Incorporating GIS Into Your Retention Schedule

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Records are scheduled by content, not format.

From a records management perspective, Geographic Information Systems are simply carriers used to store certain kinds of records, not records in and of themselves. These carriers are ultimately arbitrary and subject to change, but the information they contain is what is important.

For example, when you look at a records retention schedule you'll usually find entries regarding the retention of correspondence, but it doesn't differentiate between email, letter, text message, or even a Snapchat -- each of those formats could potentially carry correspondence. Conversely, many emails are not actually correspondence; most are calendar updates, spam, or transitory notes that usually don't have to be retained.

Geographic Information Systems work in very much the same way; they may be used to contain permanent records, non-permanent records, or even transitory information that is not a record at all. To complicate matters somewhat, a single GIS might hold permanently valuable topographical maps in one layer and section maps in another that only need to be retained until superseded. In that case, despite being a single GIS, different portions of the system will have different retention periods.

You may find geographic data under other names in your existing schedule.

It's not unusual to find entries in older retention schedules for content types that are now held in a GIS. Usually documents described as maps, plats, or surveys, are now often stored digitally. If you find that is the case for any of your records retention schedules, you can automatically start applying the existing retention period to the digital data without any further changes or forms, provided the content is the same.

You can update your schedule if you need to.

If you create or store entirely new kinds of geographic information, want to change existing retention periods for your data, or if your use of GIS necessitates updating existing entries in your schedule, you'll want to talk to your records manager and/or the State Archives staff to learn more about the process. Here are a few important things to keep in mind:

- Think about the records series (groups of records) you create, rather than individual records. Some examples of record series that might be stored in a GIS include aerial photography, road maps, watershed maps, plat books, and parcel or real estate records.
- If the data stored in a GIS is used to make a final report or map, you may choose to store the final version longer and allow the underlying data to be retained for a shorter

period of time. If you choose this method, be sure that your final versions are independent representations that do not need to pull on the underlying data to be viewed and used.
- When dealing with longer retention periods, consider how you can make sure GIS data is stable and renderable over the record's entire lifespan. Backup plans, integrity checks, and format migrations are all important strategies to ensure that GIS data is usable in the long term.

Help is available.

For further assistance, your agency's records manager (if you have one) can be a great resource. Additionally, you can always reach out to the State Archives; we are happy to assist. Lastly, the MN Government Records & Information Network (MN-GRIN) is a really excellent group that regularly dives into records management issues; many of the members are records managers in various state and local agencies who have a wealth of experience and may be able to provide really detailed, technical help.

If you have questions about government records management, retention schedules, or other questions about state archival documents, you can contact the State Archives directly at
Email: statearchives@mnhs.org
Telephone: 651-259-3260