

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 Governmental Oversight and Accountability

BILL: CS/SB 808

INTRODUCER: Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee and Senator Baxley

SUBJECT: Public Records/Surplus Lands

DATE: February 12, 2018 REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Istler	Rogers	EP	Fav/CS
2.	Brown	Caldwell	GO	Favorable
3.			RC	

Please see Section IX. for Additional Information:

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE - Substantial Changes

I. Summary:

CS/SB 808 provides a public records exemption for certain records related to the sale of surplus lands. Specifically, the bill designates the following information as confidential and exempt from disclosure requirements:

- A written valuation of land determined to be surplus by the governing board of a water management district (WMD);
- Related documents used to form, or which pertain to the valuation; and
- Written offers to purchase surplus lands.

The bill provides that the exemption expires two weeks before the contract or agreement regarding the purchase, exchange, or disposal of the surplus land is first considered for approval by the WMD.

Additionally, the bill authorizes a WMD to disclose the records before the exemption expires to potential purchasers to facilitate or expedite closure of the land sale:

- During the negotiations for the sale or exchange of the land;
- During the marketing effort or bidding process associated with the sale, disposal, or exchange of the land;
- When the passage of time has made the conclusions of value invalid; or
- When negotiations or marketing efforts concerning the land are concluded.

In accordance with the Open Government Sunset Review Act, the exemption automatically repeals on October 2, 2023, unless the Legislature reviews and saves the exemption from repeal before that date.

The bill provides a statement of public necessity as required by the Florida Constitution.

The bill is linked to SB 806 that revises provisions on the sale of surplus lands in water management districts, and takes effect on the same date that SB 806 or similar legislation takes effect either in the same legislative session or an extension of the session.

II. Present Situation:

Public Records Law

The Florida Constitution provides that the public has the right to inspect or copy records made or received in connection with official governmental business.¹ This applies to the official business of any public body, officer, or employee of the state, including all three branches of state government, local governmental entities, and any person acting on behalf of the government.²

In addition to the Florida Constitution, the Florida Statutes provide that the public may access legislative and executive branch records.³ Chapter 119, F.S., constitutes the main body of public records laws, and is known as the Public Records Act.⁴ The Public Records Act states that

it is the policy of this state that all state, county, and municipal records are open for personal inspection and copying by any person. Providing access to public records is a duty of each agency.⁵

According to the Public Records Act, a public record includes virtually any document or recording, regardless of its physical form or how it may be transmitted.⁶ The Florida Supreme Court has interpreted public records as being “any material prepared in connection with official

¹ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(a).

² FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(a).

³ The Public Records Act does not apply to legislative or judicial records. *Locke v. Hawkes*, 595 So. 2d 32 (Fla. 1992). Also see *Times Pub. Co. v. Ake*, 660 So. 2d 255 (Fla. 1995). The Legislature’s records are public pursuant to s. 11.0431, F.S. Public records exemptions for the Legislature are primarily located in s. 11.0431(2)-(3), F.S.

⁴ Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes.

⁵ Section 119.01(1), F.S.

⁶ Section 119.011(12), F.S., defines “public record” to mean “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.” 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.”

agency business which is intended to perpetuate, communicate, or formalize knowledge of some type.”⁷ A violation of the Public Records Act may result in civil or criminal liability.⁸

The Legislature may create an exemption to public records requirements by passing a general law by a two-thirds vote of the House of Representatives and the Senate.⁹ The exemption must explicitly lay out the public necessity justifying the exemption, and must be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the exemption.¹⁰ A statutory exemption which does not meet these two criteria may be unconstitutional and may not be judicially saved.¹¹

When creating a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is ‘confidential and exempt’ or ‘exempt.’¹² Records designated as ‘confidential and exempt’ may be released by the records custodian only under the circumstances defined by the Legislature. Records designated as ‘exempt’ may be released at the discretion of the records custodian under certain circumstances.¹³

Open Government Sunset Review Act

The Open Government Sunset Review Act (referred to hereafter as the “OGSR”) prescribes a legislative review process for newly created or substantially amended public records or open meetings exemptions.¹⁴ The OGSR provides that an exemption automatically repeals on October 2nd of the fifth year after creation or substantial amendment; in order to save an exemption from repeal, the Legislature must reenact the exemption.¹⁵ In practice, many exemptions are continued by repealing the sunset date rather than reenacting the exemption.

