

Public Records Advisory Commission (PRAC)
Minutes of the September 20, 2021 Meeting

Present: Jackie Cohan (Archivist); Cam Cook; Lynn Jordan; Sean Ferguson; Monica St. Dennis; Allan Krinsman

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

Appointment of Secretary: Lynn Jordan was appointed secretary.

Minutes: The minutes of June 21, 2021 meeting were approved unanimously with no corrections or additions.

Appointment of Chairperson: Lynn Jordan was appointed new chairperson of the Committee.

Facility Renovations: Jackie informed the Commission that the sprinklers and HVAC units need to be updated. The food bank and Archives are located in the same building, resulting in two very disparate temperature needs—the food bank needs to maintain cold storage, and the Archives needs to maintain temperature and humidity controls in some rooms to preserve records. There has been discussion about splitting the HVAC system entirely.

Jackie reported that the building received new motion-sensing lights as part of a push for greater energy efficiency. The city also wants to caulk cracks in the building, and there are plans to caulk any visible cracks during renovations. Searching for cracks by employing a mist throughout the building was rejected as unfeasible because of the sensitivity of records, archeological materials and museum collections that would be affected.

The facility renovations have been a long ongoing process, with money initially having been set aside three years ago. This past summer of 2021, bids were put out, and there were many interested contractors. However, only one contractor bid for the project, and it was far too expensive, so the City decided to scrap plans for renovations. Cole & Denny, the architectural firm that initially reviewed the building, is coming back to conduct another review. Allan asked if plans for renovation can be scaled back; Jackie said that there was not much that could be scaled back given that original plans had already been scaled back. Window coverings, elevator renovations, and the fire escape were among those projects that were scaled back. Jackie noted she had put in a CIP for the fire escape, which is in terrible condition. Jackie also noted that in order to have the budget to get the building renovated, we might have to give up the possibility of landscaping renovation, despite it being badly needed.

Offsite Storage: Jackie noted that there were several rooms being used by other units within the Office of Historic Alexandria, as well as a room being used to store voting equipment. To accommodate Voter Registration's needs, Archives will need to move about 2,000 boxes to off-site storage. Archives is negotiating price and storage options. Jackie said that Archives had already cleared out a lot of areas in anticipation of the expected renovation project.

Records Center Operations: A researcher, Dr. Krystyn Moon, came to the Records Center to do research on housing covenants and African-Americans in Alexandria during the mid-20th century. This project was funded by Planning & Zoning.

FOIA Requests: Jackie explained to our new member the increase in FOIAs in the context of Archives' duties. In the past, people could come and do research in person at the Records Center, but in 2017, the City Attorney's Office said that we could not release any records to the public without that person making a FOIA request, which has meant a large increase in the number of FOIA requests, although this increase began much earlier. During the beginning of the pandemic, requests were slow, but have since picked up. Jackie also explained her research process once a FOIA request comes in; she has spent many hours and has conducted over 3,000 searches within the past fiscal year.

Sean asked if it was possible to reopen the conversation about people being able to come and do their own research, given the time-consuming nature of Jackie fulfilling FOIA requests and the fact that letting researchers come in is part of the core function of an archive. Sean wondered what other nearby jurisdictions are doing. Jackie said that she had talked to the new City Attorney and expressed her concerns about the current system, noting that they can't be sure researchers are getting what they wanted. Jackie asked if records could be identified that perhaps people could come and research without having to make a FOIA request. The City Attorney was amenable, and Jackie compiled a list of such records, but the project fell by the wayside. Jackie said that she would try to get that back on track.

Allan said that there should be a middle ground between making a full FOIA request and someone just showing up at the Records Center. Jackie says that the City Attorney's office wants to review the records that they're giving out, but Jackie wishes that if it's a public, non-confidential record, it could be released without condition as in the past, but we're having to work around City policy.

95% of the FOIA requests are for property records, but the City typically wants people only looking at their own properties. Lynn asked why that was the City's position; Jackie thinks it may be a security issue. But Jackie hoped to revisit the question, as it would be easier for people to come in and review records themselves. Jackie has so far scanned over 300 records into microfilm.

Allan noted that in Arlington, records and public access to property information can be found at the public library. Jackie noted that the Alexandria library system has open special collections. Sean said it would be interesting to compare the revenue FOIA requests bring in with the cost of Jackie's labor in fulfilling those requests. Jackie said her research time is \$34/hour, which she believes is an adequate value for her expertise, but she doesn't want cost to be a barrier to people obtaining records.

