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Statement of  
Thomas M. Susman  
On behalf of the D.C. Open Government Coalition  
October 16, 2018  
To the  
D.C. Council Committee on Government Operations

For the Record - Hearing on Bill B22-0842 - "Commission on Archives and Record Management Act of 2018"

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I am Thomas M. Susman, President of the D.C. Open Government Coalition, and I appreciate this opportunity to provide comments on behalf of the Coalition regarding Bill B22-0842, the chairman's bill to establish an archives and records management commission.

Formed in March 2009, the D.C. Open Government Coalition seeks to enhance public access to government information and transparency of government operations of the District. We believe transparency promotes civic engagement and is critical to a responsive and accountable government. We strive to improve the processes by which the public gains access to government records and proceedings and to inform the public and government officials about the principles and benefits of open government, and to enlist them in maintaining public access.

The current strategic plan of the National Archives sets out a valuable perspective in its first sentence: "The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is an independent agency established in 1934 to identify, protect, preserve, *and make publicly available* the historically valuable records of all three branches of the Federal government." The mission statement is even stronger: "Our mission is *to provide public access* to Federal Government records in our custody and control. Public access to government records strengthens democracy by allowing Americans to claim their rights of citizenship, hold their government accountable, and understand their history so they can participate more effectively in their government."<sup>1</sup>

From its beginning, the D.C. Open Government Coalition has stressed the importance of building public access into the District's information and records management systems. We testified on this point before this committee about eight years ago when then-Chair Mary Cheh held a public

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/about/plans-reports/strategic-plan/strategic-plan-2018-2022>. (Emphasis added in both quotations.)

roundtable on improving the District's records management systems.

That remains our view, and we recommend the committee add "public access" to the goals of "collection, custody, and preservation" mentioned at several points in the bill. Indeed, accessibility to and use by the public should be the ultimate objectives of the archival system. Preservation of the District's records for preservation's sake simply misses the point. This bill will have failed if the commission and the executive create a collection that no one can access or, when accessed, delivers no relevant records.

There are two concrete ways that the importance of public access can be incorporated into the bill to strengthen the plans for the commission.

First, the commission needs expertise in open government. The District's lead official in this area, the Director of the Office of Open Government, should be designated a member. And a section on commissioners' qualifications should be added that can require experience in open government and transparency, as well as records management. As records become increasingly digital, modern technological expertise would be a good addition as well.

Second, the strategic vision and action plan the commission will develop by the end of 2021 should include public access as a key goal and focus. Quoting again the National Archives vision (found at the same source as in note 1, above):

**We will be known for cutting-edge access to extraordinary volumes of government information and unprecedented engagement to bring greater meaning to the American experience.** We collaborate with other Federal agencies, the private sector, and the public to offer information—including records, data, and context—when, where, and how it is needed and transform the American public's relationship with their government. We will lead the archival and information professions to ensure archives thrive in a digital world.

We are fortunate in the District to have the National Archives nearby as a model (and experienced former Archives staff involved in the Friends of the D.C. Archives). Their vision seems to us exactly right, as it speaks to "cutting-edge access," "unprecedented engagement," and "offering information . . . when, where, and how it is needed."

We look forward to the work of the proposed D.C. commission as a step in the same direction – towards having D.C. records well-organized and readily available.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer views. We welcome the bill and support its passage with the enhancements we suggest. The Coalition would be pleased to help in any further way that is useful to the committee and the Council.

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