The California Public Records Act
National City and Best Practices for Improvement

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Corey Polant  Sociology
Professor Joshua Chanin  Criminal Justice
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................................... 4
  Sage Project Staff ..................................................................................................................... 4
About the Sage Project .................................................................................................................. 5
About National City ....................................................................................................................... 5
Executive Summary ...................................................................................................................... 6
Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 8
National City’s Public Records Process ........................................................................................ 10
Limitations of the National City Policy ....................................................................................... 11
  (A) Communication ................................................................................................................. 11
  (B) Employee Training ........................................................................................................... 12
  (C) Funding .............................................................................................................................. 12
Integrating Technology in the Public Records Process ................................................................. 13
  Generational disconnects of integrative technologies ................................................................. 13
  Funding & Scanning ................................................................................................................ 14
  Issues that technology could have on the CPRA .................................................................... 14
Comparative San Diego City Processes ....................................................................................... 15
  Carlsbad Best Practices .......................................................................................................... 17
  Chula Vista Best Practices ...................................................................................................... 19
  San Diego Best Practices ....................................................................................................... 21
  Lemon Grove Best Practices .................................................................................................. 23
  La Mesa Best Practices .......................................................................................................... 25
Recommendations Based on Best Practices Cities in San Diego County .................................... 26
  Recommendation #1 .............................................................................................................. 26
  Recommendation #2 .............................................................................................................. 27
  Recommendation #3 .............................................................................................................. 28
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 30
References ..................................................................................................................................... 31
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Sage Project Staff

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About the Sage Project

The Sage Project is a partnership between San Diego State University (SDSU) and a city or government entity in the San Diego region. The mission of the program is to engage students from across the University to assist the local government with projects that address their smart growth, quality of life, and sustainability goals. Students have the opportunity to engage in meaningful real-world projects and make positive contributions to a community in SDSU’s service area. The program’s vision is to connect SDSU students and faculty with high-priority, high-need community projects, thereby generating interest and fresh ideas that create momentum and provide real service to the community. The Sage Project embodies the University’s commitment to serving local students, engaging alumni, and contributing to the public good by focusing thousands of hours of course-based student involvement with high-impact activities.

The program is based on the highly successful and award-winning Sustainable City Year Program (SCYP) at the University of Oregon and is a part of the SCYP network. National City, California is the Sage Project’s 2013-2014 partner city. Participating courses come from the following disciplines: Anthropology; Audiology; City Planning; Civil Engineering; Communication; Criminal Justice; Geography; Graphic Design; Homeland Security; International Security and Conflict Resolution; Marketing; Political Science; Public Administration; Public Health; and Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences.

About National City

National City is a highly urban community of about 60,000 residents in south San Diego County. It is the second oldest city in the county and boasts a rich history, a diverse community, and is known as one of the most walkable cities in San Diego County. Located just south of downtown San Diego and just north of the US-Mexico border, the city is flanked by freeways and is home to large-scale industries. National City is a mid-size city that faces big city challenges, and, like many municipalities, the city is challenged to meet community needs and new demands of sustainability. By providing new ideas and human capacity, this partnership with the Sage Project will help National City implement sustainability concepts and practices into projects that will improve livability.
Executive Summary

The California Public Records Act (CPRA) applies to all local or municipal governments by allowing the public the right to request and inspect any document or piece of information unless exempted by law. Some documents may be redacted for either privacy issues or legalities, but overall, most documents within the government are subject to the CPRA. Signed into law in 1968, this act creates a fundamental right for the American people to access information, while safeguarding the government's accountability to the public. Though the act outlines policies and procedures for how and when information is to be released after it is requested, cities have adopted their own internal procedures and processes that have either enabled or disabled their ability to work efficiently and sustainably.

Through the partnership between National City and the SDSU Sage Project during the fall of 2014, an upper-level undergraduate Public Administration course taught by Professor Josh Chanin developed recommendations for improvement of National City’s internal procedures for the public records process. The class was divided into five groups and investigated the process by which other California cities (La Mesa, Carlsbad, Lemon Grove, San Diego and Chula Vista) archive, retain and share their documents and information to the public. Upon completion of an investigation of each local city, these students had access to the “best practices” and technological resources that have enabled these cities to develop appropriate processes for their respective governments. This report is a consolidation of each group’s findings and recommendations using relevant examples to encourage a sustainable CPRA process while demonstrating the role a city plays in making information widely accessible to the public.

