



2022 BUDGET – MODERNIZATION FUNDING REQUEST 11

New Initiative:	Modernizing Access to Archival Records
Department/Division:	Corporate Services - Clerk
Strategic Plan Focus:	A County that Informs and Engages
Strategic Plan Objective:	<i>5. i. Enhance our customer service focus and responsiveness to our municipal partners and the public by: Implementing clearly defined customer service standards and expectations</i>

DESCRIPTION OF REQUEST

The Oxford County Archives is seeking to modernize access to its archival holdings through the upgrading of equipment as well as the digitizing of archival materials. This project would not only improve our service delivery standards and achieve savings, but would also help spread awareness of Oxford County's collective archival and cultural heritage.

DISCUSSION

Background

A resolution of the County Council, dated October 27, 1999, created the County of Oxford Archives effective January 1, 2000. The establishment and operation of the Archives assists the County in meeting the legislative requirements stated under Section 254 of the *Municipal Act, 2001*.

The County of Oxford Archives is a well-recognized "total" Archives responsible for the collection of local government records as well as local history materials. Its holdings include the corporate records of the County of Oxford; area municipality corporate records; private fonds from local businesses, community groups, and individuals; as well as an extensive photograph and postcard collection. The Archives is also the official repository for the records of the District of Brock, 1842-1849, which was the precursor to the County of Oxford.

The Principles of the County of Oxford as established under the Archives Management Policy No. 3.04 include:

- To assist with and promote the efficient and effective management of all records created, received, used and maintained by the County, its agencies, boards and commissions;
- To preserve the County's recorded memory by identifying, acquiring, preserving and protecting its valuable and vital records;
- To acquire and preserve records relating to the social and economic development of the County of Oxford in order to:

- foster and understanding of local history;
- preserve information about the history and development of the County and people involved; provide educational and academic resources; and
- promote tourism through attracting researchers;
- To provide access to the information necessary to support current and future decision making and to permit County Council and the various County departments to meet institutional accountability requirements;
- To assist with and promote compliance with any statutory requirements relating to the collection, use, disclosure, retention and disposal of County records; and
- To provide adequate facilities and services for storage, preservation, retrieval and use of archival records.

Arising from the 2015-2016 corporate-wide service delivery review, the consultant identified a service improvement opportunity for possible consolidation of archival materials of all the area municipalities with the County as a shared service model. In response, Archives staff consulted with area municipal staff and, is now, the official repository of the archival records of four Area Municipalities: Blandford-Blenheim, East Zorra-Tavistock, South-West Oxford and Zorra and includes such important administrative records as minutes, by-laws, financial records, and assessment and collectors rolls.

In addition to these records, the Archives has been working with Archives of Ontario to repatriate early township records prior to restructuring (1850-1974) and to date have received materials from the Townships of Dereham, East Nissouri, North Oxford, and West Zorra as well as the Villages of Embro and Thamesford. Although this initiative has been put on hold due to COVID-19, the Archives is hoping to begin receiving more records from the provincial archives in 2022.

With continual outreach activities and partnerships with area museums, historical societies, and libraries; the Archives' holdings have continued to increase in volume in terms of community based records belonging to individuals, organizations and businesses. As of summer 2021, the Archives has been approached by the Oxford Historical Society to act as the official repository of their archival holdings as they are no longer able to maintain a physical reference centre due to cost and an aging volunteer base.

Finally, there has been a pervasive movement to digitize archival records. This trend has been accompanied by rising expectations on the part of the public to access and view materials in digital format from the comfort of their offices or homes. This need and expectation has only been increased over the last year and half due to COVID-19, which has altered how the Archives provides service to the public. However, despite this pressure, the percentage of the archival holdings that have been digitized is quite small and can be attributed to the volume of records the archives possess, the staffing complement to conduct such an initiative, and the nature of the records themselves, that are often quite fragile and vary in format.

Comments

In order for the archives to meet the increasing needs of our users, staff have determined two main objectives for modernizing the archival holdings:

Objective 1: Updating the existing microfilm reader/scanner

Our current microfilm reader/scanner was purchased when the Oxford County Archives officially opened in 2000. The machine is now antiquated in comparison to technologies now available and it no longer works effectively, with regular functional issues, which negatively impacts our service delivery efficiency. As it is used frequently by both staff, and the public to access our vast newspaper microfilm collection and other pertinent microfilm reels, it has become evident that a more modern and efficient microfilm reader/scanner is required to meet current archival service standards.

An updated microfilm reader/scanner would have the following capabilities not currently available in our legacy machine:

- Creates high resolution scans (staff currently have to print and then scan all images in order to produce a digital copy)
- Allows images to be instantly sent to Email, Google Drive, cloud storage, Dropbox and more.
- Machine includes a USB port so that images can be saved to a thumb drive
- Includes annotation software which can add highlights, text, etc. to any scan
- Can save multipage images as PDF or TIFF
- Generates user reports and total scan counts
- “Quiet Library” operation (no fans to make noise and potentially fail)

The new microfilm reader/scanner would take up less space than our legacy machine. The office space would be reconfigured to allow the microfilm reader and oversized photo/document scanner to be utilized in the same area, thereby creating a technology hub that could be accessed by staff, volunteers, members of the Oxford Historical Society and Oxford Ancestors, students and researchers.

A new microfilm reader/scanner, such as this, would allow archives staff to complete reference requests in a timely fashion, could be utilized for research completed by staff and the public; and would provide more efficient and better quality service to our patrons that align with current technologies.

