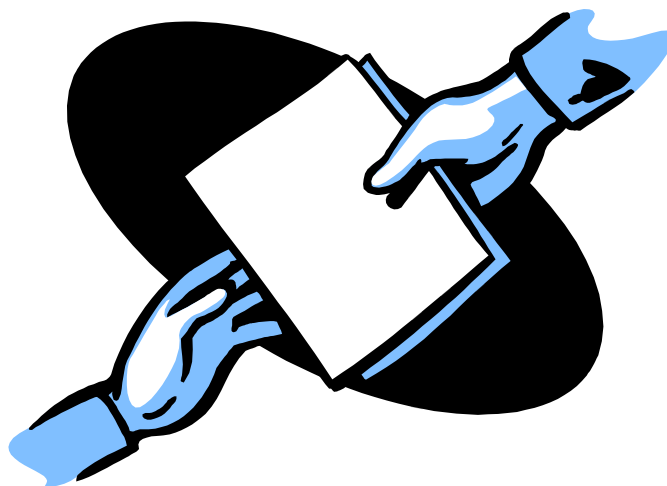




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# A Citizen's Guide to the Open Public Records Act



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Second Edition – July 2011

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## **A Citizen's Guide to the Open Public Records Act**

The Citizen's Guide to the Open Public Records Act (OPRA) has been prepared by the Government Records Council to help the public understand the requirements of the State of New Jersey's Open Public Records Act (N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.). This guide is intended to familiarize those who want access to public records of their rights and of the responsibilities of public agencies that hold records, but is not to serve as a legal reference.

The Council's website at [www.state.nj.us/grc](http://www.state.nj.us/grc) contains useful information on the law, including summaries of exceptions to disclosure, copies of gubernatorial Executive Orders, lists of statutes containing exceptions, and a search engine of all prior GRC decisions. Requestors are urged to check the website when questions arise and should also feel free to submit their questions to the Council via our toll-free information line (1-866-850-0511), e-mail ([grc@dca.state.nj.us](mailto:grc@dca.state.nj.us)), or regular mail (101 South Broad Street, P.O. Box 819, Trenton, NJ 08625-0819).

In addition to this guide, the Council has other resource materials that may be useful in assisting requestors understand the provisions of OPRA. These materials include the following which can be accessed from the GRC's website at [www.state.nj.us/grc/meetings/present](http://www.state.nj.us/grc/meetings/present):

- OPRA PowerPoint presentation
- Exemptions in OPRA handout
- Special Service Charge handout
- Useful OPRA Cases by Subject handout
- E-mail Retention – DARM Circular

## SECTION 1 – OPRA DEFINED

### What is the Open Public Records Act (OPRA)?

OPRA is the State statute that replaces the old “Right to Know Law” which governs the public’s access to government records in New Jersey. The law is compiled in the statutes as N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.

Specifically, OPRA is intended to:

- Expand the public’s right of access to government records;
- Create an administrative appeals process if access is denied; and
- Define what records are and are not “government records.”

### Are there other ways to request access to government records besides OPRA?

Yes. OPRA does not affect a requestor’s common law right of access, or right of access via discovery.

If, in addition to requesting records under OPRA, a requestor seeks government records under the common law, please consider the following:

A public record under the common law is one required by law to be kept, or necessary to be kept in the discharge of a duty imposed by law, or directed by law to serve as a memorial and evidence of something written, said, or done, or a written memorial made by a public officer authorized to perform that function, or a writing filed in a public office. The elements essential to constitute a public record are that it be a written memorial, that it be made by a public officer, and that the officer be authorized by law to make it.

If the information requested is a "public record" under common law and the requestor has a legally recognized interest in the subject matter contained in the material, then the material must be disclosed if the individual's right of access outweighs the State's interest in preventing disclosure.

***Note that any challenge to a denial of a request for records under the common law cannot be made to the Government Records Council, as the Government Records Council only has jurisdiction to adjudicate challenges to denials of OPRA requests. A challenge to the denial of access under the common law can be made by filing an action in Superior Court. Additionally, the GRC cannot provide any guidance on how to submit a request under the common law.***

Discovery requests may also be served upon a public agency for access to government records pursuant to *N.J. Court Rules, 1969 R. 3:13-3* (2005) and *N.J. Court Rules, 1969 R. 7:7-7* (2005). Please note that requests for discovery do not affect a requestor’s right to request the same records under OPRA.