The current process for record retrieval in National City does not have any major flaws or need an immediate overhaul, but there are many ways that the city could improve the process. Some recommendations may be part of a larger conversation of funding and resources, but more simple recommendations, such as a more comprehensive training for city employees on the public records act and process, could improve administrative efficiency.

The report acknowledges that there is not a “one-fits-all” template for cities to utilize for their internal public records process as each city differs demographically, and may need a specialized process that works within the confines of city resources. For example, some cities had more resources available to buy supportive programs, like Laserfiche, a digital imaging database which centralizes a city’s public records. Chula Vista has a designated public employee whose title is “Records Manager” and is responsible solely for the response and tracking of public records requests. In other cities, the city clerk served as the coordinator for all public records requests, but they also had a deputy city clerk or assistant who helped facilitate communication between departments to obtain
documents to fulfill the requests. This helped the city clerk delegate responsibilities
and removed the pressure of being the only person working on public records requests.
Further, the importance of a progressive employee culture understanding of the
CPRA, the retrieval process, and its role within the government and to the people
must be noted.

The sum of this report is the significance that technology and communication between
departments plays throughout the process of public records retrieval. Both of these
organizational tools are discussed at length later in this report. Cities like Carlsbad
have a database online through their city website which allows citizens to navigate and
search for public records. Not only is it more convenient for the requester, but it also
frees up time and money that would have been spent for a city employee to retrieve the
document. Further, communication within the city clerk’s office and between different
departments is key to ensuring that the requests are fulfilled on time, correctly and
efficiently across different departments.
Introduction

In March of this year, Hilary Clinton came under public scrutiny followed by a media firestorm during the ongoing investigation of the deadly 2012 attacks on U.S. installations in Benghazi, Libya, killing four people. Though a Republican-led panel investigating the attacks accused Clinton of downplaying the role of Islamic militants in the attacks, to the public, the story since March has centered on Clinton’s use of a personal email address for official government business during her term as secretary of state. For many reasons, Clinton has found herself battling another controversy, and the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee alleges that Clinton has likely broken the law. Under the Federal Records Act, agencies are required to hold on to official communications—including all work-related emails—not only for government archival purposes, but so that information requested by the public through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) can be easily accessed. By using a personal email and server, some suggest that Clinton has circumvented FOIA. These actions have resulted in a loss of trust and perception of dishonesty that could have an enduring effect on public opinion, especially as she begins her presidential campaign.

This current example is not only relevant to the California Public Records Act (CPRA) and its process, but more importantly, captures how a public servant violated the spirit of what the FOIA and CPRA are supposed to embody to the citizenry. As an effort to connect and better inform the public of decisions being made by government, these acts are a tool granted to citizens to hold the government accountable and create a public “check” on the federal, state, and local government’s power. The Clinton controversy clearly illustrates the consequences when these tools are manipulated by those it is meant to check.

The CPRA is modeled after the federal FOIA, and both allow citizens the opportunity and authority to request information or documents for review and scrutiny, creating transparency between the government and the people it serves. For many reasons, this relationship is crucial to the representative democracy of America. All monetary resources for work in the public sector come directly from the taxpayers, and as such, the public has an inherent interest in the allocation of government funding; many times, the CPRA allows citizens to uncover wasteful spending in their own local government.

Recently, CBS News in San Diego utilized the CPRA to retrieve documents from Mayor Faulconer’s office regarding his city-leased SUV, which is equipped with DIRECTV (Gotfredson, 2015). CBS shaped the story to highlight government officials’ misuse of public money for a $4,300 installation and subscription of this service which included over 140 satellite TV and radio channels. Even though the car itself was leased through the San Diego Police Department, the mayor was accused of wasting taxpayers’ dollars on entertainment stations which had no relevancy to his position as mayor or his duties.
Though this local example is small when compared to the nearly $3 billion city budget, it evidences CPRA in action and highlights a public servant’s accountability to upholding his or her constituents’ best interest.

