Researching Legislative History

About this course

Sometimes you want to know not just what the law is, but how and why it was written. This course will demonstrate some research strategies that can shed light on how decisions were made and who participated in making them.

Records in the Seattle Municipal Archives (SMA) and the Office of the City Clerk (OCC) overlap and connect – together they can give the fullest picture of how legislation was created and evolved.

Are you new to research at SMA?

This course will do some advanced searching in SMA's Finding Aids and Digital Collections. If you're not already familiar with these tools, you will first want to check out the Searching for Records course to learn the basics of navigating the sites.

Legislation 101

Let’s start by looking at legislative records managed by the Office of the City Clerk. We’ll focus on ordinances (otherwise known as council bills) and agendas.

Understanding how legislation is passed in the City can be helpful in planning your research. If you're not already familiar with the process, you can read more about how a bill becomes a law on the OCC website.

What is an ordinance?

A proposal for the enactment of a new law

An amendment or repeal of an existing law

An appropriation of public money

Important to know!

Before they are passed, ordinances are called council bills and have different numbers. If you are looking into the background of an ordinance, you will need to know the council bill number. We'll see how to find that number in just a moment.

Things to note about the City Clerk's ordinance/ council bill database:

- It includes everything acted on by City Council (but does *not* include bills currently under consideration)
- Ordinances introduced in 1996 or later include full text
- If an earlier ordinance has been scanned, there will be a link to it
- Ordinances not online are available on microfiche at the Clerk's Office

Research clues in an ordinance record

Seattle City Council Bills and Ordinances

Information retrieved on November 13, 2019 11:41 AM

LINK

Council Bill Number: 109814
Ordinance Number: 116885

Council Bill number (before passage)
Ordinance number (after passage

Title
AN ORDINANCE forbidding sitting and lying down upon public sidewalks in downtown and neighborhood commercial zones during certain hours, and imposing a civil fine for violations.

Status: Passed
Date passed by Full Council: October 4, 1993
Vote: 8-0
Date filed with the City Clerk: October 7, 1993
Date of Mayor's signature: October 7, 1993
(About the signature date)

Bill passage info:
status, date, vote count

Date introduced/referred to committee: August 9, 1993
Committee: Public Safety
Sponsor: PAGELER
Committee Recommendation:
Date of Committee Recommendation:
Committee Vote:

Committee info: committee name, date introduced, councilmember sponsor

Index Terms: DOWNTOWN, NEIGHBORHOOD-COMMERCIAL-AREAS, SIDEWALKS, MISDEMEANORS, HOMELESS

Scan of signed legislation: PDF scan of Ordinance No. 116885

See **How to Read a Bill** for more details

Agendas

See a sample agenda record

Meeting agendas can help determine when a council bill was discussed, which can help you find related records like audio recordings and committee files.

The agenda database contains plain text of published agendas for City Council and committee meetings held from 2002 to 30 days ago. New items are added within a month of the meeting taking place. Contact the archives for agendas from before 2002.

Remember that on the agenda, the bill will be referred to by its council bill number.

Now that we’re familiar with bills and agendas, let’s move on to strategies for discovering more background in SMA collections.

Search Strategy 1: Meeting Records

For ordinances from the 1980s forward, the best place to start is Council committee records, as the committee is often (but not always) presented with background information for their discussion about whether or not to move a council bill forward for consideration by the full council.

Sponsor:	LICATA
Date Introduced:	May 12, 2003
Committee Referral:	Neighborhoods, Arts and Civil Rights

For Ordinance 121174 / Council Bill 11455, the ordinance record tells us that we're looking for Neighborhoods, Arts and Civil Rights Committee records from 2003.