***Note that any challenge to a denial of a request for records pursuant to a discovery request cannot be made to the Government Records Council, as the Government Records Council only has jurisdiction to adjudicate challenges to denials of OPRA requests. A challenge to the denial of access pursuant to a discovery request can be made by filing an action in Superior Court. Additionally, the GRC cannot provide any guidance on how to submit a request through discovery.***

### **What public policies are expressed in OPRA?**

OPRA provides overriding public policies in the legislative findings (N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1) which must be considered during the handling of all OPRA requests for access to government records. Those public policies are:

- Government records must be readily accessible for inspection, copying, or examination by its citizens, with certain exceptions, for the protection of the public interest.
- Any limitations on the right of access to government records must be interpreted in favor of the public's right of access.
- A public agency has a responsibility and an obligation to protect a citizen's personal information that is in the possession of a public agency when disclosure of that information would violate the citizen's reasonable expectation of privacy."

In fact, in Burnett v. County of Bergen, 198 N.J. 408 (2009), the Court held without ambiguity, that the privacy provision "is neither a preface nor a preamble." Rather, "the very language expressed in the privacy clause reveals its substantive nature; it does not offer reasons why OPRA was adopted, as preambles typically do; instead, it focuses on the law's implementation." "Specifically, it imposes an obligation on public agencies to protect against disclosure of personal information which would run contrary to reasonable privacy interests."

The above means that the court considers OPRA's privacy provision to be a substantive exemption from public access. The Government Records Council has routinely relied on this privacy provision to substantiate a custodian's withholding from public access a citizen's personal information such as home address and home telephone numbers. However, in each instance the Government Records Council conducts a balancing test to weigh the requestor's need for the personal information against the agency's need to keep the information confidential per advice from the NJ Office of the Attorney General. Thus, decisions to withhold personal information under this provision are made on a case-by-case basis.

### **Who may file an OPRA request?**

Anyone! Although OPRA specifically references "citizens of this State," (N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1) the Attorney General's Office advises that OPRA does not prohibit access to residents of other states. Also, requestors may file OPRA requests anonymously without providing any personal contact information, even though space for that information appears on the form; thus anonymous requests are permitted. However, OPRA specifically prohibits anonymous requests

for victims' records. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-2.2. If a permissible anonymous request involves making copies and the estimated cost exceeds \$5.00, the custodian may request a deposit. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.f.

### **What is a “government record?”**

OPRA's definition of a government record expands the old Right to Know Law definition (which was limited to records *required* by law to be maintained on file).

OPRA specifically defines a government record as:

“... any paper, written or printed book, document, drawing, map, plan, photograph, microfilm, data processed or image processed document, information stored or maintained electronically or by sound-recording or in a similar device, or any copy thereof, that has been *made, maintained or kept on file ... or that has been received* in the course of his or its official business ...” (Emphasis added.) N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1.

Generally stated, a “government record” means any record that has been made, maintained, or kept on file in the course of official business, or that has been received in the course of official business.

OPRA covers more than just paper records. Under OPRA, a “government record” includes printed records, tape recordings, microfilm, electronically stored records (including e-mails and data sets stored in a database), books, maps, photographs, etc.

All government records are subject to public access unless specifically exempt under OPRA or any other law. There are 24 specific exemptions contained in OPRA which are listed below:

#### **N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1**

- 1) Inter-agency or intra-agency advisory, consultative or deliberative material (Note: generally refers to draft documents or documents used in a deliberative process).
- 2) Legislative records. Specifically:
  - a. information received by a member of the Legislature from a constituent or information held by a member of the Legislature concerning a constituent, including but not limited to information in written form or contained in any e-mail or computer data base, or in any telephone record whatsoever, *unless it is information the constituent is required by law to transmit*;
  - b. any memorandum, correspondence, notes, report or other communication prepared by, or for, the specific use of a member of the Legislature in the course of the member's official duties, *except that this provision shall not apply to an otherwise publicly-accessible report which is required by law to be submitted to the Legislature or its members*.