The CPRA has the ability to shape the political landscape, influence public opinion and allow for the free flow of public documents and information. By providing relevant examples that indicate the importance and power of the CPRA in local government, it is the goal of this report that the City of National City create a more sustainable and efficient process which incorporates best practices of CPRA retrieval.
National City’s Public Records Process

According to National City’s Administrative Manual, the city clerk is the city records manager and is responsible for ensuring that all requests are routed to their respective department in a timely manner. Further, once a requester has indicated either verbally or in writing their desire for a specific document or piece of information, it is treated as a submission of the CPRA and so begins the process. National City has a very straight-forward process for reviewing and handling public records requests, and there are only three people involved internally: the city clerk, city attorney and department director. Once a request is made to the city clerk’s office, it is sent to the appropriate department director that would have the specific information requested. The director becomes the requester’s liaison, and most of the communication occurs between them. It is also here that National City has within ten (10) calendar days to notify the requester if their request is valid or not and inform them of any cost to copy the documents. If the request will take additional days past the first 10, the city may take an additional 10 business days to gather documents. If a request is complicated or seems controversial in nature, it is sent to the city attorney for review. At the end of document gathering, the completed documents are sent to the requester upon payment for the documents. The CPRA is simple in its process, and it is up to the autonomy of each city to establish a process that works well for the government structure.
Limitations of the National City Policy

Through the investigation into National City and a meeting with City Clerk Michael Dalla, three main limitations of National City’s current process were identified. (A) The heavy demands their current approach places on communication largely impacts the productivity and efficiency of the CPRA process from the beginning to end. (B) By nature, government positions have frequent employee turnover, which makes it difficult for the city to properly train employees on the CPRA and internal process. (C) Funding is always an issue for any public agency, and the lack of funding for key administrative positions and managing systems puts more pressure on the city clerk to handle responsibilities that should be designated to a positioned records manager. Though the lack of technology and importance of its integration into National City’s process will be discussed in a different section, it is relevant to note it as a limitation in this section as well.

(A) Communication

An important element of any successful form of government is communication within the structure itself and communication with those which it serves. In essence, communication is what creates transparency. The CPRA embodies both these forms of communication. Requests sent to the city clerk’s office are sometimes very broad, not clearly demonstrating what the requester is asking for. Also, some requests may be so complicated that they require information from all different areas of government. Both of these cases require multiple departments to communicate and work together towards completion of the request. As experienced in most large organizations, the more people there are involved in something, the more confusing and messy a situation can become. When multiple departments are searching for vague documents that they believe could fulfill the request, communication between involved parties is sometimes lacking.

Further, making matters more difficult is the city’s lack of on-line document storage, meaning that departments must locate old files in boxes and storage rooms, taking away time from their daily job responsibilities. Department directors are the liaisons for any CPRA requests, so this wasteful time is being taken out of their workday to find documents in an unstructured system. Department directors and staff might not fully understand the policies and process of the CPRA, and confusion may occur when departments get requests directly from a requester rather than forwarded from the city clerk. Because they may not be familiar with the public records process, a department director in this situation may not know who to seek guidance from. The department director already has considerable responsibility, and the additional responsibility as liaison to the city clerk on any requests puts additional stress on the director, which deters communication throughout the process.
(B) Employee Training

Training on office processes and procedures is important for any organization, whether it be government, private, or not-for-profit. It is important for employees in National City to understand the role of the CPRA, know what the process is and who the contacts are in case they are ever involved in retrieving documents. This report did not investigate the current training, if any, for National City, but, based on conversations with National City employees, there seems to be a disconnect with what employees understand to be the CPRA. This may be for multiple reasons, including the need to get someone that is hired into a governmental role working as soon as possible to help run the city it serves. Therefore, certain processes may be prioritized more than others and the supervision over a new employee may not accurately communicate the importance and relevancy of the CPRA to this new hire’s position in government.

(C) Funding

Like most small local governments, National City deals with financial restraints that prevent the city from having the resources needed for full productivity and efficiency in the public records process. Many cities post-recession, still struggling to balance their budgets and administrative staff, often take on multiple responsibilities in their roles to make up for this loss (Pianin, 2014). From the research conducted for this report, there is not enough funding allocated to the CPRA process in terms of administrative staff and technology to make the process truly efficient. As will be discussed further, other local cities have specific personal dedicated to overseeing the CPRA process while also investing in data management systems to save and share public documents. Understanding these financial constraints, it is important to start conversations about short-term and long-term improvements that can be made over time and to provide funding to support these initiatives.
Integrating Technology in the Public Records Process

Technology in society is an ever-expanding resource, constantly redefining and revolutionizing the living standard. Not only has its impact been substantive on the individual, but technology’s contribution to businesses, agencies, and corporations alike has opened up what seems to be endless opportunities for societal growth. More than ever, we are in a digital age where children grow up learning how to read and write on iPads, elementary school children have cell phones and a society has been connected together as one through various social media services. Discussed here in subsections are a) A disconnect between generations of public employees and the use of technology and b) Future issues that technology has on the CPRA.

