

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS

BILL #: CS/HB 273 Public Records

SPONSOR(S): Government Operations Subcommittee; Beshears and Kerner

TIED BILLS: **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** CS/SB 390

REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR or BUDGET/POLICY CHIEF
1) Government Operations Subcommittee	11 Y, 0 N, As CS	Moore	Williamson
2) State Affairs Committee	15 Y, 1 N	Moore	Camechis

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

The State Constitution and Florida Statutes govern access to records of state and local agencies. Current law in part defines terms, provides for assessment of certain fees associated with responding to public record requests, requires certain contracts with public agencies to contain provisions regarding public records, and provides for the assessment of attorney fees for an agency found in violation of the public records law. Private contractors who act on behalf of a public agency are required to comply with public records laws in the same manner as a public agency.

This bill requires a public agency contract for services with a contractor to include a statement in large, boldface font informing the contractor of the contact information of the public agency's custodian of public records (records custodian) and instructing the contractor to contact the agency records custodian concerning any questions the contractor may have regarding the contractor's duties to provide public records relating to the contract.

The bill repeals the requirement that each contract for services require the contractor to transfer its public records to the public agency upon termination of the contract. Instead, the contract must address whether the contractor will retain the public records or transfer the public records to the public agency upon completion of the contract.

The bill requires a request for public records relating to a contract for services to be made directly to the contracting agency. If the agency determines that it does not possess the records, it must immediately notify the contractor and the contractor must provide the records or allow access to the records within a reasonable time. A contractor who fails to provide the records to the agency within a reasonable time may be subject to certain penalties.

The bill provides that if a civil action is filed to compel production of public records, the court must assess and award against the contractor the reasonable costs of enforcement, including attorney fees, if the court determines that a contractor unlawfully refused to comply with the public records request within a reasonable time, and the plaintiff provided written notice of the public records request to the public agency and the contractor. The notice must be sent at least 8 business days before the plaintiff files the civil action. The bill specifies that a contractor who complies with the public records request within 8 business days after the notice is sent is not liable for the reasonable costs of enforcement.

The bill does not appear to have a fiscal impact on 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.

Public Records and Private Contractors

Section 119.0701, F.S., Contracts and Public Records

Public agencies, which include local and statewide governmental entities, as well as municipal officers, are permitted to hire contractors to provide services or act on behalf of the public agency.³ Contractors can be individuals or business entities.⁴ Private contractors who act on behalf of a public agency are required by the law and the terms of their contracts to comply with public records laws in the same manner as a public agency.⁵

Current law does not provide a definition for "acting on behalf of a public agency." When determining whether a private entity is acting on behalf of a public agency, the courts have relied on a "totality of factors" analysis.⁶ The factors include, but are not limited to, the level of public funding, whether the services contracted for are an integral part of the public agency's decision-making process, whether the private entity is performing a governmental function or a function that the public agency otherwise would perform, and the extent of the public agency's involvement with, regulation of, or control over the private entity.⁷

Section 119.0701, F.S., requires each public agency contract for services to include certain provisions that require the contractor to comply with public records laws. Specifically, the contract must require the contractor to:

- Keep and maintain public records that would be required by the agency to perform the service;
- Provide the public with access to public records on the same terms that the agency would;
- Ensure that public records that are exempt or confidential and exempt are not improperly disclosed; and

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

⁴ Section 119.0701(1)(a), F.S.

⁵ Section 119.0701, F.S.; *News and Sun-Sentinel Co. v. Schwab, Twitty & Hanser Architectural Group, Inc.*, 596 So. 2d 1029 (Fla. 1992).

⁶ See, e.g., *News and Sun-Sentinel Co. v. Schwab, Twitty & Hanser Architectural Group, Inc.*, 596 So. 2d 1029 (Fla. 1992).

⁷ *Id.*

- Meet certain public records retention and transfer requirements.

