnecessary spending of more than \$5,000 annually. In order to improve the efficiency, accuracy, and quality of the City's Codified Ordinances the entire document has been audited and recodified by the staff of Council's office cutting more than 500 pages of unnecessary, obsolete, or incorrect legislation as well as adding some laws which should have been codified, but for various reasons were not. Examples of issues include codification of conflicting provisions, chapter modification without legislative authorization, duplications of Ohio Revised Code, and missing codification of personnel regulations. This proposal will be formally introduced to Council for adoption in Fall 2020.

Retention Books for Legislation

Since 2016 legislation passed by Council and signed by the mayor had not been bound and stored for retention in archival books as is the standard best practice, but had been hole punched and placed in three-ring binders. This practice not only damaged the legislation and was more likely to lead to record degradation, but also required twice as much storage space than the standard archival books. Beginning with legislative year 2020 new archival quality record books have been sourced and Council's office has returned to proper retention of legislation.

YouTube Organization

Videos on the City's YouTube page have now been organized into playlists by video type and year. For example, there is now a "City Council 2020" and a "Mayor's Updates" playlist.

Priorities Moving Forward / Council Record Goals

In order to complete the revitalization of Council records the following goals have been laid out for completion by Council staff over the next one to three years.

1 Year (by Summer 2021)

1. The first priority over the next year is to scan all legislation, which currently exists only in paper form, into the Council server and eventually hard drive for permanent retention. Maintaining digital copies of these vital records will act as insurance against, theft, fire, flood, or other act of God which may cause damage to or destroy the paper originals. Once scanned, the originals for years 1969 to 1980 and 2016 to 2019 which are not the versions maintained in the permanent bound books, can be donated to the North Canton Heritage Society to ensure their continue preservation and relieve the City of the financial and resource burden of maintaining them while preserving the ability to fulfill records request for such documents.
2. At present the Codified Ordinances are not built into the city's website, or searchable from the City's website. As a long-term piece of the 2020 recodification, the Codified Ordinances are to be fully



integrated into the City's website as a separate page making them easily searchable from the City's homepage for both public and City use.

2 years (by Summer 2022)

1. In June of 2020, the Clerk of Council once again became responsible for the duties of secretary of the Civil Service Commission and maintenance of all related records. Such civil service records are in a similar state of disarray as Council's records were in December 2019 and will need audited and record maintenance practices developed similar to the process currently being done for Council's records as described in this report.
2. Council's cage storage contains a large number of duplicates and obsolete files in addition to the important records stored there. Instead of true filing cabinets, the cage consists of a series of wooden shelves and bankers boxes that do not properly fit onto the shelving units. Shelves are not designated or organized for specific record types and boxes tend to be a random assortment of thrown together files. As a result, there is a large amount of wasted storage space and a large number of records that could be either disposed of or digitized. The cage storage will need to be completely audited, file-by-file, and ideally, new filing cabinets ordered and installed to better maintain records. This will not only free up storage space, but allow Council's office to more accurately and efficiently respond to records requests should they be received.
3. All legislation, as recorded in the records of legislation, needs to be accurately entered into the new Master Ordinance Index Database for easy referencing and review. This database can then be made available to the public for informational and research purposes as well as used internally for City analytics, activities tracking, and reference.

3 Years (by Summer 2023)

1. The Planning Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals both have numerous duties and responsibilities laid out in the City Charter, Codified Ordinances, and Ohio law but lack a single clear and coherent document summarizing all rules and regulations relating to those bodies similar to the Rules and Regulations of the Civil Service Commission. Consolidating all of these rules and regulations into a single document will make navigating interactions with these bodies easier for not just the public, but also the clerks who run the meeting, city employees who assist in the functions of the body, and the members of the boards themselves.
2. Record of Legislation books bound prior to 2019 have been found to occasionally suffer from problems including unnecessary blank pages, omitting attachments, and missing legislation and approximately 10 previously bound volumes need completely rebound due to degradation or improper binding. In addition, Record of Proceedings books also frequently have blank pages, omit proceedings, especially of Council's committees, and are inconsistently labeled. In order to correct these issues and create standardization and accuracy, record books will be consolidated, rebound, relabeled, and, in extreme cases, replaced as necessary. This will improve record searchability as well as present a professional outward appearance for those members of the public who choose to exercise their rights under Ohio law and review these records.