Generational disconnects of integrative technologies

In any public entity, limited resources and funding is what determines the federal/state/local government agenda. With these limitations in mind, certain projects or initiatives get priority depending on the public need, and it is understandable that investment in technology within government is oftentimes overlooked. For the most part, a government can still operate and fulfill its role to its citizens without the latest technological enhancement or service. Currently, National City can still function and respond to public records requests without investing in programs like Laserfiche or a records managing system through Hewlett Packard. However, this subsection aims to craft an argument for the need to invest in a legitimate document managing system, which would ideally be bought within the next five years of city budgeting.

As referenced before, technology is playing a larger role in the lives of children, teens and young adults. The younger generations, (Generation Y/Z) has a profound understanding of technology, how to use it and, more importantly, how to adapt to changes in technology. This is relevant to the CPRA because technology is having an impact on the way this act is processed and managed, and how information is shared with the requestor. Some cities have taken proactive roles in incorporating the most up-to-date managing software, recognizing the amount of money and time it saves the city staff during the CPRA request process. By doing so, however, cities are also accommodating a future of public employees who will expect these sorts of technologies to be used for meticulous processes like the CPRA process. As public employees who work with public records start retiring, it is possible that cities will leave behind vaults filled with public documents, with no online storage to accommodate these documents. Cities will then have an enormous backlog of public documents that need to be scanned once they do make the transition to an on-line managing system, but addressing this issue now can save wasted time in the future. Laserfiche is a common service used by governments which helps cities scan their documents into the system, reducts information and creates retention schedules. This system, or one similar, could conceivably be implemented into most city governments within the next 10 years as reliance on technology increases every day.
Funding & Scanning
As alluded to earlier, a reason that National City has not already transitioned to Laserfiche or a system with similar document managing software may be the city’s inability to gather funding for such a program. Other cities investigated paid around $50,000 for this software, which is costly considering the limitations on a government’s budget, but this one time cost could potentially save the city money in the future. In a variety of ways, having an on-line managing system will cut down administrative costs that go into locating public documents, copying them, sending emails and so forth. Short term, the funding may be difficult to justify, but, after the process of scanning the cities documents into the system is complete, there will be a categorized system that anyone within the city government will be able to use and reference for finding documents. By paying for Laserfiche, a city is investing in their public employees who will now have documents more easily accessible to them and the security of knowing documents will always be secure without fear of paper documents being lost or damaged in a potential catastrophic event.

Issues that technology could have on the CPRA
America, in many ways, lives in an information-hungry society, and access to public documents makes it convenient for any person to get the answers they desire. Records becoming more accessible through technologies like Laserfiche also creates a potential danger for governments regarding the type of information that gets leaked to the public, which the CPRA also protects.

Edward Snowden and the National Security Agency’s classified document leak is an example of how easily information can be dispersed, and, even more recently, the hack against Sony showed the world the danger of online databases. Cities must create safeguards and procedures for what type of documents get scanned onto these systems, making sure that they are redacted before being shared online. Edward Snowden showed how an employee perceived as trustworthy was able to go against policy and release classified documents. The CPRA allows governments the ability to withhold certain information or redact specific information. Further, creating procedures that assure the protection of sensitive material is important to the incorporation of technology into document retrieval.

Though there may be some risks associated with keeping public, private and security information online, the Internet has allowed the average American to be more informed with what the government is and is not doing. Most cities that were interviewed for this report have utilized and capitalized on the ability to connect with its citizens through online document management resources like Laserfiche and Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS) a program ran through Hewlett Packard. With any information that goes on line, there will always be the potential security threat of hacking. With proper supervision and office protocol, however, cities should be able to utilize technology for their advantage while protecting certain city documents.
Comparative San Diego City Processes

Important for National City and the reason for this Public Administration class investigating the CPRA was to give the city insight of how other cities in San Diego County process requests from the CPRA and how National City could incorporate these best practices within their process. The five cities that were researched in this report differed demographically, as did the administrative structure within each government. Nevertheless, this section of the report offers the opportunity for National City to learn about other cities, and select elements they may want to incorporate into their process. Each of the five cities is listed below and the key elements from their process are broken down in bullet points. Each city followed a basic routine similar to National City’s process but had unique elements that increased their efficiency in responding to requests.
Carlsbad Best Practices

• In the city clerk’s office, there are two deputy city clerks who control the daily follow-through of public records requests and communication between departments. These staff members are trained very well and are fully committed to complete openness.