The OGSR provides that a public records or open meetings exemption may be created or maintained only if it serves an identifiable public purpose and is no broader than is necessary.¹⁶ An exemption serves an identifiable purpose if it meets one of the following purposes *and* the Legislature finds that the purpose of the exemption outweighs open government policy and cannot be accomplished without the exemption:

⁷ *Shevin v. Byron, Harless, Schaffer, Reid, and Assoc. Inc.*, 379 So. 2d 633, 640 (Fla. 1980).

⁸ Section 119.10, F.S. Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes, as are the penalties for violating those laws.

⁹ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(c).

¹⁰ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(c).

¹¹ *Halifax Hosp. Medical Center v. New-Journal Corp.*, 724 So. 2d 567 (Fla. 1999). In *Halifax Hospital*, the Florida Supreme Court found that a public meetings exemption was unconstitutional because the statement of public necessity did not define important terms and did not justify the breadth of the exemption. *Id.* at 570. The Florida Supreme Court also declined to narrow the exemption in order to save it. *Id.* In *Baker County Press, Inc. v. Baker County Medical Services, Inc.*, 870 So. 2d 189 (Fla. 1st DCA 2004), the court found that the intent of a statute was to create a public records exemption. The *Baker County Press* court found that since the law did not contain a public necessity statement, it was unconstitutional. *Id.* at 196.

¹² If the Legislature designates a record as confidential, such record may not be released to anyone other than the persons or entities specifically designated in the statutory exemption. *WFTV, Inc. v. The School Board of Seminole*, 874 So. 2d 48 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004).

¹³ A record classified as exempt from public disclosure may be disclosed under certain circumstances. *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 683 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991).

¹⁴ Section 119.15, F.S. Section 119.15(4)(b), F.S., provides that an exemption is considered to be substantially amended if it is expanded to include more information or to include meetings. The OGSR does not apply to an exemption that is required by federal law or that applies solely to the Legislature or the State Court System pursuant to s. 119.15(2), F.S.

¹⁵ Section 119.15(3), F.S.

¹⁶ Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S.

- It allows the state or its political subdivision to effectively and efficiently administer a program, and administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;¹⁷
- Releasing sensitive personal information would be defamatory or would jeopardize an individual's safety. If this public purpose is cited as the basis of an exemption, however, only personal identifying information is exempt;¹⁸ or
- It protects trade or business secrets.¹⁹

The OGSR also requires specified questions to be considered during the review process.²⁰ In examining an exemption, the OGSR asks the Legislature to carefully question the purpose and necessity of reenacting the exemption.

If, in reenacting an exemption, the exemption is expanded, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are required.²¹ If the exemption is reenacted without substantive changes or if the exemption is narrowed, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are *not* required. If the Legislature allows an exemption to sunset, the previously exempt records will remain exempt unless provided for by law.²²

Valuation of state lands for sale

Pursuant to s. 253.0341(8)(a), F.S., a written valuation of land determined to be surplus by the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (BOT) and related documents used to form the valuation or which pertain to the valuation are confidential and exempt from disclosure.²³ This exemption expires two weeks before the time that the contract or agreement regarding the purchase, exchange, or disposal of the surplus land is first considered for approval by the BOT.²⁴

Before expiration of the exemption, however, the Division of State Lands within the Department of Environmental Protection is authorized to disclose these appraisals, valuations, or valuation information regarding the surplus land:

- During negotiations for the sale or exchange of the land;
- During the marketing effort or bidding process associated with the sale, disposal, or exchange of the land to facilitate closure of the effort or process;
- When the passage of time has made the conclusions of value invalid; or
- When negotiations or marketing efforts concerning the land are concluded.²⁵

¹⁷ Section 119.15(6)(b)1., F.S.

¹⁸ Section 119.15(6)(b)2., F.S.

¹⁹ Section 119.15(6)(b)3., F.S.

²⁰ Section 119.15(6)(a), F.S. The specified questions are:

1. What specific records or meetings are affected by the exemption?
2. Whom does the exemption uniquely affect, as opposed to the general public?
3. What is the identifiable public purpose or goal of the exemption?
4. Can the information contained in the records or discussed in the meeting be readily obtained by alternative means? If so, how?
5. Is the record or meeting protected by another exemption?
6. Are there multiple exemptions for the same type of record or meeting that it would be appropriate to merge?

²¹ FLA. CONST. art. I, s. 24(c).

²² Section 119.15(7), F.S.

²³ Section 253.0341(8)(a), F.S.

²⁴ Section 253.0341(8)(a)1., F.S.

²⁵ Section 253.0341(8)(a)2., F.S.