Upon the completion of a contract, the contract for services must provide for the transfer of public records from the contractor to the public agency at no cost to the public agency.⁸ The contractor is not permitted to retain any public records that are confidential and exempt or exempt from public records disclosure.⁹ Records that are stored electronically must be transferred to the public agency in a format that is compatible with the public agency's information technology systems.¹⁰

A public agency is required to enforce the terms of its contract if a contractor fails to abide by public records laws.¹¹

Section 287.058, F.S., Contract Document

For state agencies,¹² every procurement of contractual services in excess of \$35,000, except for specified procurements pertaining to health and human services, must be evidenced by a written agreement (contract) embodying all provisions and conditions of such services.¹³ The contract must be signed by the agency head or designee and the contractor before the rendering of any contractual service, except in the case of an emergency.¹⁴

Section 287.058(1), F.S., provides provisions that must be included in the contract document. With regard to public record requirements, the contract document must allow for unilateral cancellation by the state agency for refusal by the contractor to allow public access to all documents, papers, letters, or other material made or received by the contractor in conjunction with the contract, unless the records are exempt from public record requirements.¹⁵

Inspection and Copying of Public Records

Current law describes the duties and responsibilities of a custodian of public records (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,¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ The term "labor cost" includes the entire labor cost, including benefits in addition to wages or

⁸ Section 119.0701(2)(d), F.S.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Section 119.0701(3), F.S.

¹² For purposes of chapter 287, F.S., agency does not include the university and college boards of trustees or the state universities and colleges.

¹³ Section 287.058(1), F.S.

¹⁴ Section 287.058(2), F.S.

¹⁵ Section 287.058(1)(c), F.S.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ *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).

¹⁸ Section 119.07(4)(d), F.S.

salary.¹⁹ Such service charge may be assessed, and payment may be required, by an agency prior to providing a response to the request.²⁰

Enforcing Public Records Laws and Attorney Fees

If a public agency unlawfully fails to provide a public record, the person making the public records request may sue to have the request enforced.²¹ Whenever such an action is filed, the court must give the case priority over other pending cases and must set an immediate hearing date.²²

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 considered a legal consequence that is independent of the public records request.²³ Once an enforcement action has been filed, a public agency, or a contractor acting on behalf of a public agency, can be held liable for attorney fees even after the public agency has produced the requested records.²⁴ The public policy behind awarding attorney fees is to encourage people to pursue their right to access government records after an initial denial.²⁵ Granting attorney fees also makes it more likely that public agencies will comply with public records laws and deter improper denials of requests.²⁶

If the court finds that the agency unlawfully refused access to a public record, the court will order the public agency to pay for the requestor's reasonable costs of enforcement, including reasonable attorney fees.²⁷ If a contractor acting on behalf of the agency fails to comply with a public records request, the requestor may sue the contractor to enforce his or her rights to have access to records.²⁸ If a court determines that the contractor unlawfully withheld public records, the court must order the contractor to pay for the cost of the enforcement lawsuit and the requestor's attorney fees in the same manner that a public agency would be liable.²⁹ Attorney fees for efforts expended to obtain attorney fees are not currently permitted.³⁰

A court will not take into consideration whether a records custodian intended to violate public records laws or was simply inept,³¹ and it is immaterial if a records custodian did not willfully refuse to provide a public record.³² In addition, to be entitled to attorney fees against the state or any of its agencies, the plaintiff must serve a copy of the pleading claiming the fees on the Department of Financial Services (DFS). DFS is then entitled to participate with the agency in the defense of the suit and any appeal thereof with respect to such fees.³³

Recent Litigation

On December 1, 2014, a circuit court judge in Duval County denied relief to a plaintiff in a lawsuit to enforce a public records request and for assessment of attorney fees.³⁴ According to the court order, the plaintiff made two 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

¹⁹ *Board of County Commissioners of Highlands County v. Colby*, 976 So. 2d 31 (Fla. 2d DCA 2008).

²⁰ Section 119.07(4), F.S.; see also *Wootton v. Cook*, 590 So. 2d 1039, 1040 (Fla. 1st DCA 1991) (stating 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).

²¹ Section 119.11, F.S.

²² *Id.*

²³ Section 119.12, F.S.

²⁴ *Mazer v. Orange County*, 811 So. 2d 857, 860 (Fla. 5th DCA 2002); *Barfield v. Town of Eatonville*, 675 So. 2d 223 (Fla. 5th DCA 1996); *Althouse v. Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office*, 92 So. 3d 899, 902 (Fla. 4th DCA 2012).

²⁵ *New York Times Co. v. PHH Mental Health Services, Inc.*, 616 So. 2d 27, 29 (Fla. 1993).

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Section 119.12, F.S.

²⁸ See *New York Times Co. v. PHH Mental Health Services, Inc.*, 616 So. 2d 27 (Fla. 1993).

²⁹ See s. 119.12, F.S.; see also *New York Times Co. v. PHH Mental Health Services, Inc.*, 616 So. 2d 27, 29 (Fla. 1993).