- 3) Medical examiner records – photographs, negatives, prints, videotapes taken at the scene of death or in the course of post mortem examination or autopsy, *except*:
  - a. *when used in a criminal action or proceeding in this State which relates to the death of that person,*
  - b. *for the use as a court of this State permits, by order after good cause has been shown and after written notification of the request for the court order has been served at least five days before the order is made upon the county prosecutor for the county in which the post mortem examination or autopsy occurred,*
  - c. *for use in the field of forensic pathology or for use in medical or scientific education or research, or*
  - d. *or use by any law enforcement agency in this State or any other state or federal law enforcement agency.*
- 4) Criminal investigatory records - records which are not required by law to be made, maintained or kept on file that are held by a law enforcement agency which pertain to any criminal investigation or related civil enforcement proceeding. (Note: N.J.S.A. 47:1A-3.b. lists specific criminal investigatory information which must be disclosed).
- 5) Victims' records - an individually-identifiable file or document held by a victims' rights agency which pertains directly to a victim of a crime except that a victim of a crime shall have access to the victim's own records. "Victims' rights agency" means a public agency, or part thereof, the primary responsibility of which is providing services, including but not limited to food, shelter, or clothing, medical, psychiatric, psychological or legal services or referrals, information and referral services, counseling and support services, or financial services to victims of crimes, including victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, violent crime, child endangerment, child abuse or child neglect, and the Victims of Crime Compensation Board.
- 6) Trade secrets and proprietary commercial or financial information obtained from any source. Includes data processing software obtained by a public agency under a licensing agreement which prohibits its disclosure.
- 7) Any record within the attorney-client privilege.
- 8) Administrative or technical information regarding computer hardware, software and networks which, if disclosed would jeopardize computer security.
- 9) Emergency or security information or procedures for any buildings or facility which, if disclosed, would jeopardize security of the building or facility or persons therein.
- 10) Security measures and surveillance techniques which, if disclosed, would create a risk to the safety or persons, property, electronic data or software.
- 11) Information which, if disclosed, would give an advantage to competitors or bidders.

- 12) Information generated by or on behalf of public employers or public employees in connection with:
  - a. Any sexual harassment complaint filed with a public employer;
  - b. Any grievance filed by or against an individual; or
  - c. Collective negotiations, including documents and statements of strategy or negotiating position.
- 13) Information which is a communication between a public agency and its insurance carrier, administrative service organization or risk management office.
- 14) Information which is to be kept confidential pursuant to court order.
- 15) Certificate of honorable discharge issued by the United States government (Form DD-214) filed with a public agency, *except that a veteran or the veteran's spouse or surviving spouse shall have access to the veteran's own records.*
- 16) Personal identifying information. Specifically:
  - a. Social security numbers, *except that a social security number contained in a record required by law to be made, maintained or kept on file by a public agency shall be disclosed when access to the document or disclosure of that information is not otherwise prohibited by State or federal law, regulation or order or by State statute, resolution of either or both houses of the Legislature, Executive Order of the Governor, rule of court or regulation promulgated under the authority of any statute or executive order of the Governor.*
  - b. Credit card numbers
  - c. Unlisted telephone numbers
  - d. Drivers' license numbers.

*Except for:*

  - a. *Use by any government agency, including any court or law enforcement agency, in carrying out its functions,*
  - b. *or any private person or entity acting on behalf thereof,*
  - c. *or any private person or entity seeking to enforce payment of court-ordered child support; except with respect to the disclosure of driver information by the Division of Motor Vehicles as permitted by section 2 of P.L.1997, c.188 (C.39:2-3.4);*
- 17) Certain records of higher education institutions:
  - a. Pedagogical, scholarly and/or academic research records and/or the specific details of any research project, *except that a custodian may not deny inspection of a government record or part thereof that gives the name, title,*

*expenditures, source and amounts of funding and date when the final project summary of any research will be available.*

- b. Test questions, scoring keys and other examination data pertaining to the administration of an examination for employment or academic examination.
- c. Records of pursuit of charitable contributions or records containing the identity of a donor of a gift if the donor requires non-disclosure of the donor's identity as a condition of making the gift provided that the donor has not received any benefits of or from the institution of higher education in connection with such gift other than a request for memorialization or dedication.
- d. Valuable or rare collections of books and/or documents obtained by gift, grant, bequest or devise conditioned upon limited public access.
- e. Information contained on individual admission applications.
- f. Information concerning student records or grievance or disciplinary proceedings against a student to the extent disclosure would reveal the identity of the student.

**N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.2**

- 18) Biotechnology trade secrets.

