



State & Local Records News

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Open records task force to consider revision of Alabama's public records access laws

A new "Open Records Study Task Force" met on October 20 to begin creating "a clear and uniform process through which citizens may obtain access to public information and documents." Chaired by Senator Zeb Little and Representative Blaine Galliher, the task force includes members from 29 state agencies; public officials' organizations; and political interest groups, such as the Alabama Press Association and the League of Women Voters. State Archivist Ed Bridges represents ADAH.

The Code of Alabama 1975, Section 36-12-40, establishes that "every citizen has a right to inspect and take a copy of any public writing in this state, except as otherwise expressly provided by statute." However, the statutes do restrict certain records from public inspection, either permanently or for a period of years. Because our current laws are vague, state or local officials may be unsure which records can legitimately be closed to public access, while citizens lack a clear legal recourse if they feel that access to a record has been improperly denied.

The Open Records Study Task Force began its work by appointing five subcommittees to study the following questions: (1) What defines a public record? (2) What are the exemptions to the Open Records Law? (3) What is the procedure for accessing a public record? (4) What are the penalties for failing to comply with the Open Records Law?,

and (5) What are the issues relating to the ownership and disposition of government records? Task force members will also consider whether all records held in public archives might be opened to public inspection after a specified period of years.

The task force's purpose is to undertake a long-term reassessment of Alabama's open records laws. Therefore, any proposed changes are unlikely to be ready before the 2007 legislative session.

State Records Commission approves State Agency RDAs

On October 26, members of the **State Records Commission** approved a new records disposition authority (RDA) for the Office of the Secretary of State. The commission also approved a major revision of the RDA for the Alabama Licensure Board for Interpreters and Transliterators and a minor revision of the RDA for the Department of Revenue. Finally, the commission reviewed RDA implementation reports from 26 state agencies.

Because the **Local Government Records Commission** did not meet on October 26, draft RDAs and other business for that meeting have been held over until January.

The commissions' next meetings are set for **January 25, 2006**. The State Records Commission will begin at 10:00 a.m., and the Local Government Records Commission at 1:30 p.m. Both meetings will be held in the Milo B. Howard Auditorium at ADAH.

Open Meetings Act creates new record-keeping requirement

During its meeting on October 26, the State Records Commission also discussed the impact of the Alabama Open Meetings Act of 2005 on record-keeping requirements for state agencies.

In compliance with the new act, all state agencies must send notice of their meetings to the Office of the Secretary of State, to be posted on its website for public review. After receiving the meeting notice, the Secretary of State's staff will e-mail an acknowledgment back to the agency.

To ensure that evidence of meeting notices is preserved to meet audit and compliance review needs, the State Records Commission has directed that all acknowledgments from the Secretary of State's office must be retained by the agency (either electronically or in hard copy) for three years. The State Records Commission may issue future records retention guidelines to address other provisions of this act.

The new legislation requires county and municipal governing bodies to post notice of their meetings locally. It also permits, but does not require, them to post notice on the Secretary of State's website. Disposition for notices of local government meetings is already provided for in county and municipal RDAs. Any statement regarding the Open Meetings Act issued at the Local Government Records Commission's January meeting will be reported in the next issue of *State and Local Records News*.

State agencies with questions about the new requirement should contact ADAH state rec-

ords archivist Richard Wang at (334)353-4605 or Richard.Wang@archives.alabama.gov.

ADAH officially dedicates west wing at "Wing Fling"

As previewed in the last issue of *State and Local Records News*, ADAH celebrated the grand opening of its new west wing at an open house—the "Wing Fling"—held on October 8. Hundreds of invited guests and visitors spent their Saturday touring our new



facility, which includes a beautiful research room, a state-of-the-art records storage area, a modern auditorium, and expanded office space.

Archivist Mike Breedlove shows visitors historical documents from the west wing basement storage area

Attendees enjoyed a variety of day-long activities, including historical reenactments and panel discussions, live storytelling and traditional music performances, a quilting exhibition, and an "antiques corner." There were also fun events for children, who included many of the 4th-grade students who participated in our "ribbon-cutting" contest (see photograph below).

Among the dignitaries attending our "Wing Fling" were Governor and Mrs. Riley (Mrs. Riley assisted the contest winners in cutting the ribbon), other state and local government officials, and

members of the Archives' Friends board and Board of Trustees. Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb, the trus-



tees' chairman, announced during the dedication ceremony that the west wing would be named "The Edwin C. Bridges Wing" in honor of (and much to the surprise of) our director.

Dr. Bridges, First Lady Patsy Riley, and 4th-grade students Kameron Smith and Alex Kim officially open the new wing

In his own remarks, Dr. Bridges extended thanks to everyone who has helped to make our new wing a reality: state officials who shared our vision and appropriated funding; ADAH board members, Friends, and generous private contributors; architects and contractors who worked with us throughout construction; state inmates who assisted staff with moving records and artifacts; and loyal volunteers who helped—as they always do—with the festivities on October 8.