³⁰ *Downs v. Austin*, 559 So. 2d 246, 248 (Fla. 1st DCA 1990).

³¹ *Barfield v. Town of Eatonville*, 675 So. 2d 223, 225 (Fla. 5th DCA 1996).

³² *Lilker v. Suwannee Valley Transit Authority*, 133 So. 3d 654 (Fla. 1st DCA 2014).

³³ Section 284.30, F.S.

³⁴ *Marcus 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. Dec. 2, 2014).

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.”³⁵

The court found that the plaintiff’s method of requesting public records was an abuse of the public records laws noting that the actions of the requester amounted to “nothing more than a scam.”³⁶ 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.”³⁷ 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 noted that all of the cases followed a similar pattern.

The court opined that:

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.³⁸

The case was affirmed by the First District Court of Appeal on December 16, 2015.³⁹

Effect of Proposed Changes

The bill requires a public agency contract for services with a contractor to include a statement in large, boldface font informing the contractor of the contact information of the public agency’s records custodian and instructing the contractor to contact the agency records custodian concerning any questions the contractor may have regarding the contractor’s duties to provide public records relating to the contract. The statement must include the telephone number, e-mail address, and mailing address for the records custodian.

The bill repeals the requirement that each contract for services require the contractor to transfer its public records to the public agency upon termination of the contract. Instead, the contract must address whether the contractor will retain the public records or transfer the public records to the public agency upon completion of the contract. If the contractor keeps and maintains public records upon completion of the contract, the contractor must meet all applicable requirements for retaining public records. If requested by the public agency, all records stored electronically must be provided to the public agency in a format that is compatible with the information technology systems of the public agency.

The bill requires the additional contract requirements to be included in contracts entered into or amended on or after July 1, 2016.

The bill requires a request for public records relating to a contract for services to be made directly to the contracting public agency. If the public agency determines that it does not possess the records, it must immediately notify the contractor and the contractor must provide the records or allow access to the records within a reasonable time. A contractor who fails to provide the records to the public agency within a reasonable time may be subject to penalties under s. 119.10, F.S. Section 119.10(2), F.S., provides that a person who willfully and knowingly violates the Public Records Act commits a

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Gray v. Lutheran Social Services of Northeast Florida, Inc.*, 2015 WL 9091680 (Fla. 1st DCA 2015).

misdemeanor of the first degree, which is punishable by up to a year in jail and a fine not to exceed \$1,000.

The bill provides that if a civil action is filed to compel production of public records, the court must assess and award against the contractor the reasonable costs of enforcement, including attorney fees, if the court determines that a contractor unlawfully refused to comply with the public records request within a reasonable time, and the plaintiff provided written notice of the public records request to the public agency and the contractor. A notice is in compliance if it is sent to the public agency's records custodian and to the contractor at the contractor's address listed on its contract with the public agency or to the contractor's registered agent. The notice must be sent at least 8 business days before the plaintiff files the civil action, and must be sent by common carrier delivery service or by registered, Global Express Guaranteed, or certified mail. The postage or shipping must be paid by the sender and must include evidence of delivery, which may be in an electronic format.

The bill specifies that a contractor who complies with the public records request within 8 business days after the notice is sent is not liable for the reasonable costs of enforcement.

B. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1 amends s. 119.0701, F.S., relating to public agency contracts for services and public records.

Section 2 provides an effective date of upon becoming a law.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

It is unclear what costs might be associated with a contractor maintaining public records upon termination of a contract for services in lieu of transferring the public records to the records custodian.

In addition, a person requesting public records may incur attorney fees that cannot be recovered from the contractor if the contractor provides the requested records within 8 business days after the notice to compel production of records is sent to the contractor and the public 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 expenditures 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:

None.

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

None.

IV. AMENDMENTS/ COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES

On December 2, 2015, the Government Operations Subcommittee adopted a strike-all amendment and reported the bill favorably with committee substitute. The amendment:

- Removes the requirement for an agency to designate a custodian of public records;
- Requires a request for public records associated with a contract for services to be made directly to the contracting agency;
- Removes the requirement that a public records request be made to specified employees of a contractor in order for a contractor to be liable for attorney fees;
- Provides circumstances under which a contractor may be responsible for the reasonable costs of enforcement and attorney fees in a civil action that is filed to compel production of public records; and
- Specifies that a contractor who complies with a public records request under certain circumstances is not liable for the reasonable costs of enforcement in the civil action.

This analysis is drafted to the committee substitute as approved by the Government Operations Subcommittee.