**N.J.S.A. 47:1A-2.2**

- 19) Limitations to convicts - personal information pertaining to the person's victim or the victim's family, including but not limited to a victim's home address, home telephone number, work or school address, work telephone number, social security account number, medical history or any other identifying information. *Information may be released only if the information is necessary to assist in the defense of the requestor. A determination that the information is necessary to assist in the requestor's defense shall be made by the court upon motion by the requestor or his representative.*

**N.J.S.A. 47:1A-3.a.**

- 20) Ongoing investigations – any records pertaining to an investigation in progress by any public agency if disclosure of such record or records shall be detrimental to the public interest. *This provision shall not be construed to allow any public agency to prohibit access to a record of that agency that was open for public inspection, examination, or copying before the investigation commenced.*

**N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.k.**

- 21) Public defender records that relate to the handling of any case, *unless authorized by law, court order, or the State Public Defender.*

**N.J.S.A. 47:1A-9**

- 22) Upholds exemptions contained in other State or federal statutes and regulations, Executive Orders of the Governor, Rules of Court, Constitution of this State, or judicial case law.

**N.J.S.A. 47:1A-10**

- 23) Personnel and pension records, *except specific information identified as follows:*
- a. *An individual's name, title, position, salary, payroll record, length of service, date of separation and the reason for such separation, and the amount and type of any pension received,*
  - b. *When required to be disclosed by another law, when disclosure is essential to the performance of official duties of a person duly authorized by this State or the United States, or when authorized by an individual in interest.*
  - c. *Data contained in information which disclose conformity with specific experiential, educational or medical qualifications required for government employment or for receipt of a public pension, but not including any detailed medical or psychological information.*

**N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 (Legislative Findings)**

- 24) Privacy Interest - "a public agency has a responsibility and an obligation to safeguard from public access a citizen's personal information with which it has been entrusted when disclosure thereof would violate the citizen's reasonable expectation of privacy."

Burnette v. County of Bergen, 198 N.J. 408 (2009). Without ambiguity, the court held that the privacy provision "is neither a preface nor a preamble." Rather, "the very language expressed in the privacy clause reveals its substantive nature; it does not offer reasons why OPRA was adopted, as preambles typically do; instead, it focuses on the law's implementation." "Specifically, it imposes an obligation on public agencies to protect against disclosure of personal information which would run contrary to reasonable privacy interests."

**Executive Order No. 21 (McGreevey 2002)**

- 1) Records where inspection, examination or copying would substantially interfere with the State's ability to protect and defend the State and its citizens against acts of sabotage or terrorism, or which, if disclosed, would materially increase the risk or consequences of potential acts of sabotage or terrorism.
- 2) Executive Orders No. 9 (Hughes), 11 (Byrne), 79 (Byrne) and 69 (Whitman) are hereby continued to the extent that they are not inconsistent with this Executive Order.

Executive Order No. 9 (Hughes) exemptions which are still active:

- a. Questions on examinations required to be conducted by any State or local governmental agency;
- b. Personnel and pension records (same as N.J.S.A. 47:1A-10);
- c. Records concerning morbidity, mortality and reportable diseases of named persons required to be made, maintained or kept by any State or local governmental agency;
- d. Records which are required to be made, maintained or kept by any State or local governmental agency which would disclose information concerning illegitimacy;
- e. Fingerprint cards, plates and photographs and other similar criminal investigation records which are required to be made, maintained or kept by any State or local governmental agency;
- f. Criminal records required to be made, maintained and kept pursuant to the provisions of R. S. 53:1-20.1 and R. S. 53:1- 20.2;
- g. Personal property tax returns required to be filed under the provisions of Chapter 4 of Title 54 of the Revised Statutes; and
- h. Records relating to petitions for executive clemency.

Executive Order No. 11 (Byrne) exemptions are the same as N.J.S.A. 47:1A-10.

Executive Order No. 79 (Byrne) exemptions are the similar to # 8, 9, 10 above under N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1.

Executive Order No. 69 (Whitman) exemptions that are still active: Fingerprint cards, plates and photographs and similar criminal investigation records that are required to be made, maintained or kept by any State or local governmental agency.

#### **Executive Order No. 26 (McGreevey 2002)**

1) Certain records maintained by the Office of the Governor:

- a. Any record made, maintained, kept on file or received by the Office of the Governor in the course of its official business which is subject to an executive privilege or grant of confidentiality established or recognized by the Constitution of this State, statute, court rules or judicial case law.
- b. All portions of records, including electronic communications, that contain advisory, consultative or deliberative information or other records protected by a recognized privilege.
- c. All portions of records containing information provided by an identifiable natural person outside the Office of the Governor which contains information that the sender is not required by law to transmit and which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy if disclosed.
- d. If any of the foregoing records shall contain information not exempted by the provision of the Open Public Records Act or the preceding subparagraphs (a),

(b) or (c) hereof then, in such event, that portion of the record so exempt shall be deleted or excised and access to the remainder of the record shall be promptly permitted.

