

Fears over integrity of records amid digital push

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The state opposition and crossbench will team up to save an independent council that oversees Victoria's official records after the government moved to scrap it as part of a digital-age overhaul.

The move comes as one landowner claimed her digital land records were altered and that she was able to fight the change only after she provided evidence using old paper documents from the archives.

Alison Joseph, from Bullengarook, near Gisborne, alleges a local council employee had edited the documents.

The change could have allowed a neighbour to build a driveway through her property, but she found hard-copy road boundary records – including a 120-year-old document from Public Record Office Victoria, the official archive for state and local governments – to challenge it.

Joseph said her experience showed that Victoria's public records needed more oversight, not less.

"There needs to be security and oversight of our public databases," she said. "Land data, our titles system, should be some of the most secure records in the state."

The Allan government is pushing to abolish the Public Records Advisory Council, a 10-person committee that oversees what documents are retained and destroyed in the Public Record Office.

The change has been criticised by archivists, who say future royal commissions and treaty negotiations could be put at risk if records are compromised.

The Age can reveal the Coalition is preparing to team up with the crossbench in the upper house to force the government to amend its proposed legislation and retain the Public Records Advisory Council.

A draft opposition amendment, seen by *The Age*, would delete references to the council's abolition in the government's bill. The proposal will be signed off by shadow cabinet and distributed to Greens, independent and minor party MPs in the Legislative Council in coming days.

Opposition spokesman David Davis said everyone should be troubled by the government's planned changes.

"These critical records cannot be swept away or lost forever. That is why the Public Records Advisory Council is such a bulwark in protecting our records," he said.

"It may be convenient for governments that, for their own purposes, wish less scrutiny. But that is not in the interests of Victorians.

"Sometimes it is only the actual, real original records that tell the true story, and these can't be recreated where they have been summarily destroyed."

Greens MP Sam Hibbins said the party would also fight the proposed scrapping of the advisory council.

"It beggars belief that Labor would want to scrap a body that provides such critical oversight and accountability. The board must be retained to maintain the integrity of our public records office," he said.

Premier Jacinta Allan insisted yesterday that Victoria's public records would continue to be scrutinised under her government's changes, but she would not be drawn on whether future scrutiny

of the Public Record Office would be enshrined in law.

“There is legislation that is being worked through at the moment,” Allan said. “What we need to do is we need to make sure that the oversight mechanisms adapt, are adapting, to changes in technology.”

Records and Information Management Practitioners Alliance chief executive Anne Cornish said the Public Records Advisory Council was a “crucial mechanism for basic oversight and integrity”.

“The dissolution of PRAC could compromise the integrity and accessibility of important archival materials, which should be safeguarded for the benefit of future generations,” Cornish said.

The Australian Society of Archivists and the Royal Historical Society of Victoria also oppose the government’s changes.

Alison Joseph fears that without proper scrutiny over the way physical records are kept, Victorians could be worse off when it comes to land boundary disputes, heritage debates and other matters.

“There’s plenty of people who can benefit from changing records,” she said.

Joseph said her dispute with the council over the digital record was now at a standstill.

Macedon Ranges Shire Council was contacted for comment.