• Each department within Carlsbad has a secretary or designated correspondent for fulfilling CPRA requests. The department directors are not the liaison purposely to avoid them being overburdened.

  • Since lower staff may have more time and less city responsibilities, they become better trained at understanding and handling CPRA requests because they have a better understanding of what is required of them and any requests don’t get added onto an already daunting list of things a department director must perform.

• The key to communication between the city clerk and her deputies is an excel worksheet that is shared between every department. This excel spreadsheet is used to track where in the process the documents are of being collected and completed. At every point in collection, the spreadsheet is updated with the employees initials and date of work.

  • Therefore, when a request is being worked on, the respective department is held accountable for updating the excel worksheet and collecting the appropriate documents.

• The excel worksheet is overseen by one of the deputy clerks and if there have not been any updates to the sheet a few days prior to the ten day deadline, the city clerk is informed and she follows up through email to the department collecting the documents.

• The city attorney has been cc’d on every email correspondence from the beginning of the request, and once all the documents come together in one file, the city attorney reviews it. If requested information does not need to be shared per CPRA policies, or may be too sensitive to government operations, it is flagged to be deleted from the shared documents.
Chula Vista Best Practices

- Chula Vista has a designated position for public records request, “records manager,” and every request for the city is made through her.

- Requests are left in the mailbox for the records manager and those that can be handled quickly are first to be worked on while those more difficult may need legal review from the city attorney.

- The records manager has a lot of autonomy in the retrieval process and is the main point person for records besides having a supporting staff member.

- Organization of the records is crucial to the efficiency of the process in Chula Vista.

- LaserFiche houses 80% of Chula Vista's public records, so finding documents and information for requests is relatively simple because it is all on line.
  - All new records on Laserfiche are immediately scanned and labeled into the system.
  - If there is a record that is not on line there is a codified vault that has records dating back to 1900.
  - For records that are in the vault and not on line, it is an easy task from the office of the records manager to scan the record straight into LaserFiche.

- Every department has a liaison that is in charge of storing their department’s records onto this database.
  - This liaison is also the record manager’s point person for the departments that has the information needed for the requests.

- There is an active list of all the liaisons, secondary liaisons, and department directors in order to know who is to be communicated with to get requests completed quickly.

- For tougher requests and those that may cause litigation issues, Chula Vista’s city manager has a standing meeting every Wednesday with the city attorney to discuss what problems there are and what can be released. After those meetings, a response is sent to the requester with either what they were looking for with a few pieces taken out or a response stating why the city cannot release those documents. Here, Chula Vista also utilizes a set of well written templates to save time redrafting a similar response to multiple requesters.
San Diego Best Practices

• Upon receiving a request, a staff member in the city clerk’s office reviews the request and sends it to one of the twenty-five departments which will have the appropriate documents.

• Once the request has been sent to the correct department(s), the department that knows the most information about the request becomes the “lead” department in the process
  
  • Example: If the request was for financial information in regards to the City of San Diego, it would go to the Department of Financial Management, and they become the lead for that request.

• Once the request has a lead department, this lead will be in communication with the requester via the department’s liaison.
  
  • Each department has their own CPRA liaison who handles CPRA requests in addition to their everyday responsibilities.

• When there are multiple departments responding to a single request, it is the lead department’s responsibility to coordinate with others to organize the information needed to satisfy the request in a timely manner.

• Each of the twenty-five departments in the City of San Diego has their own way of recording, processing, and maintaining documents.

• The Open Data Movement is a program that aims to increase transparency between San Diego and the public.
  