- 2) Resumes, applications for employment or other information concerning job applicants while a recruitment search is ongoing. *The resumes of successful candidates shall be disclosed once the successful candidate is hired. The resumes of unsuccessful candidates may be disclosed after the search has been concluded and the position has been filled, but only where the unsuccessful candidate has consented to such disclosure.*
- 3) Records of complaints and investigations undertaken pursuant to the Model Procedures for Internal Complaints Alleging Discrimination, Harassment or Hostile Environments.
- 4) Information relating to medical, psychiatric or psychological history, diagnosis, treatment or evaluation.
- 5) Information in a personal income or other tax return
- 6) Information describing a natural person's finances, income, assets, liabilities, net worth, bank balances, financial history or activities, or creditworthiness, except as otherwise required by law to be disclosed.
- 7) Test questions, scoring keys and other examination data pertaining to the administration of an examination for public employment or licensing.
- 8) Records in the possession of another department (including NJ Office of Information Technology or State Archives) when those records are made confidential by a regulation of that department or agency adopted pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq. and Executive Order No. 9 (Hughes 1963), or pursuant to another law authorizing the department or agency to make records confidential or exempt from disclosure.
- 9) Records of a department or agency held by the Office of Information Technology (OIT) or the State Records Storage Center of the Division of Archives and Records Management (DARM) in the Department of State, or an offsite storage facility outside of the regular business office of the agency. Such records shall remain the legal property of the department or agency and be accessible for inspection or copying only through a request to the proper custodian of the department or agency. In the event that records of a department or agency have been or shall be transferred to and accessioned by the State Archives in the Division of Archives and Records Management, all such records shall become the legal property of the State Archives, and requests for access to them shall be submitted directly to the State Archives.

### **Who is the “custodian of a government record?”**

OPRA defines “custodian of a government record” as that official designated by formal action of a public agency’s director or governing body that has custody or control of the government

records of the public agency. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1. Some large state departments have determined that they can be more responsive to requests for access to government records by designating more than one custodian. For example, the New Jersey Department of Law & Public Safety is comprised of ten divisions and four agencies; each of the divisions and agencies in Law & Public Safety designated a custodian to deal with records requests made to that division or agency.

OPRA provides that the custodian of government records in a municipality is the municipal clerk. However, OPRA does not preclude a municipality from developing reasonable and practical measures for responding to OPRA requests, which may include the designation of deputy custodians for particular types of records (most common occurrence is the Police Department).

### **What is a “public agency” under OPRA?**

Only “public agencies” are subject to the provisions of OPRA. OPRA defines a “public agency” as:

- The executive branch of state government and all independent state agencies and authorities. This includes all state colleges and universities;
- The Legislature of the State and any office, board, bureau or commission within or created by the Legislative Branch;
- All counties, municipalities, school districts, fire districts, planning and zoning boards and other county and local boards or agencies, and all independent county or local agencies and authorities established by municipal or county governments. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1.

The following agencies are **not** subject to the provisions of OPRA:

- The Judicial branch of state government or any agency officer, or employee of those branches (including the Supreme Court of New Jersey, the Superior Court of New Jersey, the municipal courts, the Administrative Office of the Courts, and the agencies, offices, and boards under their authority). The Courts have adopted their own records disclosure policies and procedures. See [www.judiciary.state.nj.us/superior/copies\\_court\\_rec.htm](http://www.judiciary.state.nj.us/superior/copies_court_rec.htm).
- Private businesses or not-for-profit entities. However, if a private business or not-for-profit entity has all or some of the following factors, such private entity *may* be subject to the provisions of OPRA:
  - (1) the entity exercises sovereign powers of government;
  - (2) the entity was created for the express purpose of redeveloping property donated to it by a municipality;

- (3) the entity has a Board of Trustees/Directors appointed by a Mayor or City Council;
- (4) there is a mandated reversion of the donated property after the completion of the project and repayment of the associated debt;
- (5) the entity has corporate bylaws requiring distribution of all assets to the donating city upon the dissolution or liquidation of the corporation;
- (6) the entity has a Disposition Agreement with the donating city that designates the city as the “agency” and the corporation as the “redeveloper” pursuant to the Local Redevelopment and Housing Law, N.J.S.A. 40A-12A-1 to -49; and
- (7) the entity has the authority to issue tax-exempt bonds for the financing of the redevelopment project.