Committee records are described in SMA's Finding Aids database. Searching series on "Licata," you will find a record for:

Neighborhoods, Arts and Civil Rights Committee Records
(Record Series 4650-05)

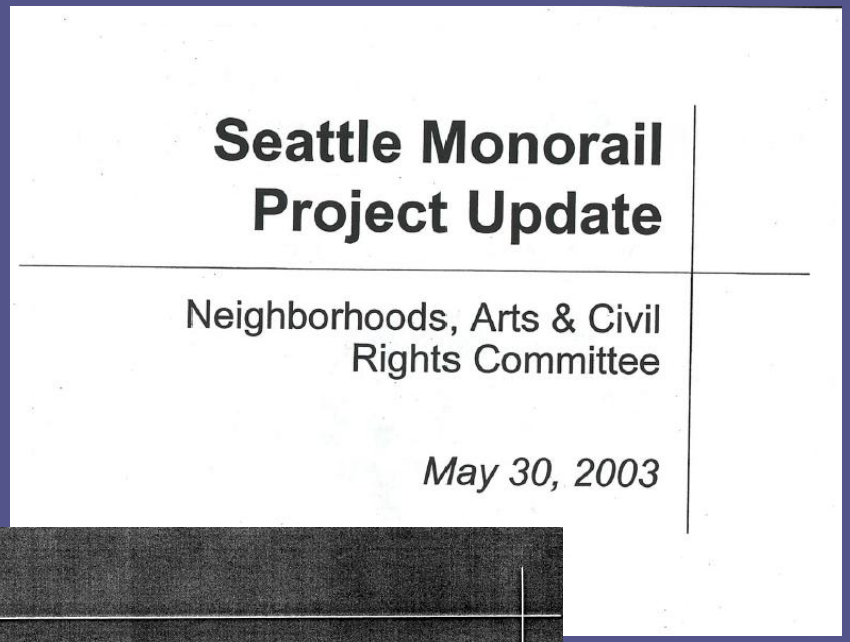
These are paper records held in the archives, which can be viewed in the research room.

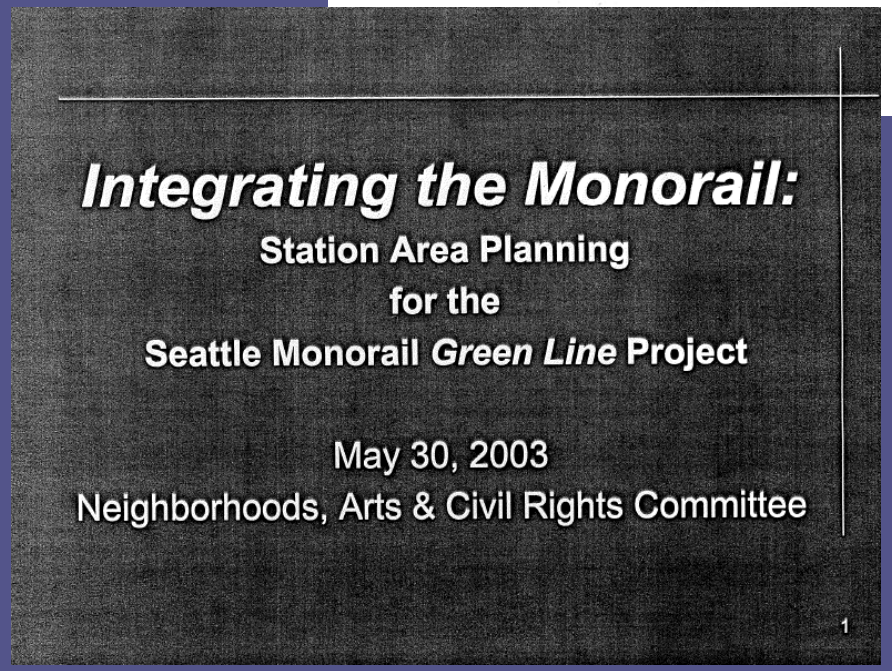
Now we need to need to find the agenda(s) for any meeting where the bill was discussed. It was introduced and referred to the committee on May 12, 2003 – so let's look at the agendas for the next couple of committee meetings after that.