While a public records exemption exists for written valuations of land determined to be surplus by the BOT, a similar exemption does not exist for written valuations of land determined to be surplus by a WMD.

Appraisals and written offers for lands the state is purchasing

There are public records exemptions for appraisals and written offers when the state is seeking to purchase land. When an agency of the executive branch of state government seeks to acquire real property by purchase or through the exercise of the power of eminent domain, all appraisals, other reports relating to value, and written offers and counteroffers are exempt until the execution of a valid option contract or a written offer to sell that has been conditionally accepted by the agency.²⁶ If the parties do not execute a valid option contract or the agency does not conditionally accept a written offer to sell, then the exemption expires at the conclusion of the condemnation litigation of the subject property.²⁷

Similarly, when a WMD is seeking to purchase land, all appraisal reports, offers, and counteroffers are exempt until an option contract is executed or if no option contract is executed, until 30 days before a contract of agreement for purchase is considered for approval by the governing board.²⁸

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill designates the following information as confidential and exempt from the disclosure requirements under the Public Records Act and Art. I, s. 24(a) of the Florida Constitution:

- A written valuation of land determined to be surplus by the governing board of a water management district (WMD);
- Related documents used to form or which pertain to the valuation; and
- Written offers to purchase the surplus lands.

The bill provides that the exemption expires two weeks before the contract or agreement regarding the purchase, exchange, or disposal of the surplus land is first considered for approval by the WMD.

Additionally, the bill authorizes a WMD to disclose the records before the exemption expires to potential purchasers to facilitate or expedite closure of the land sale:

- During the negotiations for the sale or exchange of the land;
- During the marketing effort or bidding process associated with the sale, disposal, or exchange of the land;
- When the passage of time has made the conclusions of value invalid; or
- When negotiations or marketing efforts concerning the land are concluded.

In accordance with the Open Government Sunset Review Act, the exemption shall stand repealed on October 2, 2023, unless the Legislature review and saves the exemption from repeal before that date.

²⁶ Section 119.0711, F.S.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ Section 373.139(3)(a), F.S.

As required by the Florida Constitution, the bill provides a statement of public necessity.²⁹ As justification for the exemption:

- The exemption is necessary in order to facilitate successful or expedited closure of the sale of surplus lands; and
- The public availability of the valuations, related documents, and written offers can negatively impact the ability of WMDs to negotiate with potential purchasers and potentially places WMDs at a disadvantage in attempting to maximize the return on the sale of surplus land.

The bill is linked to SB 806 that revises provisions on the sale of surplus lands in water management districts. The bill takes effect on the same date that SB 806 or similar legislation takes effect, if adopted in the same legislative session or an extension of the session.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

The mandate restrictions do not apply because the bill does not require counties and municipalities to spend funds, reduce counties' or municipalities' ability to raise revenue, or reduce the percentage of state tax shared with counties and municipalities.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

Voting Requirement

Article I, s. 24(c) of the Florida Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for final passage of a newly created or expanded public record exemption. As the bill creates a new public record exemption, it requires a two-thirds vote for final passage.

Public Necessity Statement

Article I, s. 24(c) of the Florida Constitution requires a public necessity statement for a newly created public record exemption. The bill includes a public necessity statement and provides as justification for the exemption that without the exemption, the ability of water management districts to maximize the return on the sale of surplus lands could be compromised.

Breadth of Exemption

Article I, s. 24(c) of the Florida Constitution requires a newly created public record exemption to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. The bill specifically exempts written valuations of land determined to be surplus, any related documents, and written offers and provides for the expiration of such exemption upon the contract or agreement being approved, at the conclusion of negotiations or marketing efforts, or the passage of a year. Thus, the bill appears to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the public necessity for this public record exemption.

²⁹ FLA. CONST. art. I, s. 24(c).

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

The bill has a negative, indeterminate fiscal impact to the water management districts (WMDs) as they will incur costs related to staff training on the new public records exemption and in redacting the information prior to the release of the record. However, these costs likely can be absorbed as part of the day-to-day responsibilities of the WMD.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends section 373.089 of the Florida Statutes.

IX. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:
(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

CS by Environmental Preservation and Conservation on February 5, 2018:

The Committee Substitute:

- Revises the conditions upon when the exemption expires and when a WMD, at its discretion, is authorized to disclose the exempted information.
- Adds the automatic repeal of the exemption as required by the Open Government Sunset Review Act; and
- Makes conforming changes to the public necessity statement.

B. Amendments:

None.

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