See The Times of Trenton Publishing Corporation v. Lafayette Yard Community Development Corporation, 368 N.J. Super. 425, 846 A.2d 659 (April 2004) (Lafayette Yard Community Development Corporation is a “public agency” under OPRA), Fallstick v. Haddon Township & Haddon Township Business Partnership, Inc., GRC Complaint No. 2004-73 (October 2004) (Haddon Township Business Partnership, Inc. is a “public agency” under OPRA), and Herron v. Montclair Community Pre-K Center, GRC Complaint No. 2005-130 (September 2006) (Montclair Community Pre-K Center is a “public agency” under OPRA).

## SECTION 2 – OPRA AT WORK

### How do I submit an OPRA request?

A request for access to a government record must be in writing and hand-delivered, mailed, transmitted electronically, or otherwise conveyed to the appropriate custodian. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.g. A records request under OPRA cannot be made verbally.

Requests are to be submitted to the public agency that maintains physical custody of the requested records. For example, a request for the City of Trenton's 2011 budget would be submitted to the City of Trenton. A request for payroll records of a school business administrator would be submitted to the school district in which the administrator is employed.

Pursuant to Renna v. County of Union (App. Div. 2009), OPRA requests *should* be on the agency's official OPRA request form. However, a written request that is not on the agency's official OPRA request form cannot be denied solely because the request is not on the request form. Written requests which are not on the form must mention OPRA. Therefore, if a requestor elects not to use an agency's official OPRA request form, he/she must submit an otherwise written request that clearly identifies itself as an OPRA request.

Some public agencies may not have a dedicated fax line for their records custodians and cannot accept fax requests. Some public agencies may accept requests for access to government records over the Internet or by e-mail. The law does not require public agencies to provide new services beyond what they currently provide in order to accept records requests electronically. See Paff v. City of East Orange (App. Div. 2009) (unpublished) (holding that the custodian's refusal to accept OPRA requests via fax is reasonable but that a custodian may not exercise his/her authority under OPRA in a manner that would impose an unreasonable obstacle to the transmission of a request for a government record. Additionally, the court stated that OPRA's requirement that custodians adopt a request form authorizes custodians to direct how government records can be transmitted as specified in the form, which need not include every method of transmission mentioned in N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.g.).

**Electronically Submitted Requests:** Some public agencies have created systems that will permit a citizen to fill out an online request form and file it with the custodian over the Internet. The means of submitting a request form (mail, in-person, Internet) will not affect which records will or will not be available for access. The request form, whether paper or electronic, must contain all of the required information listed in N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.f.

Requestors must be as specific as possible when requesting records. For example, requestors must identify types of records, dates, parties to correspondence, subject matter, etc. However, requestors may not know the names of certain records. The spirit of OPRA implies that custodians assist requestors with identifying the records they are seeking, although a custodian's failure to do so is not a violation of OPRA. Requests for information or requests that ask questions are NOT valid OPRA requests.

### **Can I request records in a specific medium?**

OPRA provides that a custodian must permit access to a government record and provide a copy of the record(s) in the medium requested, if the public agency maintains the record in that medium. If the custodian does not maintain the record in the medium requested, he/she must:

- Convert the record to the medium requested; or
- Provide the record in some other meaningful medium (meaningful to the requestor). N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.d.

If the agency maintains the record in the medium requested, the custodian can only charge the actual cost of copying (e.g. the cost of the floppy disk or CD-ROM). However, a custodian may impose a special service charge related to conversion for:

- Extensive use of technology; and
- Labor for programming, clerical and supervisory assistance that may be required.

The special service charge must be based on the cost of the technology and labor actually incurred. This may include charges incurred by an outside vendor. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.c.

Before undertaking any conversion to another medium or taking other major actions that would result in the imposition of a special charge, the custodian must first inform the requestor that a special charge will be incurred and give the requestor the opportunity to accept or reject the extra fee. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.c. If the requestor objects to the special charge and refuses to pay it, the custodian may deny the request for access to the record. However, if the requestor is willing to pay for it, the agency has the responsibility to provide access to the government record in the requested format.

### **Can I specify how I want the Custodian to send me the requested records?**

A custodian must grant access to a government record by the method of delivery requested by the requestor (regular mail, fax, or e-mail). O'Shea v. Township of Fredon (Sussex), GRC Complaint No. 2007-251 (April 2008). OPRA was amended to allow the production of electronic records free of charge, except that a public agency may charge the actual cost of any needed supplies such as computer discs. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.b.

