

SENATE STAFF ANALYSIS AND ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

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

BILL: CS/SB 304
SPONSOR: Comprehensive Planning Committee and Senator Argenziano
SUBJECT: Public Records Exemption
DATE: March 7, 2003 REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Cooper</u>	<u>Yeatman</u>	<u>CP</u>	<u>Favorable/CS</u>
2.	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u>CU</u>	<u> </u>
3.	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u>GO</u>	<u> </u>
4.	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u>RC</u>	<u> </u>
5.	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
6.	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

I. Summary:

This CS exempts from public records requirements personal identifying information held by a public water, wastewater, solid waste, natural gas, electric, cable television, or telecommunications utilities, which would identify a utility customer. The exemption is retroactive in effect.

This CS amends s. 119.07 of the Florida Statutes.

II. Present Situation:

Constitutional Access to Public Records and Meetings

Florida has a long history of providing public access to the meetings and records of governmental and other public entities. The Florida Legislature enacted the first law affording access to public records in 1909. The Public Records Law, ch. 119, F.S., and the Public Meetings Law, s. 286.011, F.S., specify the conditions under which public access must be provided to governmental records and meetings of the executive branch and other governmental agencies.

In November 1992, the public affirmed its approval of Florida’s tradition of “government in the sunshine” by enacting a constitutional amendment to guarantee the practice. Article I, s. 24 of the State Constitution provides every person with the right to inspect or copy any public record made or received in connection with the official business of any public body, officer, or employee of the state, or persons acting on their behalf. The section specifically includes the legislative, executive and judicial branches and each agency or department created under them. It also includes counties, municipalities, and special districts, as well as constitutional officers, boards, and commissioners or entities created pursuant to law or the State Constitution.

The term public records has been defined by the Legislature in s. 119.011(1), F.S., to include:

. . . 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 the official business by any agency.

This definition of *public records* has been interpreted by the Florida Supreme Court to include all materials made or received by an agency in connection with official business that are used to perpetuate, communicate or formalize knowledge. *Shevin v. Byron, Harless, Schaffer, Reid and Associates, Inc.*, 379 So.2d 633, 640 (Fla. 1980). Unless these materials have been made exempt by the Legislature, they are open for public inspection, regardless of whether they are in final form. *Wait v. Florida Power & Light Company*, 372 So.2d 420 (Fla. 1979).

The State Constitution permits exemptions to open government requirements and establishes the means by which these exemptions are to be established. Under Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution, the Legislature may provide by general law for the exemption of records provided that: (1) the law creating the exemption states with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption; and (2) the exemption is no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. A law creating an exemption is permitted to contain only exemptions to public records or meetings requirements and must relate to one subject.

The Open Government Sunset Review Act of 1995

Section 119.15, F.S., the Open Government Sunset Review Act of 1995, provides that an exemption may be created or maintained only if it serves an identifiable public purpose and may be no broader than is necessary to meet the public purpose it serves. An identifiable public purpose is served if the exemption meets one of the following purposes, and the Legislature finds that the purpose is sufficiently compelling to override the strong public policy of open government and cannot be accomplished without the exemption:

- Allows the state or its political subdivisions to effectively and efficiently administer a governmental program, which administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;
- Protects information of a sensitive personal nature concerning individuals, the release of which information would be defamatory to such individuals or cause unwarranted damage to the good name or reputation of such individuals or would jeopardize the safety of such individuals. However, in exemptions under this subparagraph, only information that would identify the individuals may be exempted; or
- Protects information of a confidential nature concerning entities, including, but not limited to, a formula, pattern, device, combination of devices, or compilation of information which is used to protect or further a business advantage over those who do not know or use it, the disclosure of which information would injure the affected entity in the marketplace.

The act also establishes a review and repeal process for exemptions to public records or meetings requirements. Under s. 119.15(3)(a), F.S., a law that enacts a new exemption or substantially amends an existing exemption must state that the exemption is repealed at the end of 5 years.