Using the agenda database, we find our bill on the agenda for the May 30 committee meeting. Remember that before it is passed, it will be referred to by its council bill number.

```
5. C.B. 114559
Relating to monorail transportation; repealing City of Seattle Initiative 41 and
City of Seatt
le Initiative 53.
Presented by:  Martha Lester Council Central Staff
2:45 p.m.
```

Now that we know when the committee discussed the bill, we can look at the records from that date. In the committee file for the May 30 meeting, we find supporting materials included with the agenda, including two presentations given at the meeting.





Bill books (Record Series 1801-77) are similar records but for full council meetings. SMA holds bill books back to 1997.

The ordinance record tells us that the bill was passed at the June 9, 2003, council meeting. The bill book for that meeting includes supporting materials as well as a related resolution.

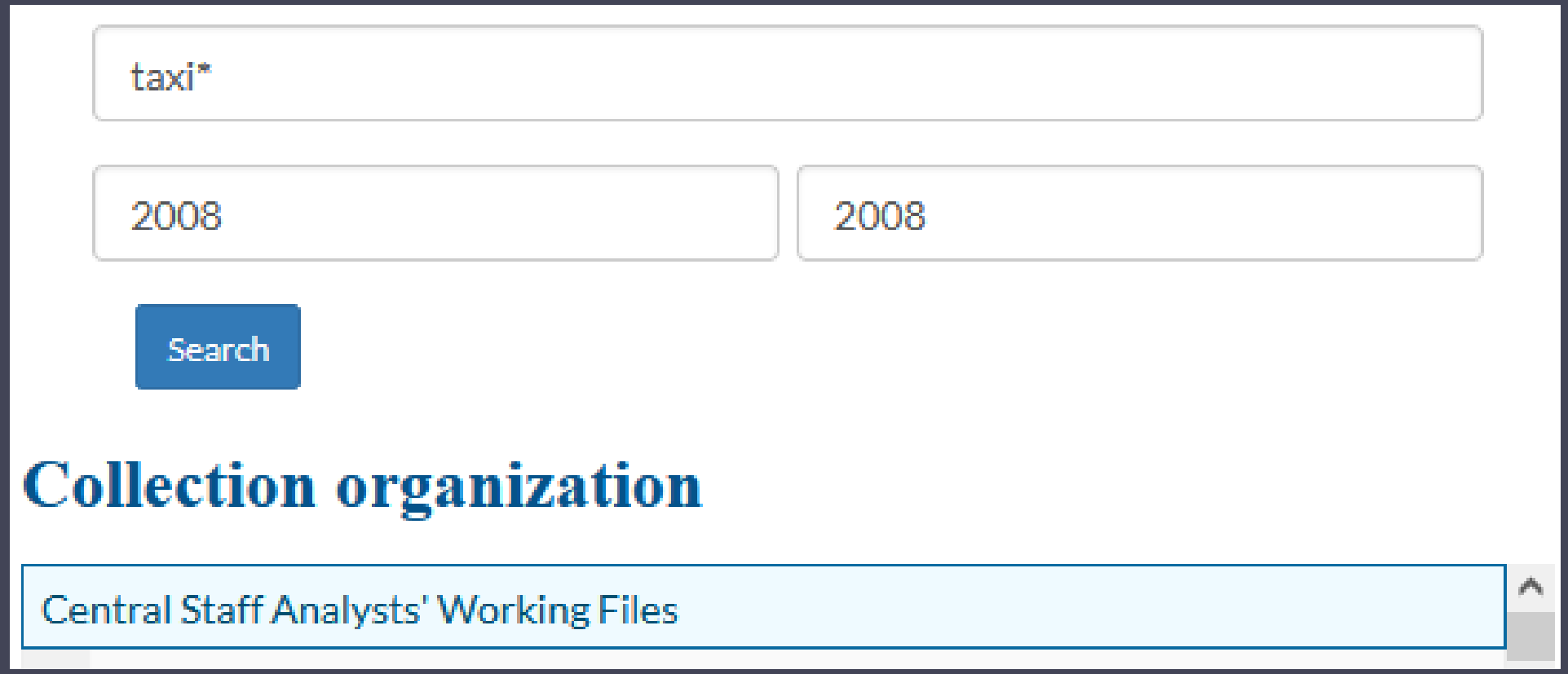
Search Strategy 2: Central Staff Records

The City Council's Central Staff was created in the mid-1970s to enhance the independent research and analysis capability of the legislative branch of City government. Central Staff Records (Record Series 4603-01) are a good place to check for research and background on legislation.

