Open Data Literacy Project/Washington State Library

Washington State Archives Meeting, 2018-08-02: Notes

*Following are notes from a meeting between Evelyn Lindberg, Washington State Library, and ODL intern Kathleen Sullivan, with senior Archives staff, AR1, AR2 and AR3.*

# Background

* The State Library was interested in whether a records-management grantmaking program administered through Archives might help provide infrastructure for local open-data publishing. The grantmaking program, created by ESHB 1594 in 2017, runs through June 2020.
* Local agencies may apply for grants to purchase technology, digital imaging tools or help in organizing files and other physical materials. Local agencies include Washington counties, cities, towns, fire districts, school districts, hospital districts, port districts, public utility districts, transit authorities and other special purpose districts.
* Archives awarded one round of grants to 57 local agencies in May 2018. Applications for a second round of grants closed on July 31, 2018.

# Comments

* Archives staff said the grantmaking program would not be a good avenue for putting open data publishing platforms or other enduring infrastructure in place, for at least two reasons:
  + Most grant applications so far have sought support for basic records management -- temporary staff to inventory and organized paper files and other physical materials, for example, or shelving to get file boxes off the floor. Technology grants in the first round went mostly went to software that manages records requests themselves, rather than making records openly available online.
  + The grants provide one-time support, not the sustained staffing and investment needed to support open-data publishing.
* While acknowledging that open data can support public access, government accountability and research opportunities, AR1 expressed skepticism that open data can significantly reduce public records requests. Among reasons cited were the following:
  + Open data is not especially useful when it is poorly documented, incomplete or disconnected from relevant, contextual information. Incomplete data may build in bias. Poorly defined or inaccurate datasets may be improperly combined.
  + Information that begins on paper and is digitized often lacks metadata or granularity associated with data that is born digital.
  + Open data needs to be easy to use in order to be truly accessible to most members of the public, not just a small group of technology enthusiasts. The public needs education or marketing to understand the benefits of researching open data.
  + Public demand doesn’t exist for all government data, and maintaining open data indefinitely costs money.
* AR1 also expressed concerns about open datasets being combined in a way that identifies individuals and violates privacy.