Allan asked if there were any records that could be moved to the public library. Jackie said that could be consider deaccession which is a big deal. The library is focused on genealogical research, whereas Archives' focus was City government records. But the library has been allowed to scan some Archives records in the past, so that may be a possibility.

Records Destruction: Last year, we destroyed 2,169 boxes of records that were eligible for destruction. Monica asked how records are destroyed. Jackie said they had an arrangement with Covanta to burn old records free of charge, unless it's non-paper records like videotapes or microfilms; Paxton destroys those.

Accession: Jackie was contacted by someone who worked for the Department of Transportation who had documents from the 1920s and 1930s relating to efforts to improve traffic safety in Alexandria, and Jackie decided to take them. Allan asked if Jackie frequently received unsolicited offers of records. Jackie said this did happen occasionally from members of the public. Allan asked if there were any efforts to educate the public as to what kind of records they could possibly save and donate. Jackie said that Archives didn't really have a public outreach effort, although it should.

Internships and Volunteers: Archives had an intern for the University of Maryland during the summer, who scanned and indexed more City Council minutes, dockets and transcripts. She and another graduate student from University of Maryland also went through a collection from the Planning Commission to see exactly what it contained. There's also a volunteer who is an MLS student who is working on those planning records as well.

Training Presentation: Jackie sent the Commission a training presentation for City boards and commissions, for our review. Lynn had a suggestion which was to perhaps provide a definition for "historically significant." Jackie agreed, and explained that the definition is generally at Archives' discretion. Sean suggested including some examples of what might be a "historically significant" record.

Records Management Training: Normally, Archives holds training for everyone in the City once a year, where City employees are trained on what to look for and what their responsibilities are. Trainings traditionally have been focused on people Archives generally liaised with, but we want to do slightly broader trainings. Archives has drafted trainings for department heads, records officers liaisons, and all City employees generally. There had been talk of holding these trainings before the pandemic hit, which obviously delayed those trainings. Over the last year, Archives has still had Zoom trainings with people or groups of people that so desired it. Allan asked if employees would already be aware of state guidelines for records retention. Jackie said they would really only learn about it through trainings, which underscores the importance of these trainings. Jackie was currently discussing this with the City Attorney's office.

Jackie also explained how they had made several attempts to update the administrative regulations around records management, which was written over 30 years ago and not updated since. Jackie hopes that the City Attorney's office will soon facilitate this update after a recent conversation with one of the assistant City attorneys who was interested in seeing this accomplished.

Both the trainings and regulations updates are sorely needed given the amount of new City employees and lack of general knowledge about records management and retention.

HARC Update: Monica updated the Commission on what's going on with HARC:

- The City has received \$600,000 under the American Rescue Plan for historic preservation related to civil rights and African-American history activities.

- A nonprofit and half the HARC board wants the City to deaccession the Living Legends Collection of portraits so they can be given back to the subjects of the portraits; the other half of the HARC board does not want that to happen.
- Justice Black House case was used as a precedent in a case Arlington; the case did not go the way HARC wanted it to.
- The HARC Advocacy Subcommittee wanted it noted that they feel the City has an obligation to ensure that new construction fits with the City's aesthetic character. Those not on the subcommittee wanted it noted that we shouldn't be viewing historic preservation and affordable housing as diametrically opposed. This is a battle that has been ongoing in HARC for a long time.
- People who live on Prince Street are complaining about the pedestrian zone at the end of King Street, because it's driving more traffic to Prince Street and damaging the historic cobblestones.
- HARC Composition Subcommittee has submitted a plan on how they're going to overhaul the commission, to make it more agile and diverse. Recommendations include cutting all the members-at-large.
- Lee-Fendall House had a wall collapse.

New Business:

- a. **Vacancies** – There are 2 vacancies on the Commission; if anyone knows anyone interested, tell them to apply.
- b. **Next meeting:** October 18, 2021. As of now we can meet in person, but we don't know how long that will last. HARC is transitioning back to Zoom meetings. Jackie noted that the City has evolving mandates on masking, vaccination and testing. Jackie will communicate any new policies to the Commission.
- c. **Tours:** We should consider if we want City Council members to tour the Records Center facility. The last renovation project was funded because City Council members visited and saw the need for the renovation. Jackie is eager to get the necessary renovations done before she retires.

Next meeting - Our next meeting will be on October 18, 2021, in person.

Adjourn: Cam made a motion to adjourn at 8:40 PM; Lynn seconded.

Respectfully submitted,

Lynn Jorden