

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Judiciary

BILL: CS/SB 80

INTRODUCER: Community Affairs Committee and Senator Steube

SUBJECT: Public Records

DATE: March 13, 2017

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Kim</u>	<u>Ferrin</u>	<u>GO</u>	Favorable
2.	<u>Cochran</u>	<u>Yeatman</u>	<u>CA</u>	Fav/CS
3.	<u>Brown</u>	<u>Cibula</u>	<u>JU</u>	Pre-meeting

Please see Section IX. for Additional Information:

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE - Substantial Changes

I. Summary:

SB 80 grants discretion to a court to award attorney fees and costs relating to public records enforcement actions.

A court may award attorney fees and costs to a plaintiff, if an agency unlawfully refuses to comply with a public record request and if the plaintiff provided written notice of the public records request to the agency's records custodian of public records at least 5 business days before filing the lawsuit.

The bill also directs the court in determining whether the agency unlawfully refused a records request to consider whether the request was made in bad faith or if the agency responded in good faith. The court may award attorney fees and costs to the agency if the plaintiff filed the action in bad faith or if the action was frivolous.

Finally, the bill entitles a plaintiff to attorney fees and costs only if he or she shows by a preponderance of the evidence that the agency intentionally or willfully refused to permit a public record to be inspected or copied.

Under current law, a court must award attorney fees and costs to the plaintiff in an enforcement action if an agency unlawfully refuses a public records request.

II. Present Situation:

Public Records Requirements

The Florida Constitution provides that every individual has a right of access to public records that are made or received in connection with official public business.¹ This right applies to records of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches.²

The Public Records Act, codified in ch. 119, F.S., authorizes guarantees every person's right to inspect and copy any state or local government public record³ at any reasonable time, under reasonable conditions, and under the supervision of the public records custodian.⁴ The Public Records Act also applies to a private contractor if that private business acts on behalf of a governmental entity.⁵

An agency, as defined by ch. 119, F.S., may not impose greater conditions on responding to a public records request than those required by law. For example, an agency may not require a person seeking a public record to disclose his or her background.⁶ Nor may an agency require an individual to put his or her request in writing as a condition of production, or to disclose his or her name, address, or other contact information.⁷ An agency must honor a request whether a person requests records by phone, in writing, or in person, if the request is sufficient to identify the records sought.⁸

Custodian of Public Records

Pursuant to s. 119.011(5), F.S., a custodian of public records is “the elected or appointed state, county, or municipal officer charged with the responsibility of maintaining the office having public records, or his or her designee.”

A custodian of public records is required to perform statutorily required duties such as maintaining records in fireproof vaults, repairing records and complying with retention schedules set by the Department of State.⁹ Section 119.07, F.S., also provides that a public records custodian has duties that include:

¹ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(a).

² *Id.*

³ Section 119.011(12), F.S., defines “public record” as “all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, films, sound recordings, data processing software, or other material, regardless of the physical form, characteristics, or means of transmission, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance or in connection with the transaction of official business by any agency.”

⁴ Section 119.07(1)(a), F.S.

⁵ Section 119.011(2), F.S., defines “agency” as “any state, county, district, authority, or municipal officer, department, division, board, bureau, commission, or other separate unit of government created or established by law including, for the purposes of this chapter, the Commission on Ethics, the Public Service Commission, and the Office of Public Counsel, and any other public or private agency, person, partnership, corporation, or business entity acting on behalf of any public agency.”

⁶ *Bevan v. Wanichka*, 505 So. 2d 1116, 1118 (Fla. 2d DCA Fla. 1987).

⁷ Op. Att’y Gen. Informal Opinion, pg. 1 (Dec. 16, 2003). *Chandler v. City of Greenacres*, 140 So. 3d 7, 7 (Fla. 4th DCA 2014).

⁸ Op. Att’y Gen. Fla. 80-57, pg. 3 (1980).

⁹ Section 119.021, F.S.

- Acknowledging public records requests and responding to those requests in good faith;¹⁰
- Producing records after redacting exempt information or providing the statutory citation for an exemption if the entire document is exempt;¹¹
- Maintaining records that are the subject of public records litigation;¹²
- Ensuring that public records are secure if they are provided electronically;¹³
- Providing supervision if someone wishes to photograph records;¹⁴ and
- Providing certified copies of public records upon payment of a fee.¹⁵

Public records custodians are also responsible for supervising the production of records by agency personnel. Section 119.07(1)(a), F.S., provides that “[e]very person who has custody of a public record shall permit the record to be inspected and copied . . . at any reasonable time, under reasonable conditions, and under reasonable supervision by the custodian of the public records.”