  • This program has only been implemented in the Developmental Services Department, which keeps track of all building code violations and complaints. Recently, they have created a website, accessible to the public, that allows them to view pending and active building permits, code violations and complaints in a specific geographical area. It also gives those with a reference number access to the status of their building permit or code enforcement case all the way back to 2003.
Lemon Grove Best Practices

- In Lemon Grove, the city clerk does not see all CPRA requests. Many are forwarded directly to the department that is responsible for the requested record by a staff member in the clerk’s office.
  - One person in each department serves as the department’s point of contact for the CPRA.
- Being a smaller city organization helps improve the efficiency and the movement of a public request because there is less bureaucracy than exists in some of the larger cities we examined.
- They also invested in LaserFiche around 2004-2005.
  - At that time the city’s initial investment cost for the system was approximately $50,000. This system has served the city well and has provided long-term benefits. Laserfiche has redacting functions and can be published onto a DVD for adequate copy retention for emergency backup copying. Lemon Grove stores this DVD copy with another city within San Diego County, part of their emergency contingency plan.
  - All of Lemon Grove’s departments have access to LaserFiche, which makes pulling up records for each department a simple task.
    - Department directors determine whether a city record should be released; however, if it is not clear, the department director is urged to confer with the city clerk or the city attorney.
  - For the more challenging request(s) that get held up in a certain location, a “request for a 14 day extension” is sent out on the initial due date of the ten day response time.
    - Also, if the request involves more than one department, then the request is immediately forwarded to the city clerk’s office, which then handles the coordination of the retrieval of all documents.
- Lemon Grove has a standard letter of response that is available to all departments, and the completion of a PRA is then finalized with documentation to the City Clerk.
La Mesa Best Practices

- The city clerk and the city deputy clerk are the primary personnel responsible for fulfilling public records requests.

- Most of the public records requests that the city receives come to them via the city website, but may also come in by phone or in person.

- La Mesa also uses LaserFiche, where they store information pertaining to common requests.

- Personnel is key to their process, as both the clerk and deputy clerk are familiar with fulfilling routine requests and have been able to, over time, create a database of information on LaserFiche.

- If a request requires documents not found on LaserFiche, the request will be sent to the respective departments for fulfillment.
  
  - If it will take a considerable amount of time to fulfill the request, the city clerk’s office will call the requesting party to let them know that they will be getting their information soon and will give them an approximate time to fulfill the request.
  
  - After doing so, the requested documents are printed and a copy is kept in a folder on the city clerk’s desk, making sure to follow through with the fulfillment of the request.
Recommendations Based on Best Practices Cities in San Diego County

Recommendation #1
Establish a CPRA liaison in each city department who is not the department director and who receives special training on the city’s process.

National City should re-evaluate the internal structure and communication line for employees when completing a CPRA request. Releasing department directors from PRA responsibility has the potential to increase the efficiency of the response process. These employees are already overseeing the function and operation of an entire department and may not have the time to effectively work on a public records request on top of the responsibilities they already hold. In fact, no other city that was investigated utilized department directors as the primary liaison for department CPRA requests. Every city has a specific liaison who is a lower-level administrative staff member with more time to understand the process that the city uses to complete CPRA requests. They have less responsibilities in their government role compared to a director and have more availability to allocate time towards completing these requests. This person who will be the designated liaison will also undergo targeted training aimed at educating them on the CPRA and internal process and be taught how to use any technology used as a resource to more efficiently respond to requests.

The other cities that do not use a department director as the main liaison have a more focused director, and unless the request is complex, there is no need to bring a director into the communication flow since all documents will be vetted by the clerk and attorney if need be. Further, if there aren’t already, there needs to be a flow chart developed that illustrates the CPRA and the people within National City who are involved in the various steps of completing a request. This will assure that all departments have a foundation of understanding regarding who is in charge of overseeing the process and what the process itself looks like.
Recommendation #2

Improve upon government efficiency by utilizing web-based opportunities to connect citizens with government documents and resources.

Another suggestion would be putting frequently requested documents onto the website. This saves time on the backend because residents frequently make PRA requests for simple documents, such as business licenses, uncashed checks, budgets, general plans, etc., and once they realize they can find this information instantly online, they won’t write up a request which saves time and money for the city clerks. Some cities provide an interactive list of all previous requests and documents provided so that when similar requests come in, they can be directed to the website.

National city should also look into the City of Oakland, which created a massive and streamlined PRA records request system that uses open source code, meaning that this system is available to other cities and can be adapted to suit each city’s individual needs. Updates are frequently made to this system by cities throughout California, and many are discovering new ways to improve the process. In so many ways, technology improves the overall process from start to end when handling public records. The advent of the Internet further established opportunities to connect citizens with their governments and its resources. Information became much more accessible, could be shared more easily and had the capability of storing documents and information electronically rather than in print.

