

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: SB 248

INTRODUCER: Senator Hooper

SUBJECT: Public Records/County Attorneys and Assistant County Attorneys

DATE: December 6, 2019

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Davis</u>	<u>Cibula</u>	<u>JU</u>	Favorable
2.	<u>Hackett</u>	<u>McVaney</u>	<u>GO</u>	Favorable
3.	_____	_____	<u>RC</u>	_____

I. Summary:

SB 248 exempts from public inspection and copying certain information held by an agency that could identify or locate current or former county attorneys or assistant county attorneys and their spouses and children.

A county attorney is selected by the board of county commissioners and provides legal advice to the commission, the county administrator, and various departments and boards organized under the authority of the board of county commissioners. The county attorney also drafts and reviews contracts and initiates and defends civil actions in court on behalf of the county.

The bill exempts from public disclosure the following information that relates to current or former county attorneys or assistant county attorneys:

- Their home addresses, telephone numbers, dates of birth, and photographs.
- The names, home addresses, telephone numbers, photographs, dates of birth, and places of employment of their spouses and children.
- The names and locations of schools and day care facilities attended by their children.

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

Because the bill creates a new public records exemption, it requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting in each house of the Legislature for final passage.

The bill takes effect July 1, 2020.

II. Present Situation:

Public Records Law

Overview

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

Chapter 119, F.S., known as the Public Records Act, constitutes the main body of public records laws.³ The Public Records Act states:

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.⁴

The Public Records Act typically contains general exemptions that apply across agencies. Agency- or program-specific exemptions often are placed in the substantive statutes relating to that particular agency or program.

Legislative and Judicial Records

The Public Records Act does not apply to legislative or judicial records.⁵ Legislative records are public pursuant to s. 11.0431, F.S. Public records exemptions for the Legislature are codified primarily in s. 11.0431(2)-(3), F.S., and adopted in the rules of each house of the Legislature.

Definition

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 agency business which is intended to perpetuate, communicate, or formalize knowledge of some type.”⁷

¹ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(a).

² *Id.*

³ Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes.

⁴ Section 119.01(1), F.S.

⁵ *Locke v. Hawkes*, 595 So. 2d 32 (Fla. 1992). Also see *Times Pub. Co. v. Ake*, 660 So. 2d 255 (Fla. 1995).

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.”

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

Access

The Florida Statutes specify conditions under which public access to governmental records must be provided. The Public Records Act guarantees every person's right to inspect and copy any state or local government public record at any reasonable time, under reasonable conditions, and under supervision by the custodian of the public record.⁸ A violation of the Public Records Act may result in civil or criminal liability.⁹

Exemptions

The Legislature, alone, has the authority to create an exemption to public records requirements.¹⁰ An exemption must be created by general law and must specifically state the public necessity justifying the exemption.¹¹ An exemption serves an identifiable purpose if it meets one of the following statutory purposes, the Legislature finds that the purpose of the exemption outweighs open government policy, *and* the purpose cannot be accomplished without the exemption:

- It allows the state or its political subdivision to effectively and efficiently administer a program, and administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;¹²
- 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;¹³ or
- It protects trade or business secrets.¹⁴

Further, the exemption must be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. Additionally, a bill enacting an exemption may not contain other substantive provisions¹⁵ and must pass by a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting in each house of the Legislature.¹⁶

“Confidential and Exempt” or “Exempt” Designations

When creating or expanding a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is “confidential and exempt” or “exempt.”¹⁷ Records designated as “confidential and exempt” may be released by the records custodian only under the circumstances defined by the Legislature or pursuant to a court order. Records designated as “exempt” may be released at the discretion of the records custodian under certain circumstances.¹⁸

⁸ Section 119.07(1)(a), F.S.

⁹ Section 119.10, F.S. Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes, as are the penalties for violating those laws.

¹⁰ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(c).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Section 119.15(6)(b)1., F.S.

¹³ Section 119.15(6)(b)2., F.S.

¹⁴ Section 119.15(6)(b)3., F.S.

¹⁵ The bill may, however, contain multiple exemptions that relate to one subject.

¹⁶ FLA. CONST., art. I, s. 24(c) and FLA. CONST., art., X, s. 12(e).