### **Can a public agency create specific OPRA hours?**

In the case of:

- A municipality having a population of 5,000 or fewer according to the most recent federal decennial census,
- A board of education having a total district enrollment of 500 or fewer, or
- A public authority having less than \$10 million in assets,

a records custodian must provide access to a government record that is authorized for public inspection or copying during not less than six regular business hours over not fewer than three business days per week, or during the public agency's regularly scheduled business hours, whichever is less. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.a.

All other agencies must process OPRA requests during their regular business hours.

### **What happens if an employee other than the custodian receives my OPRA request?**

OPRA permits a public agency to adopt one of two processes for when non-custodian officers or employees receive records requests. Any officer or employee of a public agency who receives a request for access to a government record may either:

1. Forward the request to the agency's records custodian; or
2. Direct the requestor to the agency's records custodian.

In other words, a public agency may decide to permit any employee to accept a records request to be forwarded to the appropriate custodian, or the employee may refuse to accept the request and direct the requestor to the appropriate custodian. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.h.

### **When should I expect a response to my OPRA request?**

Custodians should fulfill a request as soon as possible but not later than seven (7) business days after the request is received, provided that the record is currently available and not in storage or archived. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.i. Day One (1) is the day following the custodian's receipt of the request.

It is the GRC's position that a custodian's written response either granting access, denying access, seeking clarification or requesting an extension of time within the statutorily mandated seven (7) business days, even if said response is not on the agency's official OPRA request form, is a valid response pursuant to OPRA.

If the custodian fails to respond to the requestor within seven (7) business days after receiving a request, the failure to respond will be deemed a denial of the request. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.i.

### **When does the response time clock begin?**

The time frame to fulfill a request for access to government records under OPRA does not begin until the request form or equivalent written request has been delivered to the appropriate records custodian. Sending a records request to the wrong officer or employee may result in a delay of the fulfillment of the request. However, an agency must make the identity of the records custodian readily known to the public.

### **Can I access any records immediately?**

OPRA requires that custodians must ordinarily grant *immediate* access to budgets, bills, vouchers, contracts (including collective negotiations agreements and individual employment contracts), and public employee salary and overtime information. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.e.

Immediate access means at once, without delay. Exceptions may include instances in which the requested records are in use, in storage, or require medium conversion. In such instances, the custodian must provide access as immediately as possible. Agencies should act reasonably, however, using their best efforts to comply with this requirement.

If a custodian cannot provide immediate access to records for a legitimate reason, the custodian must reduce such reason to writing and request an extension of time to comply with the immediate statutory requirement.

### **Can the custodian take more than seven (7) business days to respond to my OPRA request?**

Custodians may seek extensions of time beyond the seven (7) business day deadline for legitimate reasons (e.g. the record is in use or in storage). N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.i. Custodians must request an extension from the requestor in writing, within the statutorily mandated seven (7) business days and provide an anticipated deadline date upon which the records will be provided. The length of the extension must be reasonable. Failure to grant or deny access by the extended deadline date results in a deemed denial of the request.

### **What should a custodian's response to my request contain?**

A proper response to an OPRA request:

- is in *writing* within seven (7) business days
- grants access, denies access, seeks clarification, or requests an extension of time
- addresses each record requested
- addresses requestor's preferred method of delivery
- if special service charge assessed, provides estimate and gives requestor opportunity to accept or reject charge
- includes a record index that identifies each record requested and the specific legal basis for a denial of access (including redactions) to each record.

Verbal responses, even if within the statutorily mandated seven (7) business days, are not valid responses under OPRA.

### **How much can the custodian charge me for my OPRA request?**

On September 10, 2010, Governor Christie signed legislation that changed OPRA's copy fee provision at N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.b. Said provision of OPRA has since been amended to provide that:

“[a] copy or copies of a government record may be purchased by any person upon payment of the fee prescribed by law or regulation. Except as otherwise provided by law or regulation, the fee assessed for the duplication of a government record embodied in the form of printed matter shall be \$0.05 per letter size page or smaller, and \$0.07 per legal size page or larger. If a public agency can demonstrate that its actual costs for duplication of a government record exceed the foregoing rates, the public agency shall be permitted to charge the actual cost of duplicating the record. The actual cost of duplicating the record, upon which all copy fees are based, shall be the cost of materials and supplies used to make a copy of the record, but shall not include the cost of labor or other overhead expenses associated with making the copy except as provided for in subsection c. of this section. Access to electronic records and non-printed materials shall be provided free of charge, but the public agency may charge for the actual costs of any needed supplies such as computer discs.” (Emphasis added). N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.b.

