



HOW TOMPKINS COUNTY SAVED \$5.5 MILLION BY GOING DIGITAL

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Like many government organizations, Tompkins County, NY has always aimed to be as transparent as possible. However, with an old and crowded records building, it wasn't always easy. County employees would have to make a list of all public records requests, venture into the records center—which had a leaky roof and unstable broiler—and then dig through boxes with a flashlight in hand. Public perception is that government hides documents, we just couldn't find them among the 9,000 boxes that stored 200 years' worth of documents.



Ithaca, New York – Seat of Tompkins County

Photo: Maeshima hiroki

Upon becoming records management officer for Tompkins County, I realized that the current records management system would not be sustainable. Not only was it difficult to find files, but we were also creating mass amounts of paper and quickly running out of storage space. We needed a solution that would keep historic files safe and allow us to easily search and retrieve the information we need.

Initially, we considered renovating the existing records center or building a new one. We would then use barcodes to better track the boxes. But after discussing the dilemma with our IT director, we realized that electronic records management was a much more sustainable approach. With electronic records management, we would be able to quickly locate files, add storage capacity as needed and back up content so documents could be recovered in the case of a fire, flood or other natural disaster. With an investment of \$400,000 to \$500,000 for scanning, software licenses and IT infrastructure upgrades, we estimated that the county could save as much as \$5.5 million in total.

The county selected Laserfiche as the enterprise content management (ECM) solution to store records and streamline document workflows. In order to increase user adoption as we rolled out the system across the county, the team in the Clerk's Office created a collaborative process for converting the paper documents into the digital system. Our staff examined departmental files and interviewed departmental staff to learn about the use and flow of documents. Then, staff members scanned files into the system and placed them in a digital folder structure that mimicked the organization of physical folders. Finally, we destroyed the paper documents.

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We saw immediate success gaining efficiency in our records management workflow as a result of going digital, and realized that the municipalities in the county could benefit from electronic records management, too. Many cities and towns in the county had lost paper files after Hurricane Sandy hit in 2012 and needed to prevent any future losses. These municipalities were eager to find a better solution for records management, but lacked budget or staff to implement a digital system of their own.

After receiving over \$600,000 in grant money from the New York State Archives Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund, we formed the Tompkins Shared Services Electronic Records Repository (TSSERR). Through the TSSERR program, 19 municipalities have their own dedicated repository in the system and each has complete control over its content with customized levels of security and access rights.

When looking at the program as a whole, every agency has benefited from reduced maintenance costs by consolidating systems and eliminating redundant expenses. This partnership has also allowed us to build a community around records management. We host user groups regularly to facilitate the sharing of best practices and new solutions among partnered agencies in the TSSERR program.

Moving forward, we hope to expand the shared services program to more municipalities outside of Tompkins County by partnering with the state on new grant opportunities. Through our experience of transitioning Tompkins County and its partners to electronic records management, we’ve learned that success comes when you eliminate paper from the start. When onboarding county departments, I used to show up with a hand truck, load all of their paper files and take the documents away for scanning or destruction. As I walked away, I said, “Trust me! You’re going to love it!” Over five years later, we have yet to receive a complaint.

MAUREEN REYNOLDS is the County Clerk for Tompkins County, NY.