¹⁷ If the Legislature designates a record as confidential, the record may not be released to anyone other than the persons or entities specifically designated in the statutory exemption. *WFTV, Inc. v. The Sch. Bd. of Seminole*, 874 So. 2d 48, 53 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004).

¹⁸ *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 683 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991).

Open Government Sunset Review Act

The Open Government Sunset Review Act (the Act) prescribes a legislative review process for newly created or substantially amended public records or open meetings exemptions,¹⁹ with specified exceptions.²⁰ It requires the automatic repeal of the exemption on October 2nd of the fifth year after creation or substantial amendment, unless the Legislature reenacts the exemption.²¹ The Act 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 to meet such public purpose.²²

General Public Records Exemptions for State Agency Personnel

There are three general public records exemptions that apply to all state agency personnel: disclosure of an employee's (1) social security number, (2) medical information, and (3) personal identifying information of dependent children who are insured by an agency group insurance plan.²³

(1) Social Security Numbers

Social security numbers of all current and former agency personnel are confidential and exempt when held by the employing agency.²⁴ An employing agency may only release social security numbers for the following reasons:

- It is required by law.
- A receiving government agency needs the social security number to perform its duties.
- The employee consents to disclose his or her social security number.²⁵

In addition, there is a general exemption for social security numbers which applies to the public that makes social security numbers confidential and exempt.²⁶ This exemption applies to any agency that holds anyone's social security number, including those belonging to the personnel of

¹⁹ Section 119.15, F.S. 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 (s. 119.15(4)(b), F.S.). The requirements of the Act do not apply to an exemption that is required by federal law or that applies solely to the Legislature or the State Court System (s. 119.15(2), F.S.).

²⁰ Section 119.15(2)(a) and (b), F.S., provide that exemptions that are required by federal law or are applicable solely to the Legislature or the State Court System are not subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act.

²¹ Section 119.15(3), F.S.

²² Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S. Section 119.15(6)(a), F.S., asks the Legislature to carefully question the purpose and necessity of reenacting the exemption, and specifically requires that the Legislature consider the following questions:

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

²³ Section 119.071(4)(a) and (b), F.S.

²⁴ Section 119.071(4)(a)1., F.S.

²⁵ Section 119.071(4)(a), F.S.

²⁶ Section 119.071(5)(a)5., F.S.

that agency. This exemption, however, permits the agency to disclose social security numbers of agency personnel in order to administer health or retirement benefits.²⁷

(2) Medical Information

An agency employee's medical information is also exempt from public disclosure if the medical information could identify the employee. This exemption applies to prospective, current and former employees.²⁸

(3) Personal Identifying Information

The personal identifying information of a dependent child of an agency employee who is insured by an agency group insurance plan is exempt from public disclosure. This exemption applies to the children of current and former employees and is also retroactively applied.²⁹

Public Records Exemptions for Enumerated Personnel

Provisions in s. 119.071(4)(d), F.S., exempt from public disclosure the personal identification and location information of enumerated agency personnel, their spouses and their children. The employing agency as well as the employee may assert the right to the exemption by submitting a written request to each agency which holds the employee's information.³⁰ Additionally, all of these exemptions have retroactive application.³¹

County Attorneys and Assistant County Attorneys

A county attorney is selected by the board of county commissioners to serve as the chief legal counsel for the county. The county attorney is authorized to appoint assistant attorneys to help in the performance of the duties and in the administration of the office. County attorneys provide legal advice to the commission, the county administrator, and various departments and boards organized under the authority of the board of county commissioners. They also draft and review contracts and ordinances and initiate and defend civil actions on behalf of the county in state and federal court.

Because county attorneys are often tasked with, or directly involved in, firing disgruntled employees, prosecuting code enforcement violations, and resolving other controversial matters involving the use of someone's land or the removal of animals for suspected neglect and abuse, they find themselves in difficult and emotionally-inflamed situations. Instances have been reported in which persons who felt that they were mistreated by the county attorney or who were angry with an outcome retaliated. Forms of retaliation included attempts to confront the attorney away from the office, posts of personal identifying information on social media in an effort to intimidate the attorney, and threats issued in person and online. As a result of one reported

²⁷ Section 119.071(5)(a)5.f. and g., F.S.

