

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS

BILL #: HB 407 Public Records
SPONSOR(S): Rodrigues, Ray
TIED BILLS: **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** SB 602

REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR or BUDGET/POLICY CHIEF
1) Oversight, Transparency & Public Management Subcommittee	7 Y, 4 N	Moehrle	Harrington
2) Civil Justice Subcommittee			
3) State Affairs Committee			

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Article I, s. 24(a) of the State Constitution sets forth the state's public policy regarding access to government records. The State Constitution guarantees every person a right to inspect or copy any public record of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, unless such record is specifically exempt. The Florida Statutes further provide that all state, county, and municipal records are open for personal inspection and copying by any person, and that it is the responsibility of each agency to provide access to public records. A custodian of public records (records custodian) is required to permit any person to inspect and copy records at any reasonable time, under reasonable conditions, and under supervision by the records custodian.

The bill prohibits an agency that receives a public record request to inspect or copy a record from responding to such request by filing a civil action against the individual or entity making the request.

The bill does not appear to have a fiscal impact on the state or local governments.

FULL ANALYSIS

I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

A. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

Background

Public Records Law

Article I, s. 24(a) of the State Constitution sets forth the state's public policy regarding access to government records. The State Constitution guarantees every person a right to inspect or copy any public record of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government.

Public policy regarding access to government records is addressed further in the Florida Statutes. Section 119.01, F.S., provides that it is the policy of the state that all state, county, and municipal records are open for personal inspection and copying by any person, and that it is the responsibility of each agency¹ to provide access to public records.² Section 119.07(1), F.S., guarantees every person a right to inspect and copy any public record unless an exemption applies. The state's public records laws are construed liberally in favor of granting public access to public records.

Inspection and Copying of Public Records

Current law describes the duties and responsibilities of a custodian of public records³ (records custodian). Section 119.07(1), F.S., requires a records custodian to permit records to be inspected and copied by any person, at any reasonable time,⁴ under reasonable conditions, and under supervision by the records custodian. Generally, a records custodian may not require that a request for public records be submitted in a specific fashion.⁵

An agency is permitted to charge fees for inspection or copying of records. Those fees are prescribed by law and are based upon the nature or volume of the public records requested. Section 119.07(4), F.S., provides that if the nature or volume of the request requires extensive use of information technology or extensive clerical or supervisory assistance, the agency may charge, in addition to the actual cost of duplication, a reasonable service charge based on the cost incurred for the use of information technology and the labor cost that is actually incurred by the agency in responding to the request. The term "labor cost" includes the entire labor cost, including benefits in addition to wages or salary.⁶ Such service charge may be assessed, and payment may be required, by an agency prior to providing a response to the request.⁷

¹ Section 119.011(2), F.S., defines the term "agency" to mean 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 chapter 119, F.S., 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 agency.

² Section 119.011(12), F.S., defines the term "public records" 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.

³ Section 119.011(5), F.S., defines the term "custodian of public records" to mean 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.

⁴ There is no specific time limit established for compliance with public records requests. A response must be prepared within a reasonable time of the request. *Tribune Co. v. Cannella*, 458 So. 2d 1075 (Fla. 1984). What constitutes a reasonable time for a response will depend on such factors as the volume of records that are responsive to a request, as well as the amount of confidential or exempt information contained within the request.

⁵ See *Dade Aviation Consultants v. Knight Ridder, Inc.*, 800 So. 2d 302 (Fla. 3d DCA 2001) (holding that public records requests need not be made in writing).

⁶ *Board of County Commissioners of Highlands County v. Colby*, 976 So. 2d 31 (Fla. 2d DCA 2008).

⁷ Section 119.07(4), F.S.; see also *Wootton v. Cook*, 590 So. 2d 1039, 1040 (Fla. 1st DCA 1991) (stating that if a requestor identifies a record with sufficient specificity to permit an agency to identify it and forwards the appropriate fee, the agency must furnish by mail a copy of the record).

Declaratory Judgments

Florida courts have held that the government agency claiming the benefit of a public record exemption bears the burden of proving its right to the exemption.⁸ As such, when a person submits a public records request to an agency and the agency is uncertain if the document is a record that must be disclosed to the public or is otherwise protected from disclosure, the agency may seek guidance from a trial court by filing a complaint for declaratory judgment.⁹ A declaratory judgment¹⁰ is a binding adjudication in which the court establishes the rights of the parties without requiring enforcement of its decision. It is used to resolve legal uncertainties for the parties. Generally, each party bears its own attorney fees and costs when declaratory relief is sought.¹¹ Therefore, if an agency seeks a declaratory judgment and names the requestor as a party, each side will be expected to pay its own attorney fees and costs.

Effect of the Bill

The bill prohibits an agency that receives a public record request to inspect or copy a record from responding to such request by filing a civil action against the individual or entity making the request. By prohibiting an agency from filing a civil action in response to a public records request, the bill appears to prohibit an agency from filing a declaratory judgment with a court to determine whether the disclosure requirements of the public records law apply or whether the requested material is confidential or exempt.

B. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1. amends s. 119.07, F.S., relating to inspection and copying of records; photographing public records; fees; exemptions.

Section 2. provides an effective date of July 1, 2019.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

The bill does not appear to impact state government revenues.

2. Expenditures:

The bill does not appear to impact state government expenditures.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

The bill does not appear to impact local government revenues.

2. Expenditures:

The bill does not appear to impact local government expenditures.

⁸ *Central Florida Regional Transp. Authority v. Post-Newsweek*, 157 So. 3d 401, 404 (Fla. 5th DCA 2015); *Barfield v. School Bd. Of Manatee County*, 135 So. 3d 560, 562 (Fla. 2d DCA 2014).

⁹ *See Butler v. City of Hallandale Beach*, 68 So. 3d 278, 279 (Fla. 4th DCA 2011).

¹⁰ BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY (10th ed. 2014).

¹¹ Section 86.081, F.S., provides that a court may award attorney fees as are equitable. *See Price v. Tyler*, 890 So. 2d 246 (Fla. 2004) (holding that attorney fees are not recoverable in declaratory relief actions unless there is an independent statutory or contractual basis authorizing recovery of those fees).

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

The bill may have an indeterminate positive fiscal impact on the private sector because individuals and entities that request public records would not be required to pay the legal costs and fees associated with being sued by an agency.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.

III. COMMENTS

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

Not applicable. This bill does not appear to require counties or municipalities to spend funds or take action requiring the expenditure of funds; reduce the authority that counties or municipalities have to raise revenues in the aggregate; or reduce the percentage of state tax shared with counties or municipalities.

2. Other:

None.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

The bill does not appear to create a need for rulemaking or rulemaking authority.

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

Other Comments: Declaratory Judgments and Other Litigation

As drafted, the bill's prohibition from responding to public records requests by filing a civil action may preclude an agency from requesting a declaratory judgment seeking a determination on whether or not a record is a public record or whether an exemption applies. It may also prevent an agency from filing a counterclaim or suit that has nothing to do with the pending public records request and is not filed as a means to punish the requestor. As such, this bill could prevent a meritorious suit or counterclaim.

IV. AMENDMENTS/ COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES

None.