Currently, on National City’s website under the city clerk’s page, one can access agendas and minutes, a council webcast/video archive, disclosure forms and Municipal Codes. Though great resources, these types of public documents are just a small portion of what could be made accessible on the city clerk’s website. Carlsbad is a great example of a city that has taken the opportunity to develop a search bar option on their webpage that allows citizens to filter through documents they may be interested in obtaining. Any documents that have not already been scanned and incorporated into this management system can then be requested through a public records request.

If National City were to incorporate a similar system on their webpage, also connected to Laserfiche, they would be operating more efficiently and sustainably. Once staff working in National City become comfortable with which documents they have on line, when a requester either e-mails or calls asking for documents, that staff member can simply direct them to the website instead of beginning the process of the CPRA. In turn, National City will contribute to a gradual culture shift within the city by strengthening the trustworthiness and openness of the city government as it relates to the citizens it serves.
Recommendation #3

Evaluate how much money is spent on administrative costs for fulfilling PRA requests and determine the cost-benefit analysis of investing in Laserfiche

Conversations debating investment in systems like Laserfiche often end due to the costs associated with the document managing system. An interesting research idea would be to evaluate how much money National City allocates for administrative staff to fulfill the public records requests, including time spent on each request, to determine if a system like Laserfiche would help minimize costs spent on PRA requests over time. Because department directors and the city clerk are taking time out of their general responsibilities to handle such requests, money is being spent to work on things not directly within the role of their government positions. Granted, the city clerk is charged with overseeing public documents, but time and money is wasted when he or another staff member has to go through boxes and files to find the requested documents.

The city should develop a cost-benefit analysis of an investment in Laserfiche. This analysis need not be used to directly address city council for requesting money towards the program, but may be used as an informative analysis to eventually lead to discussions towards incorporating Laserfiche into the city’s retrieval process. A cost-benefit analysis is used in every decision government makes to assure funding and other resources are going towards initiatives that will be the most beneficial to the city given their limited resource restrictions. When the time is right, and there is enough buy-in from key administrative members regarding the investment in Laserfiche, it would then be appropriate to address city council utilizing the cost-benefit analysis and making reference to other cities utilizing this service. Arguments can also be made for the need of National City to get ahead of the curve and start integrating technology, not only in the CPRA process, but also other areas of government where technology could increase efficiency.
Conclusion

Public agencies are entering an unprecedented time of scrutiny and distrust due to a series of events that have exposed coercion, racism and manipulation. Police departments in America are at the forefront of these conversations, and investigations have been probed to determine police brutality against citizens, African American men, specifically. Protests and riots have ensued, and many in the public are calling for national discussions regarding the policing agencies that are supposed to protect us, but, in turn, have failed some of our communities. An interesting consequence of these talks has been the call for and implementation of body cams on police officer’s uniforms to record the actions officers take when handling alleged crime.

Though some departments, like the New York Police Department, have already begun including these cameras on uniforms, the national conversation regarding these recordings as public records has yet to reach the national platform. These cameras record the actions officers take while on duty, which may hold them more accountable for wrongdoing, but the issues of privacy cannot be ignored. Further, are these video files to be considered public records, and should the public have access to viewing them through a public records request? Debate on this issue is still forming, but viewing the daily actions of an on-duty police officer has some concerning elements. Some have noted that it creates a new privacy issue for police officers and with no clear guidelines yet formed, there’s much ambiguity around this issue. We are entering a new era of technology in the lives of our public service members, and at some point soon, the effect on public records acts and processes will need to evolve accordingly.

Though this report did not research, specifically, the CPRA in police departments, the above example illustrates the far-reaching impacts and effects of the CPRA in many different governmental agencies. Through independent city initiatives or joint ventures like the newly developed relationship with San Diego State University, it is clear that the city is striving to transform itself in a variety of different ways. Technology is transformative and a constant that will always propel society further, creating new opportunities for efficiency. With this in mind, the introduction of more technology in the document retrieval process for National City is the main recommendation this report provides.

Applying the other recommendations suggested will also increase the city’s efficiency and sustainability while creating a new realm of communication between National City and its citizens. This report in its entirety offers a glimpse in what can and should be continued research for improvement to National City’s records process. Though this initiative may not take first priority amongst other city needs, the CPRA and the citizens who use it will benefit greatly through continued transformative improvements to National City’s public records process.
References