²⁸ Section 119.071(4)(b)1., F.S.

²⁹ Section 119.071(4)(b)2., F.S.

³⁰ Section 119.071(4)(d)3., F.S.

³¹ Section 119.071(4)(d)5., F.S.

instance, a law enforcement officer escorted a threatened county attorney for extended periods of time to ensure his protection while traveling to meetings and hearings.³²

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1 amends s. 119.071(4)(d)2., F.S., to exempt certain information pertaining to current or former county attorneys or assistant county attorneys from the public disclosure requirements of the public record laws. The following information for a current or former county attorney or assistant county attorney will be exempt:

- The county attorney or assistant county attorney's home addresses, telephone numbers, date of birth, and photographs.
- The names, home addresses, telephone numbers, photographs, dates of birth, and places of employment of the attorney's spouse and children.
- The names and locations of schools and day care facilities attended by the attorney's children.

Pursuant to subparagraph 5., this exemption will apply to information held by an agency before, on, or after July 1, 2020.

Pursuant to subparagraph 6., this exemption will be subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act and shall stand repealed on October 2, 2024, unless reviewed and saved from repeal by the Legislature.

Section 2 contains the public necessity statement which explains why the exemption is necessary. The public necessity statement provides that the release of the personal identifying and location information could place current or former county attorneys or assistant county attorneys in danger of being physically and emotionally harmed or stalked by a defendant or other person. Accordingly, the statement asserts that the harm that may result from releasing the information outweighs any public benefit that may be realized from the disclosure of the information.

Section 3 provides that the bill takes effect July 1, 2020.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

The mandate restrictions in the State Constitution 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.

³² Telephone interviews with the Florida Association of County Attorneys in Tallahassee, the Charlotte County Attorney's Office in Port Charlotte, and the St. Johns County Attorney in St. Augustine (October 30, 2019).

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:***Vote Requirement***

Article I, s. 24(c), of the State Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of each house for final passage of a bill creating an exemption to the public records requirements.³³

Because this bill creates an exemption for current or former county attorneys or assistant county attorneys, it requires a two-thirds vote of each house to be enacted.

Public Necessity Statement

Article I, s. 24(c), of the State Constitution requires a bill that creates an exemption to the public records requirements to state with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption. Section 2 of the bill contains a statement of public necessity for the exemptions.

Breadth of Exemption

Article I, s. 24(c), of the State Constitution requires an exemption to the public records requirements to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. The public necessity statement notes that this exemption is necessary to protect current or former county attorneys or assistant county attorneys and their families from being physically and emotionally harmed or stalked and is narrowly drawn to protect them. For this reason, the exemption does not appear broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None identified.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**A. Tax/Fee Issues:**

None.

³³ Article X, s. 12(e), of the State Constitution, Rules of Construction, states that a “Vote or other action of a legislative house . . . means the vote or action of a majority or other specified percentage of those members voting on the matter.” Accordingly, this two-thirds vote requirement means a favorable two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for final passage.

B. Private Sector Impact:

An individual or business that requests location information that is covered by the definition of “home address” in the bill will not be able to readily obtain that information from the records custodian. If the employee or the employee’s agency has taken the initiative and requested that the home address information be exempted from disclosure, the protected person will need to sign a waiver granting permission to the records custodian to release the information to the requestor.

C. Government Sector Impact:

The bill may have a minimal negative fiscal impact on agencies that hold identifying information exempted by this bill. The agencies may need to train staff in order for them to be able to comply with public records requests and perform any necessary redactions before releasing a record. However, the costs could be absorbed by the agencies as part of their day-to-day responsibilities.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

According to s. 119.15(3), F.S., the Open Government Sunset Review Act, a newly enacted or substantially amended exemption is scheduled for review and repeal by the Legislature in the *5th* year after creation, unless the Legislature acts to reenact the exemption. The bill inserts the newly created exemption into an existing paragraph with other exemptions that are scheduled for review and repeal in 2024, which is the *4th* year after enactment instead of the *5th* year. It can be reasoned, however, that advancing the scheduled review and repeal by one year is not problematic because the deviation is supported by the reasoning that a previous Legislature cannot bind this Legislature.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill substantially amends section 119.071, Florida Statutes.

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

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

None.

B. Amendments:

None.