Further, a law that enacts or substantially amends an exemption must state that the exemption must be reviewed by the Legislature before the scheduled repeal date. An exemption is substantially amended if the amendment expands the scope of the exemption to include more records or information or to include meetings as well as records. An exemption is not substantially amended if the amendment narrows the scope of the exemption.

In the fifth year after enactment of a new exemption or the substantial amendment of an existing exemption, the exemption is repealed on October 2nd of the 5th year, unless the Legislature acts to reenact the exemption.

Public Utility Customer Records

Current law does not provide a public records exemption for a customer's personal identifying information held by a water, wastewater, natural gas, electric, cable television, or telecommunications utility owned by a public entity. However, s. 119.07(3)(dd), F.S., does exempt "bank account numbers and debit, charge, and credit card numbers" held by an agency, which is defined in s. 119.011(2), F.S., 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.”

Similarly, s. 119.0721, F.S., exempts social security numbers held by an agency or its agencies, employees, or contractors. However, there are several exceptions to this general exemption that could result in less protection of social security numbers than would be provided in a specific exemption.

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1 creates s. 119.07(3)(gg), F.S., to create an exemption from public records requirements for personal identifying information held by a public water, wastewater, solid waste, natural gas, electric, cable television, or telecommunications utility which would identify a customer. The bill specifies that "personal identifying information" includes a customer's name, social security number, taxpayer identification number, address, telephone number, and driver identification number.

The exemption applies retroactively.

The exemption is subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act of 1995, in accordance with s. 119.15, F.S., and is repealed on October 2, 2008, unless reviewed and reenacted by the Legislature.

Section 2 contains a statement of public necessity, as required by s. 24, Art. I of the State Constitution. The statement bases the exemption on the need to prevent identity theft and fraud,

and to ease the competitive disadvantage that release of identifying information causes for public utilities.

Section 3 provides that the bill takes effect upon becoming a law.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

This bill creates a single exemption from public records requirements of s. 24(a), Art. I of the State Constitution. The bill contains a statement of public necessity.

In the November 2002 election, 76.5% of voters approved a constitutional amendment concerning public records. The amendment to Article I, s. 24 of the State Constitution requires any law after the effective date of the amendment containing exemptions to public records or public meetings be passed by a two-thirds vote of each house of the Legislature. The constitution previously required a simple majority vote to enact public records exemptions.

Article I, s. 24 of the State Constitution requires that the Legislature state the public necessity for an exemption and requires that an exemption be no broader than necessary to effectuate the underlying basis for that exemption.

The statement provides three bases for the exemption: (1) the need to prevent identity theft; (2) the need to prevent fraud; and (3) the need to ease the competitive disadvantage that release of identifying information causes for public utilities.

Identity Theft and Fraud - The exemption includes in “personal identifying information”

. . . a customer’s name; social security number; taxpayer identification number; address; telephone number; and driver identification number.

It is arguable whether exempting a customer’s name is necessary to prevent identity theft when all other information about the customer (social security number; taxpayer identification number; address; telephone number; and driver ID number) is exempt. In other words, including the names of customers in the exemption could be challenged as too broad, because, standing alone, access to customers’ names provide no more opportunity for identity theft or fraud than names listed in a phone book.

Competitive Disadvantage - The bill also exempts personal identifying information from public records requirements because

“ . . . this personal identifying information could be used by competitors to identify, target, contact and solicit specific types of customers. The ability of business competitors to obtain this type of information could place these public service providers at a distinct competitive disadvantage and could result in severe economic loss to those public entities, thereby placing an increased economic burden on the less profitable customers who remain with the public utility.

However, this situation does not necessarily apply to all of the listed utilities. Generally, agency-owned water, wastewater, solid waste, and electric utilities do not operate in a competitive environment. Alternative providers of these services are not, under current law, allowed to compete for the consumer’s business. However, agency-owned natural gas, cable television, or telecommunication utilities may potentially, in some markets, operate in a competitive environment.

In any case, assuming that public utilities would be subject to a competitive disadvantage, the primary information that would permit a competitor to raid customers would be names, addresses and telephone numbers.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

V. Economic Impact and Fiscal Note:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

Agencies will incur costs associated with keeping the records or information exempt.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Amendments:

None.