



Office of the Common Council - City Clerk
City Records Center

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TO: Ald. Nik Kovac, Chair, City Information Management Committee
FROM: Brad Houston, City Records Officer
RE: "Hidden Costs" of managing all texts and emails as permanent

Dear Ald. Kovac:

Following the discussion at the December 13, 2018 City Information Management Committee (CIMC) meeting, you requested that I draft this memo elaborating on what I described as "hidden costs" of retaining indefinitely all text messages and emails produced by City employees. Although a cursory examination of storage costs suggests a manageable burden for ITMD for the foreseeable future, the absolute costs of retaining all such records are exponentially greater. These costs can be roughly broken down into four categories:

- **Operational costs:** Email is currently managed via the cloud exchange server, and the plan for text archiving is similarly cloud-oriented. Outsourcing management to third-party vendors does cut much of the overhead associated with managing enterprise email system, but does not abrogate it altogether. Critically, storage for archive accounts is only "unlimited" for as long as we stay with our current vendor under the same contract terms. If at some point in the future the vendor determines that unlimited storage is not compatible with their business model, the City may be forced to pay storage costs far beyond what would be paid for by purging non-critical records on a regular basis. Should the City decide to move to a new system in the future, migration of emails from Exchange to a new system will be more expensive the more emails that must be transferred over.
- **Administrative costs:** Time spent searching for records represents money wasted by the City, specifically the amount of time searching multiplied by the searcher's salary. The knowledge that texts/emails will always be kept may encourage employees to be careless with their organizational practices, making it harder to locate necessary information at the line-of-business level. To the extent that it is easier to physically segregate important emails to keep track of them, employees are already saving copies to hard drives and printing to physical files; evidence of this can be found in hundreds of boxes of email printouts and thousands of emails saved to PST or text files in the holdings of the record center.
- **Public Records costs:** The more responsive records that are retained, the more records that must be disclosed, with accordant screening for personal records, confidential information for redaction, etc. To the extent that information must be redacted for a records request, that cost must be borne by the City per State law and may not be passed on to the requestor. Keyword



search can help in both this case and in the case of administrative records, but in general a simple search does not bring back records where key terms are misspelt or alternative terms are used, and may bring back a number of false positives which must be reviewed. This has a material effect on public records requests now, and will have an obscurant effect on research if/when historically significant texts or emails are made ready for City Archives.

- **Reputational costs:** By retaining all text messages and emails permanently, the City is making a commitment to potentially providing access to any and all such records, for an indefinite period of time. As we have seen recently with texts sent to and from City employees and officials, these have enormous potential to bring correspondence to light which is at best personally embarrassing to City officials, and at worst could be used as the basis of litigation if illegal or unethical behavior is discussed. Beyond the content of the record itself, any confidential or protected information retained permanently could be leaked if access to email accounts were compromised, either via social engineering such as phishing or via brute-force hacking. This sort of breach, in addition to the reputational cost to the city, could also bring with it the costs of mandatory notification of breach to any and all affected parties (e.g. in the case of leaked Protected Health Information).

The two retention schedules for text messages that I have submitted for CIMC approval this quarter are a preliminary attempt to create a records retention compliance-based solution to some of these problems. Using a modified “capstone” approach of the sort already in use by the Federal Government, we can both reduce our absolute costs of retaining texts with minimal ongoing administrative or legal value, and increase the likelihood that texts of import to City business or policy are appropriately retained.

Please let me know if you have any questions about any of the above.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Brad Houston', written in a cursive style.

Brad Houston, City Records Officer

Cc: City Information Management Committee members and support staff