Enforcing Public Records Laws and Attorney Fees

Article I, section 24(c), Florida Constitution, requires the Legislature to enact laws governing the enforcement of public records requirements, including the “maintenance, control, destruction, disposal, and disposition of records.”

Under s. 119.11, F.S., a person may enforce his or her right to inspect a public record by filing a lawsuit against an agency. In those lawsuits, the court must set an immediate hearing, giving the case priority over other cases.¹⁶ If a court orders an agency to open its records for inspection, the agency must comply within 48 hours.¹⁷

Section 119.12, F.S., provides that if a court finds that an agency unlawfully refused access to a public record, the court will order the public agency to pay costs and attorney fees related to the enforcement lawsuit.¹⁸ An unjustified delay in turning over public records is also considered an unlawful refusal, and a court will award attorney fees even if the delay was not willful or if the delay was due to incompetence.¹⁹ When a court awards attorney fees in a public records case, the

¹⁰ Section 119.07(1)(c), F.S.

¹¹ Section 119.07(1)(d)-(f), F.S.

¹² Section 119.07(1)(g)-(i), F.S.

¹³ Section 119.07(2), F.S.

¹⁴ Section 119.07(3), F.S.

¹⁵ Section 119.07(4), F.S.

¹⁶ Section 119.11(1), F.S.

¹⁷ Section 119.11(2), F.S.

¹⁸ Section 119.12, F.S. In 1984, the Legislature amended the public records attorney fee provision, deleting language which would permit attorney fees to be awarded only when records are “unreasonably” refused and replaced it with “unlawfully” refused. Ch. 84-298, s. 7, Laws of Fla. The Florida Supreme Court stated what once the Legislature amended s. 119.12, F.S., from “unreasonable” refusal to “unlawful” refusal, the Legislature “eliminated the potential that an award for attorney’s fees would be denied just because the public agency acted reasonably in violating the Public Records Act. . . . The public agency’s failure to comply, rather than its good or bad faith in doing so, became the relevant inquiry.” *Bd. of Trs. v. Lee*, 189 So. 3d 120, 126 (Fla. 2016). Based on the Legislature’s removal of the word “unreasonably,” a court concluded that good faith or honest mistakes do not excuse a defendant from being assessed attorney fees.” *News and Sun-Sentinel Co. v. Palm Beach County*, 517 So. 2d 743, 744 (Fla. 4th DCA 1987), partially disapproved of in *New York Times Co. v. PHH Mental Health Services, Inc.*, 616 So.2d 27, 30 (Fla. 1993).

¹⁹ *Lilker v. Suwannee Valley Transit Authority*, 133 So. 3d 654, 655-656 (Fla. 1st DCA 2014); *Barfield v. Town of Eatonville*, 675 So. 2d 223, 225 (Fla. 5th DCA 1996).

court does not have to find that the public agency acted in good faith, bad faith, or unreasonably.”²⁰

Enforcement lawsuits are composed of two parts, the request for production of a record and the assessment of fees. The assessment of attorney fees is a legal consequence independent of the public records request.²¹ Once the requestor files suit, the court will require a public agency to pay the requestor’s attorney fees even after the agency has produced the records.²² The Florida Supreme Court stated that the policy behind awarding attorney fees is to encourage people to pursue their right to access government records after an initial denial, and that granting attorney fees makes it more likely that agencies will comply with public records laws.²³

The Florida Constitution also requires all meetings of any collegial public body of the executive branch of state government or of any local government, at which official acts are to be taken or at which public business of such body is to be transacted or discussed, to be open and noticed to the public.²⁴ Open meetings laws also include an attorney fee provision. Section 286.0114(7)(a), F.S., provides:

(a) Whenever an action is filed against a board or commission to enforce this section, the court shall assess reasonable attorney fees against such board or commission if the court determines that the defendant to such action acted in violation of this section. The court may assess reasonable attorney fees against the individual filing such an action if the court finds that the action was filed in bad faith or was frivolous. This paragraph does not apply to a state attorney or his or her duly authorized assistants or an officer charged with enforcing this section.

