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SB 180

Testimony on SB180
House State Administration Committee
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Testimony presented by
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The State Archives were created by the Legislature in 1969 as a division of the Montana Historical Society. The Historical Society is one of the smallest agencies in state government, yet they are charged with storing, preserving and providing access to the records of ALL state government agencies. We have been attempting to do this without any assistance from the other agencies and with a minimal staff.

The Historical Society receives an average of 600 linear feet of public records annually (one linear foot is roughly one banker's box). We also have 11,000 feet of unprocessed state records. These are records of government agencies and officials that are stacked in boxes but for which there are no detailed catalog records, effectively making them inaccessible to the public. The law requires the Montana Historical Society to keep appropriate state records in perpetuity and requires that they be made available to the public.

Laid out side-by-side, these records are over 34 football fields in length. Processing records can result in as much as a 60 percent reduction in materials as non-relevant records and duplications are weeded out by professional archivists.

The Historical Society would use the funds generated by SB180 to hire two full-time, professional archivists who will process the records of state government agencies. Less than one FTE is devoted to state records management currently. This would increase public access by making the records fully accessible through an online catalog and substantially reduce the amount of space necessary to store them.

If the Society had just two additional archivists, they could assess, preserve, and catalog the contents of these records. This would reduce the storage requirement by as much as 140 to 210 boxes and, most importantly, could provide meaningful public access to these records by completing a detailed catalog record.

If we apply the formula for the Governor's papers alone to the 34 football field analogy, over 4,000 feet of valuable space could be freed up (13 football fields), saving a substantial amount of space in a facility that is bursting at the seams. Even more significantly, the Society will be able to provide access to these records because they will be fully cataloged.

SB180 assesses a fee to each agency of government based on the number of FTE or size of the agency. This approach is better than charging by the linear foot because it is not a disincentive to preserving our history. Basing the fee on the number of full-time, regular staff of the various agencies makes sense because larger departments generate more records. It's that simple. For example, Health and Human Services is the largest department by FTE. They also deposit the largest volume of records. Likewise, the smaller agencies like Agriculture or tiny ones like the Arts Council, deposit proportionally smaller volumes of material.

In summary, with no additional staff, the Montana Historical Society will be unable to accept or provide public access to a large amount of historically significant records of state government. This bill is essential to state records management and to comply with the law.

I urge your support on SB180.