Objective 2: Digitization of archival holdings

According to the Archives Space Needs Assessment Study conducted in 2017, it was noted that although there is a pressure to digitize collections, most Canadian archives have a small percentage – typically one to ten percent – of their holdings digitized and available on-line. This can be attributed to the volume of records that most archival institutions possess, along with the equipment requirements and protocols involved in scanning historic materials. This can also be attributed to the fact that archival records are irreplaceable, often quite fragile, and come in different media and formats (ie. audio and video cassettes, reels, negatives, slides, photographs, maps, etc.) and sizes. Consequently, it is much more time-consuming and expensive to digitize and describe archival records compared to operational textual records.

Archival processing backlog is a constant reality for archives staff. This past year and a half, the COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted the Archives in terms of staffing numbers as well as physical limitations of work being completed on site with staff working remotely. Over the years there has been a steady increase in demand for online content and access to digital versions of archival records, which has only been exacerbated by COVID-19 which saw the physical closure of the archives to the public and an increase in public time and interest in historical research.

Archives staff recognize the demand and need for access to digital versions of archival records and have identified two main areas in our holdings that we feel would benefit from digitization, being area municipal records and photograph and postcard collection.

Area Municipal Records

Priority would be given to digitizing by-laws that have been received from our Area Municipalities and Archives of Ontario, to make them accessible on-line. These records have already been processed by Archives staff and have determined that some of these early records are physically fragile and would benefit from having a digital copy produced for preservation purposes. Once digitized, these records would be made accessible online for easy access by our partnering Area Municipalities and the general public. In addition, any records, such as minutes that have preservation and conservation concerns, such as mold, would also be scanned to ensure a lasting digital copy. This would allow continuous and easy access to these important records relating to the history of the county and our area municipalities.

Photograph and Postcard Collection

Also a priority would be to begin the monumental task of digitizing our large postcard, photograph and negative collection which includes County Council composites, school photos, community organizations and our vast collection of Woodstock Sentinel-Review negatives which date back to the late 1940s and consists of over 10,000 images. To date, Archives staff have catalogued well over 2000 images with only a fraction of those being digitized. However, the more images we have digitized, the better we will be able to serve our patrons and local community by providing easier access to such materials that are in most demand. It would assist in improving our service delivery model as we would be able to assist patrons both on site and remotely by having more collections available online. In addition, our digitized photograph collection could be a potential revenue stream, similar to initiatives already in place by the Bruce County Museum and Archives and Western University Archives, with patrons purchasing high quality digital scans. Finally, it would allow staff to focus on creating more public programming and online initiatives with materials that have already been digitized and made accessible. In doing so, it would allow the Archives to promote the county's heritage to a wider audience and encourage local community members' engagement with Oxford County's history.

The following table references prioritized records and volumes proposed to be included in this digitization project based on archival records in most demand.

Type of Records	Amount
Area Municipality By-laws	32 half size boxes (approx. 16 feet) 3 oversized ledgers
Photograph collection	14 boxes (approx. 12 feet)
Postcard collection	184 postcards
County Composites (1896 - 2018)	76 composites of varying sizes
Woodstock Sentinel-Review Negatives	10,000+ negatives (unprocessed)

Financial Implications

The Archives has an oversized photo/document scanner and software for staff to digitize materials. However, due to staffing and time limitations the task of digitizing materials has not received the attention it deserves. Contracting out our digitization needs would not only meet the public's demand for access to records online, but would streamline the Archives reference services thereby saving staff time. Moreover, it would allow current Archives staff to focus on arranging and describing our unprocessed records which would help utilize our current space and in turn, save us the need to seek additional space, for the time being, and the costs associated with a larger building.

The digitization of physical records would also result in an added benefit of less printed copies being created for researchers and patrons, and therefore less office supplies, such as paper and ink, being used for this purpose. With records being available online, parties interested in accessing the records can do so at any time online from home, which would likely reduce the number of requests for printed copies of records being created at the Archives for researchers to take home with them. The Archives could also provide a high resolution digital copy of scanned records for a fee for patrons to print at home. Not only would this save on supply costs, but would also reduce the Archives' environmental impact with less paper and ink being utilized.

The digitization of archival materials such as photographs, postcards, paper based records, and other analogue archival items, decreases the likelihood of the materials needing future or repeat conservation work. Once the materials are digitized and made available in a digital format online or in an accessible database, the need to access the physical records is greatly reduced. This results in the records being handled less, and exposed less frequently to deteriorating environmental factors such as light and pollutants. Instead, these records can be stored safely for the long-term and removed from storage only upon necessity. Increased handling and exposure of historical records leads to an increase in the need for conservation work as damage and deterioration is inevitable. With less conservation work needing to be applied to processed, physical records in storage, the result would be a savings in conservation supply costs and staff time required for repairing and cleaning the records.

Conclusions

The Oxford County Archives provides exceptional service to staff and the public. In order to continue to provide such customer service, and to adapt to the changing ways people seek information, the archives needs the proper tools and strategies in place. Antiquated equipment hinders how Archives staff are able to assist researchers and limits ease of access to such materials, especially as so much information is shared digitally. Furthermore, as technology continues to advance, the public continues to seek out records online. In order to better serve our patrons, it is imperative that we provide more online content to those seeking historical information. In order to do so, photographs and records will need to be digitized to meet that interest and demand.

RISKS/IMPLICATIONS

The preservation of the County's history, from a corporate and community social, cultural and economic perspective will be lost over time if the County does not meet the future service levels and technologies necessary to accommodate the safekeeping and accessibility of our past for the benefit of our future.

BUDGET REQUIREMENTS

	2022 One-time	2022 Base
Funding		
Modernization Grant – Implementation Stream (Intake 3)	\$14,755	\$-
Reserve Funding - General	7,945	-
Total Funding	22,700	-
Expenses		
Microfilm Scanner	10,700	-
Digitization services	12,000	-
Total Expenses	22,700	-
County Levy	\$-	\$-