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Calif. board to open files on assassination of RFK

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LOS ANGELES — More than 17 years after the death of Robert F. Kennedy, the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners voted yesterday to begin the process of releasing the 50,000 pages of documents involved in the police investigation of his assassination.

"The files are of supreme political importance and are the primary investigative record of one of the major political assassinations of our time," Philip H. Melanson, director of the Robert F. Kennedy Assassination Archive at Southeastern Massachusetts University, told the board.

Paul Schrade, a campaign coordinator for Kennedy who was wounded in the June 5, 1968, shooting, said that the commission's concern about the right of privacy of those named in the investigative files "should not be an obstruction to the public's right to know."

The records of the 13-month inves-

tigation of the Kennedy assassination have been sought by scholars and friends of Kennedy since 1973, when former Rep. Allard K. Lowenstein of New York failed to get access to the files.

Ultimately, Melanson said in a statement, though the police commission declared publicly in 1975 that the public should have full access to the investigation, no records were ever released.

While the files stayed in five four-drawer file cabinets in the Los Angeles Police Department, federal and local records of the investigations into the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were made public.

"In the last year and a half, we have received a lot of letters from archivists and historians about the (Robert) Kennedy records," said Bill Moran, commission executive officer.

"It's a complex issue. You get into the resources that have to be expended to go back over this material, the privacy issue, the openness of government."

Melanson and others testified that law enforcement agencies involved in other sensitive investigations had had no problems editing out material that violated privacy, national security or confidentiality.

He said that he would not expect the commission to release all of the files and that some portions, like the autopsy photographs of Kennedy, should not be released.

But he estimated that as much as 90 percent of the more than 4,000 interviews, 1,700 pictures and other materials would be suitable for public release.

Despite Police Chief Daryl F. Gates' recommendation to delay release of the files "because there are still people around who would be seriously harmed," the board voted to begin establishing standards to evaluate what could and could not be released.

It also voted to begin studying a portion of the 50,000 pages — a 1,500-page police summary of the investigation — for release as soon as standards were developed.

Sirhan B. Sirhan was convicted of the shooting death of Kennedy on Apr. 17, 1969. Sirhan's death sentence was later overturned. He was denied parole in June for the seventh time.