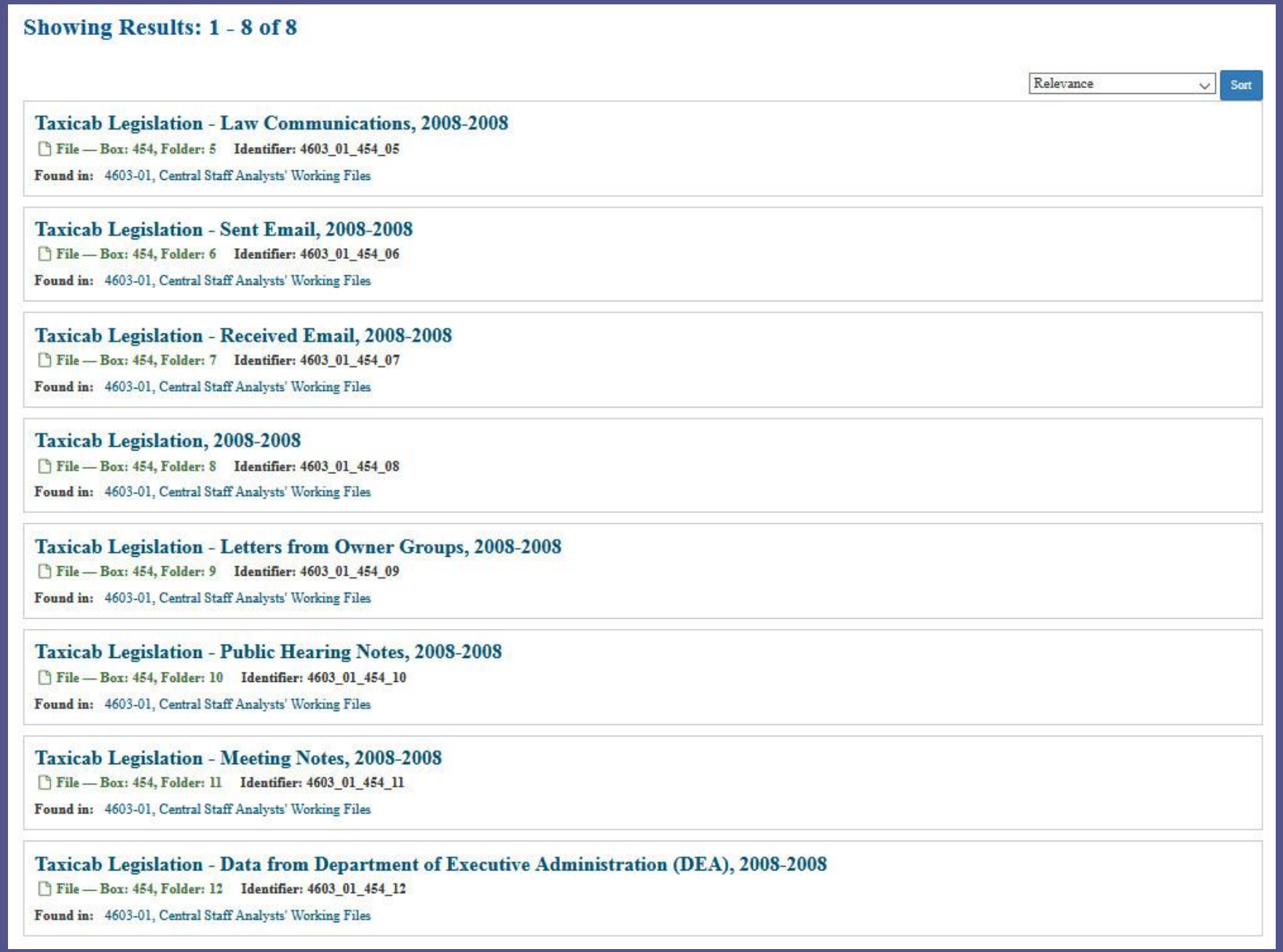
Searching for information on Ordinance 122734/ Council Bill 116208, relating to taxicabs, the ordinance database tells us that it was introduced and passed in 2008.