(b) Whenever a board or commission appeals a court order that has found the board or commission to have violated this section, and such order is affirmed, the court shall assess reasonable attorney fees for the appeal against such board or commission.

Public Records Requests, Settlements and Attorney Fees

Over the past few years, governmental entities have been sued based on a failure to provide public records in cases that appear to be motivated solely to force a settlement and generate attorney fees by a person making a sham public records request. Governmental entities often settle the public records complaints because settlements are less costly than litigation.

The Town of Gulf Stream filed a federal lawsuit against a resident, the Citizen’s Awareness Foundation, Inc., Our Public Records LLC, and other defendants based on their abuse of public records laws.²⁵ The Town of Gulf Stream alleged that the defendants sent sham public records requests that were intended to be overlooked. Then the defendants asked for settlements that

²⁰ *Bd. of Trs. v. Lee*, 189 So. 3d 130 (Fla. 2016).

²¹ *Mazer v. Orange County*, 811 So. 2d 857, 859 (Fla. 5th DCA 2002).

²² *Mazer v. Orange County*, 811 So. 2d 857, 860 (Fla. 5th DCA 2002); *Barfield v. Town of Eatonville*, 675 So. 2d 223, 224 (Fla. 5th DCA 1996); *Cookston v. Office of the Pub. Defender*, 204 So.3d 480, 482-483 (Fla. 5th DCA 2016).

²³ *New York Times Co. v. PHH Mental Health Services, Inc.*, 616 So. 2d 27, 29 (Fla. 1993).

²⁴ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(b).

²⁵ *Town of Gulf Stream v. O’Boyle*, 2015 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 84778 (S.D. Fla. 2015).

were higher than actual attorney fees and costs either before or after filing a lawsuit.²⁶ The case was dismissed by a federal judge, who stated:

To the extent Defendants are abusing the rights afforded them by the Florida public records laws, those abuses must be addressed in the individual lawsuits filed, or through a change in the laws by the Florida Legislature.²⁷

Counties and state agencies have also been targeted for frivolous lawsuits. In upholding the trial court's decision to refuse attorney fees to plaintiff known as Consumer Rights, LLC, the First District Court of Appeal stated:

The plaintiff made the request in a suspicious email that could not be easily verified, directed it to a general email account that might not be checked by the person having anything to do with the records at issue, waited four months without saying anything and then sued the county, claiming a right to attorney fees.²⁸

The First District Court found that the manner in which the public records request was made, as well as the fact that the County ultimately provided the requested record when it became apparent that the email was not spam, indicated that there was no refusal to provide the requested records.²⁹ Because there was no refusal, there was no basis for awarding attorney fees.

Consumer Rights, LLC, also filed an enforcement lawsuit seeking attorney fees against the Department of Economic Opportunity. The court ruled against the plaintiff on procedural grounds in denying attorney fees, but noted the existence of evidence to support the state agency's allegations that Consumer Rights, LLC, was engaged in a "scheme [that] was designed to generate fees."³⁰

Public Records and Private Contractors

Public agencies, including local and statewide governmental entities and municipal officers may hire contractors to provide services or act on behalf of the public agency.³¹ Contractors can be individuals or business entities.³² Private contractors who act on behalf of a public agency are required by law and the terms of their contracts to comply with public records laws.³³ These duties include keeping public records, providing the public an opportunity to inspect or copy a public record, and redacting exempt information.³⁴ A request for a contractor's records must be

²⁶ *Id.* at 4.

²⁷ *Id.* at 11.

²⁸ *Consumer Rights, LLC, v. Union County, Fla.*, 159 So. 3d 882, 885 (Fla. 1st DCA 2015).

²⁹ *Id.* at 886-887; *Citizens Awareness Found., Inc., v. Wantman Grp., Inc.*, 195 So. 3d 396, 397 (Fla. 4th DCA 2016).

³⁰ *State v. Consumer Rights, LLC*, 181 So. 3d 1239, 1241 (Fla. 1st DCA 2015).

³¹ Section 119.0701(1)(b), F.S.; *News and Sun-Sentinel Co. v. Schwab, Twitty and Hanser Architectural Group, Inc.*, 596 So. 2d 1029 (Fla. 1992); Op. Att'y Gen. Fla. Informal Opinion, pg. 2 (Dec. 31, 2014).

³² Section 119.0701(1)(a), F.S.

