

Public Records Advisory Commission (PRAC)
Minutes of the May 15, 2023 Meeting

Present: Jackie Cohan (Archivist); Gretchen Bulova (OHA Director); Cam Cook; Sean Ferguson; Lynn Jorden; Allan Krinsman; Dennis McDonald

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order at 7:30 PM.

Appointment of Secretary: Lynn Jorden was appointed secretary.

Minutes: The minutes of the April 24, 2023 meeting had not yet been completed by May 15. They will be approved at the June 26, 2023 meeting.

Introduction with Gretchen Bulova: Gretchen Bulova, Director of the Office of Historic Alexandria, was invited to our May 15 meeting to hear the Commission's plans for the future and keep her up to date on our strategic vision, especially in light of staff departures. We also sought to hear her thoughts on the future of OHA and the Archives and Records Center, and ensure congruity between her plans and ours. The Commission emphasized the goals of open records and more access for researchers and the necessity of collaboration with other departments.

Gretchen described that OHA was being reorganized, although ARC was staying the same. Digitization of collections has been a priority of OHA for the last 10 years. OHA also hopes to work with the City Clerk's office and the Clerk of the Court on digitization and common projects for the storage of archival materials within the City. Gretchen expressed surprise that so much of the ARC's time was spent on FOIA and agreed something needed to be done to address that. Gretchen was pleased, however, about the potential availability of archives professionals with digital experience to replace Jackie and Annette, and hoped someone with PRAC would assist in interviewing new staff. Gretchen noted that Annette has delayed her retirement as that process continues.

FOIA continuation: Cam brought up his concerns with ensuring the FOIA process would continue unabated if there were gaps in staffing. Jackie said that she hoped to digitize as much as possible so whoever replaced her would be able to find requested records more easily. Lynn asked if that might eliminate the need for a requester to submit a full FOIA request; Jackie said that it would by allowing the Archivist to refer to the requester to those open online databases.

Sean noted that we had discussed making in-person research easier so that researchers would not actually have to make a FOIA request to be able to access records. Jackie said that option had been available in the past, but not as much post-pandemic, and she wanted to try and make that a viable option again. She still would have to review City Council records first, if someone wanted to view them.

Further digitization: Gretchen noted that the department would need a lot more grant money if we were to undertake a major digitization project. ARC has been working on digitization some of the easier records, but it would be most valuable to digitize property-related permits. What has been digitized out of those records is not good enough quality to be valuable to researchers. There are other records, however,

such as City Council minutes, that have been digitized by ARC. Lynn asked if most requesters didn't know about what was already digitized, or if they records they requested were mostly those that have not been digitized. Jackie said that the records that have been digitized are ready to go and are requested by researchers, but the City Attorney's office is the stumbling block in releasing them.

Organization of collections and departmental collaboration: Dennis recapped his communications with the IT Commission and our shared goals of open, accessible records. He emphasized the usefulness of Jackie's inventory of collections and the prioritization for digitalization. He also noted that we as a Commission need to articulate what role we want ARC to play in this overall plan for open data. Gretchen stated that the City's IT Services Department had not mentioned anything about open data plans.

Jackie said that departmental coordination had suffered slightly upon the advent of digitization, in that departments started using different systems and methods for digital storage and making it more difficult for ARC to participate in that records collection. Gretchen additionally voiced concerns about the differences in data storage among departments.

Commission role: Cam asked if there was anything we, as PRAC members, could do to help resolve the issues facing ARC, such as talking with the City Attorney. Jackie suggested meeting with the IT Commission or inviting City Council members to PRAC meetings.

Lynn said that we should have a hard ask for those entities before meeting with them. In the case of the City Attorney's office, Sean said we should try to define a specific ask to loosen regulations around FOIA requests, for both in-person and online research. Dennis suggested adding to Jackie's list of digitization priorities what the areas of sensitivities may be for those records, and what flags the City Attorney's office may have about those sensitivities.

Cam asked if the records destruction issues we had with the City Attorney's office had been resolved. Jackie said it has, and records destructions sign-offs were happening more quickly.

Sean recapped what exactly we would need to have these conversations with the City Attorney and any other offices—Jackie's list of collections to be digitized, organized by level of priority, and characterized by level of sensitivity. Gretchen advised that any requests to the City Attorney should be very specific, very concrete, and already digitized and ready to go. Sean also noted that even for collections that have not been digitized, we could still run them by the City Attorney's office and make them available for in-person research without a FOIA request. Dennis wanted to forward Jackie's list to the IT Commission and seek their input as well.

Back to FOIA: Lynn noted that while it was good to collaborate with the IT Commission, the IT Commission doesn't have to worry about what kind of data falls and doesn't fall within the legal requirements of FOIA. Other PRAC members disagreed, because although all departments have to deal with FOIA, though Gretchen noted that it seemed the IT Commission could act more nimbly than ARC because they didn't have to deal with FOIA in such a direct manner.

City Council: Lynn asked Gretchen how amenable the City Council has been to data and archives projects, from a funding perspective. Gretchen said she had a lot of success over the years with one-time project money requests. As long as we were very specific, we had a good chance of securing funding for these projects, especially at year's end.

Next steps: The Commission discussed various records collections and the need for an updated list of highest priority records for digitization. Lynn reiterated that we are attempting to define a strategic vision and goals for ARC and digitization is a major part of it. Gretchen noted that the Archeology Department often approaches the City Council for funding and we could emulate them in our approach. Jackie thought that other departments would likely be on board for the overall strategic vision of making records more openly accessible, since it was something constituents wanted.

Dennis asked if it would be advisable to have the public comment on which records they wanted to see online. Jackie said that might be possible. Gretchen said that OHA had a large listserv with which they could send surveys. Lynn asked about the demographics of the listserv and whether that would constitute a good sample size. PRAC agreed that regardless of the makeup of the list, it would be useful to survey them for at least publicity purposes. Dennis also suggested advertising in the Alexandria Gazette Packet.

Gretchen warned that PRAC might want to approach our goals incrementally as ARC went through staff changes.

Allan emphasized that we will want to get information from other counties/jurisdictions to see how much they were spending on digitization efforts and the scope of their projects.

Dennis said he would send a revised version of the list of digitization priorities to the IT Commission.

HARC Report: Sean reported that HARC would soon vote on the composition of the committee. HARC also voted to approve some new names suggestions for streets.

Renovation: Jackie said there would be a meeting to talk about contractor scheduling for the renovation.

Next meeting: Next month's meeting was rescheduled to June 26th due to the Juneteenth holiday. We also discussed possibly meeting at other OHA venues.

Adjourn: Lynn made a motion to adjourn at 8:35 PM; Cam seconded.

Respectfully submitted,

Lynn Jorden