Click to see the ordinance record

Within the Central Staff record series, we can search on “taxi.” Adding an asterisk works as a wild card to capture variations like “taxis,” “taxicabs,” and so on. We can limit results to folders from 2008.



The search brings up these folders in box 454, all from 2008.



Showing Results: 1 - 8 of 8

Relevance Sort

Taxicab Legislation - Law Communications, 2008-2008
File — Box: 454, Folder: 5 Identifier: 4603_01_454_05
Found in: 4603-01, Central Staff Analysts' Working Files

Taxicab Legislation - Sent Email, 2008-2008
File — Box: 454, Folder: 6 Identifier: 4603_01_454_06
Found in: 4603-01, Central Staff Analysts' Working Files

Taxicab Legislation - Received Email, 2008-2008
File — Box: 454, Folder: 7 Identifier: 4603_01_454_07
Found in: 4603-01, Central Staff Analysts' Working Files

Taxicab Legislation, 2008-2008
File — Box: 454, Folder: 8 Identifier: 4603_01_454_08
Found in: 4603-01, Central Staff Analysts' Working Files

Taxicab Legislation - Letters from Owner Groups, 2008-2008
File — Box: 454, Folder: 9 Identifier: 4603_01_454_09
Found in: 4603-01, Central Staff Analysts' Working Files

Taxicab Legislation - Public Hearing Notes, 2008-2008
File — Box: 454, Folder: 10 Identifier: 4603_01_454_10
Found in: 4603-01, Central Staff Analysts' Working Files

Taxicab Legislation - Meeting Notes, 2008-2008
File — Box: 454, Folder: 11 Identifier: 4603_01_454_11
Found in: 4603-01, Central Staff Analysts' Working Files

Taxicab Legislation - Data from Department of Executive Administration (DEA), 2008-2008
File — Box: 454, Folder: 12 Identifier: 4603_01_454_12
Found in: 4603-01, Central Staff Analysts' Working Files

Legislative Department
Seattle City Council
Memorandum

Date: June 30, 2008

To: Councilmember Jean Godden, Chair
Councilmember Nick Licata, Vice Chair
Councilmember Sally Clark, Member
Finance and Budget Committee

From: Michael Jenkins, Council Central Staff

Subject: Council Bills (CB) 116208 and 116210 governing taxicab and for-hire vehicle regulations

Background

CB 116208 would revise Seattle Municipal Code (SMC) 6.310 governing the operation and ownership of taxis and for-hire vehicles[1]. CB 116210 would amend SMC 6.310.530 to increase the per-mile rate by which taxi fares are accrued and the rate that wait time charges and initial ('drop') charges are accrued and to raise the flat rate charges between Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SeaTac) and the downtown Seattle hotel district[2].

CB 116208

As originally proposed, CB 116208 would increase the number of taxicab licenses within the City of Seattle from 667 to 1,000. The new licenses would only be issued to individuals or solely owned corporations following a lottery, competitive bid process or combination of both. Licensees would be required to drive a minimum of 40 hours per week for at least 40 weeks a year. New licenses would have to be held for a period of 5 years before they could be sold or transferred. DEA currently issues licenses without such restrictions.

Reviewing the files in this box uncovers a memo from June 2008 providing background information.

