



Where Are Those Files When You Need Them?

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The Problem

For most local public agencies, file retention and retrieval presents a problem of monumental proportions. Record retention and retrieval, for public agencies seems to be of even greater importance than in private industry. Public records, such as right-of-way deeds and permanent easements, must be available for review and copying easily and frequently.

Creating a Comprehensive Records Management System

Because of the frequency of use, these road right-of-way and project files are often in poor and tattered condition. For this same reason, many of the files have been misplaced or filed incorrectly. As a land acquisition agent and manager since 1978, I have become painfully aware of many wasted hours involved in trying to find files that I know are somewhere in that maze.

Added to the time and worry element, consider the loss of revenue suffered by acquiring property and property rights which our agency may already own. If your agency is anything like mine, you probably have project files in a number of different locations.

For instance, we have the general road right-of-way files in one group of file cabinets in our office. These contain the rural post road right-of-way deeds that we have accumulated over the years, conveying 60-, 80- or 100-foot rights of way to the county. Many of these have multiple signatures of landowners on them.

Most of the old right-of-way deeds do not reference a tax parcel number, or other information identifying the precise tract of land for which the right of way is granted. Consequently, when a landowner sells a parcel of land, the succeeding owner is not aware that right of way has been granted. The previous property owner might forget about the deed and sell the new owner property that is already county right of way.

Without a thorough and professional title report, these recorded documents are not found when properties change hands. I have also noticed that even the tax assessor's office does not find many of these transactions. Therefore, a landowner may pay taxes on property that is in a road right of way for many years, unless the owner brings it to the attention of the tax assessor.

Another problem caused by frequent use of files, is the fraying of the file folders, labels coming off, and correspondence and other documents inside the file folder getting damaged, destroyed, or lost during handling. Most files too, have excessive paperwork in them. Files need to be

reviewed regularly, and unnecessary duplicate forms and correspondence need to be discarded.

Additional problems result when, due to space limitations, files are stored in several locations. This is complicated when both private contractors and in-house personnel are used in acquiring property. For instance, we have active project files in our own offices, usually in the individual agent's office space. These files are forwarded to law and finance departments for closing papers to be prepared. The package is then processed and sent back to the individual agent for closing. After

Recommend File Review and Scanning Procedure

- Retrieval of files from present storage site
- Thorough review of the project parcel file, including discarding of duplicate copies and unnecessary paper work
- Scanning of right-of-way deeds, warranty deeds, quit claim deeds and permanent easements with the parcel file cover sheet
- Forwarding of files to records management or a permanent storage location
- Training of personnel on the procedures, so files can be scanned as each project is completed

closing, the file is sent back to the law department for review and recording.

After recording, the documents are returned to the agent for filing in the project files. Sometimes, several months later, a law department file is sent to the agent for combining with the remainder of the file. This same procedure is followed when private acquisition contractors are used, except there are also files in the private contractors' offices, in the law department and in the real property or right-of-way section, where files are maintained.

Trying to access files anywhere along the project chain of activity can

become a nice piece of detective work. Therefore, file condition, file location and the speed and convenience of file accessibility are major factors in a local public agency's real property acquisition and management operation.

File condition concerns more than the physical condition of the file folders, such as missing labels, tattered, torn and worn file folders. It also takes into consideration the contents of the individual file folder. More often than not, a file folder will have duplicate copies of forms, correspondence and documents.

File location concerns how many copies of the file exist in how many different locations. For instance, as noted, it is common to have a working file in the agent's possession, a file in the law department, and in the case of private contractors, a review file in the acquiring agency's hands. In the case of condemnation or expropriation cases, there could even be additional files, in the court record room.

Location and condition mainly govern the accessibility of files. In addition to these two factors, the speed of accessing files is of chief importance. Most files have to be retrieved and reviewed time after time. This may be because of preparation for court cases, reviewing past property values, reviewing some agreement that was made with a property owner in times past, or just to assist the present negotiator in knowing whom to contact and how to reach them. Additional considerations include the wasted hours in locating files time after time, the time spent in returning them to their file location and the amount of storage area used to keep all those files.

The Solution

To solve these problems, our agency proposed to implement a file scanning system, using optical imaging. The backlog of files was scanned onto computer disks and the physical files were forwarded to our records management department for retention. It might be necessary to purchase hardware and software suitable for scan-

ning, or perhaps to develop our own software. After viewing what the industry had to offer, it was decided that we would use our existing hardware and purchase the software.

After each file was reviewed, duplicate and unnecessary paper work was discarded. This required training of in-house administrative staff on what

to discard, and what to retain in the project files. It was also necessary to develop a one-page cover sheet for each file, showing what was contained in the file folder that was to be forwarded to records management. The right-of-way deed, any permanent easements and the cover sheet were scanned into the computer records.

This also included the documents showing the award and date of taking for condemnation cases.

Once the backlog of old projects was scanned into the computer, our next step was to train the land acquisition personnel in scanning procedures. In the future, all current projects will be scanned into the computer at the completion of the project.

As a follow-up, all existing road and street right-of-way files were then scanned. That made it simple to retrieve the files. When someone wants to know the existing right of way on his or her property, it can be pulled up instantly. We can also provide a property owner with a copy of the right-of-way deed or easement, if necessary.

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As the geographical indexing system (GIS) advances, the file scanning of roads and other projects can be merged into the GIS network. That helps to complete the modern information network needed by local public agencies as well as private industry.

Several companies market both hardware and scanning software. The author's intent is not to recommend any one company or methodology, rather, to simply show that it is not only beneficial, but imperative that we advance into the electronic age to access and maintain file systems. I have given, in the following pages, a breakdown of the estimated cost to acquire and implement the file scanning procedure that is used by our local public agency. You may already know of firms that have hardware and software that is