Even though the "Wing Fling" is now behind us, we invite all Alabamians to visit ADAH, tour the new wing, and join us in our ongoing celebration!

Government Records Division staff continues training efforts

Government Records Division archivists continue to train state and local agencies in RDA implementation and records management.

On October 18, local records archivist Tom Turley met with the Montgomery Police Department's records officers for such a session. Tom and fellow archivist Frank Brown will hold a half-day training workshop for staff of the Mobile County Sheriff's Department, as well as municipal police departments in Mobile County, on December 8.

On October 21, Richard Wang conducted a session on "Preserving State Agency Records" at the fall meeting of the Law Libraries Association of Alabama, which was held at ADAH. Topics included Alabama records laws, public officials' records responsibilities, functions of the State Records Commission, and ADAH services to state agencies. Norwood Kerr of the Archives' Public Services Division talked to the group about researching legal questions at ADAH.

Hurricane Katrina spares most Alabama records

Despite the widespread devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, local records in our Gulf Coast counties appear to have emerged from the ordeal almost unscathed.

In mid-September, Frank Brown and Tom Turley surveyed county and municipal governments, archives, and historical and genealogical societies in Baldwin, Mobile, and other south Alabama counties to determine whether they suffered records loss or damage during the hurricane. Fortunately, only one municipality had lost records, and the losses there were not severe. In most cases, courthouses, city halls, or archival repositories were built far enough above the flood line to escape major damage.

The Alabama State Port Authority reported to Richard Wang that records in one of its storage buildings in Mobile were destroyed by the storm. Gadsden State Community College later lost rec-

ords when rainwater “runoff” from Katrina flooded a storage facility.

Hurricane Katrina provided a salutary warning that Alabama’s public records are never safe from the variety of natural disasters that can afflict our state. Following the storm, the ADAH website highlighted information on disaster preparedness and recovery. We hope to follow up with future workshops on this subject. Meanwhile, for assistance with disaster planning, salvaging wet records, or related issues, contact Linda Overman, ADAH conservation officer, at (334)353-4726 or Linda.Overman@archives.alabama.gov.

Researchers from near and far access ADAH website

Statistics from our website during the past quarter show that it is beginning to reach a worldwide audience.

While the great majority of website visitors hailed—as expected—from the USA, we had 41,449 “hits” from foreign lands. Forty per cent of them (16,753) originated in English-speaking countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Great Britain, and South Africa); but nearly as many (13,028) came from Western Europe, and over half that number (7,051) from Asia and the Middle East. Totals for other continents or regions were: Central and South America (plus the Caribbean) 3,094; Eastern Europe 1,227; Africa (excluding South Africa but including Egypt and other Arab states) 643; and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) 54.

Surprisingly—with a Hyundai plant opening in Alabama—the website attracted more visitors from Singapore than from Korea. Although statistics for US states were unavailable, it is a safe bet that there were more “hits” from Georgia (USA) than the 11 from Georgia (formerly of the USSR). Lonely individuals in Belarus, Brunei, the Netherlands Antillies, and Surinam were the only ones in their whole countries to try out our website, while it aroused no interest at all in Honduras, Microne-

sia, Oman, or Rwanda. Obviously, ADAH needs to increase its efforts in those places!

Our website coordinator, Mark Palmer, is always adding interesting material. After perusing *State and Local Records News*, why not check out a few of the site’s newest links? There’s lots more fun in store!

Senator Shelby proposes federal funding for state history museum

Early in November, ADAH received “wonderful news” (as our director described it) from Senator Richard Shelby’s office in Washington. The senator “announced conference committee approval of important projects . . . included in the Fiscal Year 2006 Commerce, Justice and Science Appropriations Bill. The bill will soon be voted on in the House, and the Senate will consider the bill following House approval.”

One of these important projects was the new Alabama History Museum, to be located on the ADAH west wing’s second floor. The department requested a total of \$2.5 million in federal funds for museum development. Under this bill, ADAH would receive \$850,000, which “should be sufficient [as Dr. Bridges informed the Board of Trustees] to move our three-year museum project forward for the first year.” He expressed hope that the museum would continue to enjoy federal support in future years.

The new history museum is designed to be a “walk-through” tour of our state’s past, featuring an “Alabama Voices” concept to “establish a clear and comprehensive storyline. . . . Visitors will proceed chronologically . . . from the early 1700s to the end of the 20th century . . . [examining] Alabama’s history through personal accounts drawn from letters, diaries, officials records, and other archival and collections resources. . . . A seamless integration of objects and documents with media,

environments, settings, and hands-on activities will provide [visitors] with engaging connections to the people from the past.”

Once preliminary funding for the project is assured, future issues of *State and Local Records News* will carry more information on these exciting plans as they develop.