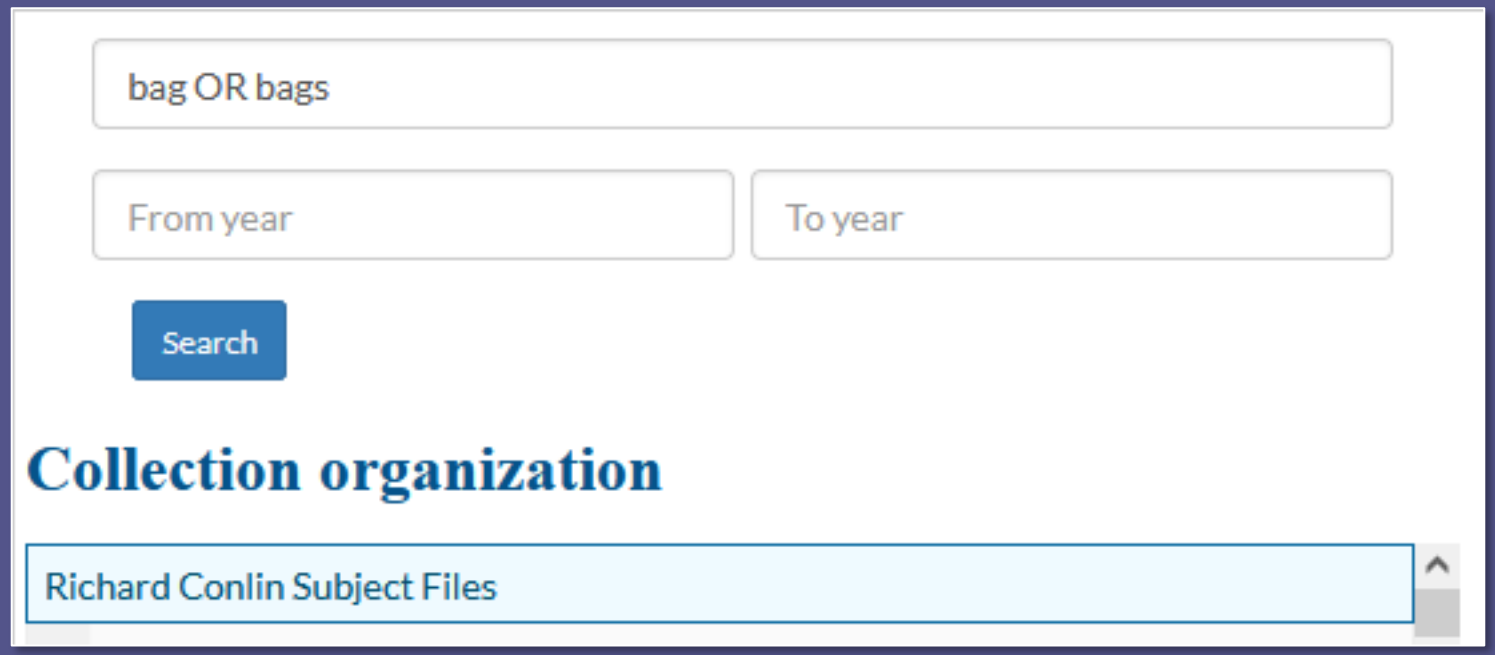
Search Strategy 3: Councilmember Subject Files

Councilmember Subject Files are the records kept by councilmembers and staff about issues under discussion. They can contain documents such as constituent correspondence or interdepartmental and intergovernmental records.

It is important to note that files for current Councilmembers are not available through the Archives.

The ordinance database tells us that Ordinance 122752/Council Bill 116251, the ban on disposable shopping bags, was sponsored by Richard Conlin.

Searching Finding Aids, we learn that Conlin's Subject Files are Record Series 4621-02.



Searching within Conlin's subject files on "bag OR bags" brings up three folders. Reviewing these files, researchers will find memos from Central Staff on expanding the ban to business use of polystyrene and plastic food ware, a report on both disposable shopping bags and "to-go" food service items, a list of pros and cons for a ballot measure on the issue, and other reports, newspaper articles and correspondence.

Search Strategy 4: Audio Recordings

Audio recordings can be helpful when little other documentation is available. At the very least, one can learn whether or not there was any discussion on a specific item. When the discussion is rich, it is like being in the same room and attending the meeting.

Audio recordings are available for most meetings from 1970 to the present, but not all are digitized yet.