³³ Section 119.011(2), s. 119.0701, F.S.; *News and Sun-Sentinel Co. v. Schwab, Twitty and Hanser Architectural Group, Inc.*, 596 So. 2d 1029 (Fla. 1992).

³⁴ Section 119.0701(2)(b), F.S.

submitted to the agency. The agency will then request the records from the contractor or arrange for the public to inspect the requested records.³⁵

If a contractor fails to comply with a public records request, the requestor may sue the contractor.³⁶ Enforcement costs, including attorney fees, will be awarded only if the contractor unlawfully refused to comply with the request and the requestor provided written notice to the agency that the contractor had not complied with the public records request.³⁷ The requestor must mail or email the notice at least 8 days before filing suit.³⁸

If the contractor fulfills the public records request within 8 days, then the contractor is no longer liable for the enforcement costs.³⁹ The law is silent on whether an agency would be liable for attorney fees after the contractor has fulfilled the public records request. If a contractor fails to fulfill the public records request within 8 days, the contractor will be liable for enforcement costs.

When a Private Contractor is an Agency for Public Records Purposes

Pursuant to s. 119.011(2), F.S., an “agency” in the Public Records Act includes a “public or private agency, person, partnership, corporation, or business entity acting on behalf of any public agency.” In addition, s. 119.0701(1)(a), F.S., defines a contractor as an “individual, partnership, corporation, or business entity that enters into a contract for services with a public agency and is acting on behalf of the public agency.”

To determine if a contractor is acting on behalf of a public agency, a totality of factors test may be applied.⁴⁰ Some of the factors a court may consider include:

- Whether the public agency created the contractor;
- How much public funding was involved;
- How much the public agency regulated the contractor;
- The comingling of decision making processes;
- Whether the contractor was performing a government function; and
- The goals of the contractor.⁴¹

Private Contractors and Public Records Lawsuits

Private contractors have also been subject to these abusive lawsuits for sham public records requests. In one such case, a circuit court judge in Duval County declined to award attorney fees in a public records enforcement case.⁴² According to the court order, the plaintiff made two

³⁵ Section 119.0701(2)(b)2. and (3), F.S.

³⁶ Section 119.0701(4), F.S.

³⁷ Section 119.0701(4)(a), F.S.

³⁸ Section 119.0701(4)(a)2., F.S.

³⁹ Section 119.0701(4)(a), F.S.

⁴⁰ *News and Sun-Sentinel Co. v. Schwab, Twitty & Hanser Architectural Group, Inc.*, 596 So. 2d 1029, 1031 (Fla. 1992).

⁴¹ *Id.* at 1032.

⁴² *Gray v. Lutheran Social Services of Northeast Florida, Inc.*, Final Order Denying Relief Under Public Records Act, No. 2014-CA-4647 (Fla 4th Cir. Ct. 2014),

[http://myfloridalegal.com/sun.nsf/cases/D51822B4D29A8BBB85257F6C00430F83/\\$file/Gray_v_Lutheran.pdf](http://myfloridalegal.com/sun.nsf/cases/D51822B4D29A8BBB85257F6C00430F83/$file/Gray_v_Lutheran.pdf).

separate requests for public records to a nonprofit organization under contract to provide social services for the Department of Children and Families. The contract manager refused to provide the documents because the contract manager believed the documents were not public records. The court found that the manner in which the plaintiff (and his companions) made the request ensured that “they obtained exactly what they wanted, namely an initial denial of an unreasonable and bogus request.”⁴³

The court found that the plaintiff’s method of requesting public records was an abuse of public records laws, amounting to “nothing more than a scam.”⁴⁴ The Final Order stated that the plaintiff and his attorney, who had an arrangement to split his attorney fees with the plaintiff, had “a financial interest in assuring that his requests for public records [were] refused.”⁴⁵ The court noted that in 2014, the plaintiff filed 18 public records lawsuits in Duval County, and that the attorney represented the plaintiff on approximately 13 of those cases.