Meeting agendas can help to identify the meeting you need. For example, using the agenda database to look for meetings of the committee that met regarding Yesler Terrace in 2012, you can put “Yesler Terrace” in the committee name field.

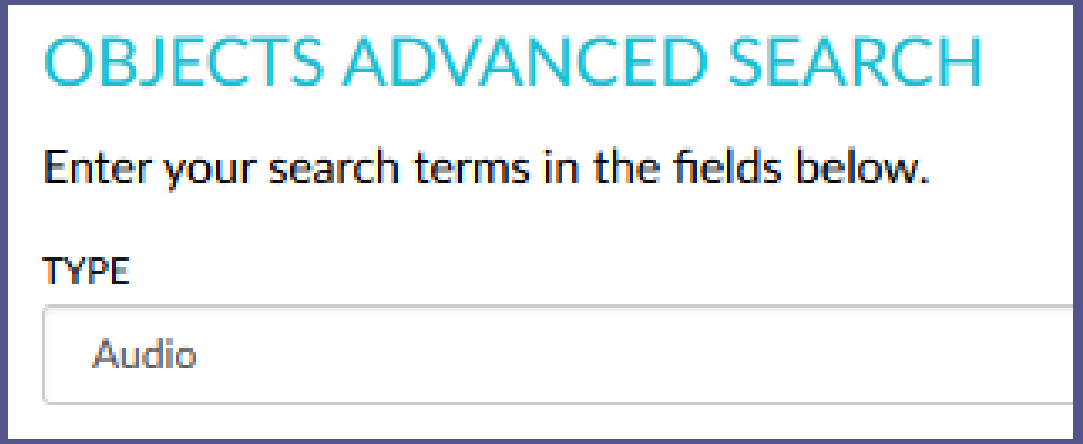
Click to see agenda search results

Seattle Municipal Archives Digital Collections

About Browse Gallery Advanced Search Finding Aids Collections Home SMA Home

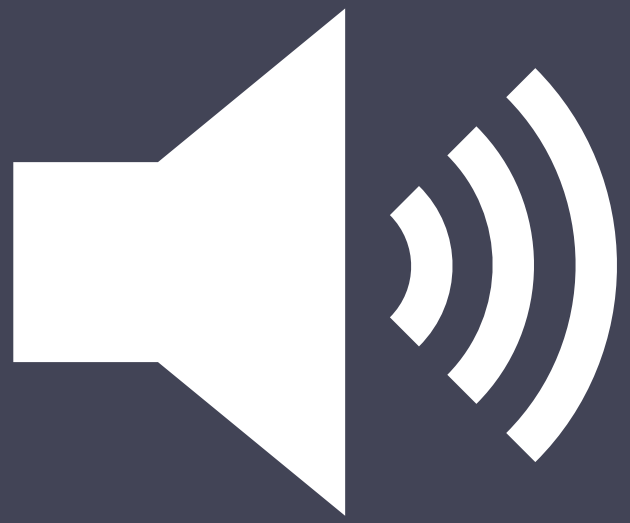
Let’s say you’re interested in the July 26 meeting. You can then go to Digital Collections to see if a copy of the audio is online.

Use the advanced search and select "audio" under Type at the top. Two search strategies to try:



1. Enter "Yesler Terrace" in the Body Name field, or
2. Search by meeting date, using the format #eq#7/26/2012

Your search results show that the July 26 meeting has a digitized copy of the audio available online. You can play or download the file from the catalog record. Ask an archivist for assistance if the audio file you are looking for is not digitized.



Some notes about legislative research

SMA was founded in 1985 and does not generally have background records for bills passed before that date.

Very little council audio exists in the archives from before 1969.

Records don't come to the archives immediately, so if you're looking at very recent legislation, the background materials likely will not be at SMA yet.

Most of SMA's textual records are not digitized; using them will involve a visit to the research room.

Thanks for your interest in our resources. Don’t hesitate to get in touch if you have questions or need assistance.

Seattle Municipal Archives
206-684-8353
archives@seattle.gov

Office of the City Clerk
206-684-8344
clerk@seattle.gov