The court opined:

If a private entity must pay an attorney’s fee every time an agent denies a needless request, the cost to the state to provide important services by contracting with private entities will increase; or private entities might discontinue bidding on these contracts. The chilling effect could be disastrous to the State. Further the [Public Records] Act was not designed to create a cottage industry for so-called “civil rights activists” or others who seek to abuse the [Public Records] Act for financial gain.⁴⁶

The First District Court of Appeal affirmed the trial court’s decision on December 16, 2015.⁴⁷

Another case followed a similar fact pattern.⁴⁸ The court found that the contractor believed that the email was spam and did not comply with the request.⁴⁹ The court ruled that the contractor had not refused to provide records, and therefore, no fees were due.⁵⁰ The court stated public records laws “should not be applied in a way that encourages the manufacture of public records requests designed to obtain no response, for the purpose of generating attorney’s fees.”⁵¹

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill gives courts discretion to award attorney fees and enforcement costs in actions to enforce public records laws if:

- The plaintiff provides written notice of the public records request to the agency’s custodian of public records at least 5 business days before filing the enforcement action; and

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Lutheran Social Services of Northeast Florida, Inc.*, 179 So. 3d 322 (Fla. 1st DCA 2015).

⁴⁸ *Citizens Awareness Found. Inc., v. Wantman Grp., Inc.*, 195 So.3d 396 (Fla. 4th DCA 2016).

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 397-398.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 401-402.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 401.

- A public entity has unlawfully refused to grant access to public records.

When considering whether an agency unlawfully refused to comply with a public records request, the bill requires courts to evaluate the actions of the plaintiff and the agency. Specifically, the court must consider whether the plaintiff made the request in bad faith or to harass the agency or to cause a violation of chapter 119, F.S, and whether the agency responded to the request in good faith.

Additionally, the bill allows the court to award attorney fees and costs against the plaintiff if the court finds the action was filed in bad faith or was frivolous.

Finally, the bill entitles a plaintiff to attorney fees and costs only if he or she shows by a preponderance of the evidence that the agency intentionally or willfully refused to permit a public record to be inspected or copied.

Under current law, a court must award attorney fees and costs to the plaintiff in an enforcement action if an agency unlawfully refuses a public records request. Further, current law does not require a plaintiff to provide advance notice of its intent to file a lawsuit to enforce the public records laws.

The bill takes effect upon becoming a law.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

Private entities that are agencies under the public records laws may spend less in settlements and attorney fees related to public records requests.

C. Government Sector Impact:

Governmental entities may spend less in settlements and in defending against lawsuits related to public records requests because the courts are given more discretion in awarding fees.

However, if the intent of the new notice requirement is to allow time for the public agency to “cure” the violation by producing the requested records before the initiation of the enforcement action and, thus, to minimize the award of attorney fees and costs, the provision may need to be clarified. The 5 day time period might not be enough time to cure a defect in responding to a public records request before an enforcement action is filed.

Current case law states that the enforcement action (the part of the lawsuit that seeks access to the public records) is independent of the part of the lawsuit that seeks an award for attorney fees and costs.⁵² A plaintiff may seek attorney fees and costs if the public agency has unlawfully refused access to the public records, even though the public agency ultimately provided the requested records.

To the extent that this bill deters frivolous filings of lawsuits, the court may experience fewer filings and court hearings.

Likewise, the bill may reduce the workload for governmental entities that are currently processing frivolous requests and defending themselves in lawsuits.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:**Custodian of public records**

Since private contractors who act on behalf of an agency are also subject to public records laws, they also would have records custodians. It is not clear if this bill requires a citizen to send a notice to the contracting agency’s public records custodian or to the business’s records custodian.

Private citizens who are unable to get a public agency to provide access to public records may find the written notice requirement cumbersome in that the custodian of public records may be the agency head, another officer or a designee.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends section 119.12, Florida Statutes.

⁵² *Mazer v. Orange County*, 811 So. 2d 857, 860 (Fla. 5th DCA 2002); *Cookston v. Office of the Pub. Defender*, LEXIS 10858 at 6 (Fla. 5th DCA July 15, 2016); *Schweickert v. Citrus Cnty. Fla. Bd.*, 193 So. 3d 1075 (Fla. 5th DCA 2016).

IX. Additional Information:**A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:**

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

CS by Community Affairs Committee on March 7, 2017:

- Adds guidance for the court when determining whether a public record was unlawfully refused for inspection.
- Provides that attorney fees may be awarded against a complainant if the court finds an action was filed in bad faith or was frivolous.
- Adds that if a complainant can show by a preponderance of the evidence that the agency intentionally or willfully refused to permit a public record to be inspected or copied, the court shall award the reasonable costs of enforcement and attorney fees against the agency.
- Removes the phrase “listed in the notice” for clarity.

B. Amendments:

None.