To fully understand the impact of this amendment to OPRA’s copy fee schedule, the Government Records Council interprets each sentence of the amended fee provision below:

1. “[a] copy or copies of a government record may be purchased by any person upon payment of the fee prescribed by law or regulation.”

This sentence means that custodians are to charge OPRA requestors any copy fees that are established by other New Jersey laws or regulations, if said fees exist. For example, N.J.S.A. 22A:4-1a sets forth specific fees for certain records filed with the New Jersey Department of Treasury (and requested from the Department of Treasury). Specifically, said statute provides that “[i]f a roll of microfilm images is requested, the State Treasurer shall collect a fee of \$1.00 for each image on the microfilm roll.” Thus, if a requestor seeks access to a microfilm roll from the Department of Treasury, the Department’s custodian must charge the fees established in N.J.S.A. 22A:4-1a. The same applies for any other records that have specific fees established in other New Jersey laws or regulations.

2. “Except as otherwise provided by law or regulation, the fee assessed for the duplication of a government record embodied in the form of printed matter shall be \$0.05 per letter size page or smaller, and \$0.07 per legal size page or larger.”

For records that do not have a specific fee established by statute (like the Treasury example above), custodians must charge a flat rate of \$0.05 per letter size (8 ½” x 11”) page or smaller, and \$0.07 per legal size (8 ½” x 14”) page or larger, *if providing a requestor with paper copies*. For example, a custodian providing access to 3 pages of printed meeting minutes on letter size pages would charge a requestor \$0.15 (\$0.05 per page for 3 pages = \$0.15).

3. “*If a public agency can demonstrate that its actual costs for duplication of a government record exceed the foregoing rates, the public agency shall be permitted to charge the actual cost of duplicating the record.* The actual cost of duplicating the record, upon which all copy fees are based, shall be the cost of materials and supplies used to make a

copy of the record, but shall not include the cost of labor or other overhead expenses associated with making the copy except as provided for in subsection c. of this section.” (Emphasis added).

It is possible that the actual cost to produce paper copies will exceed \$0.05 per letter size page or smaller and \$0.07 per legal size page or larger for some public agencies. In these instances, the OPRA amendment allows custodians to charge the actual cost of duplication, which is limited to the cost of materials and supplies used to make the copy.

#### **How to Calculate Actual Costs (only if paper copies exceed the \$0.05 and \$0.07 rates)**

- Custodians should contact their supplier to determine the cost of paper and toner. A supplier is wherever the agency obtains those materials – paper and toner (i.e. central purchasing unit, Staples, Office Depot, etc).
- Calculate or contact copying company to determine the agency’s annual copying volume (calendar or fiscal year, however the agency operates). This does NOT only include copies pertaining to OPRA requests – this is ALL copying on all copy machines in the agency for all purposes.
- Contact copying company to determine the average paper life of one toner/ink cartridge (i.e. how many pieces of paper the ink or toner should be able to copy).
- Custodians must maintain documentation of all information provided by copying company or office supplier (i.e. contracts or correspondence from purchasing agent or copying company) regarding this calculation.
- **Actual calculation is the total cost of paper purchased for 1 year (calendar or fiscal) + the total cost of toner purchased (calendar or fiscal) ÷ the annual copying volume.**

This calculation can be averaged for all copy machines in an agency that produce letter and legal copies. Special copiers, such as for color printing or blueprints copied in house, should be calculated separately.

4. “If a public agency can demonstrate that its actual costs for duplication of a government record exceed the foregoing rates, the public agency shall be permitted to charge the actual cost of duplicating the record. *The actual cost of duplicating the record, upon which all copy fees are based, shall be the cost of materials and supplies used to make a copy of the record, but shall not include the cost of labor or other overhead expenses associated with making the copy except as provided for in subsection c. of this section.*” (Emphasis added).

The reference to “subsection c.” pertains to OPRA’s special service charge provision, which is applicable in instances when fulfilling an OPRA request requires an extraordinary amount of time and effort. For guidance on how and when a special service charge applies to an OPRA request, please refer to the GRC’s “Special Service Charge” handout online at <http://www.nj.gov/grc/meetings/present/>.

The GRC strongly encourages every public agency to clearly identify its per page copy fee on its OPRA request form, whether it be the flat rates established in N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.b., or the actual cost calculated by the agency.

5. "Access to electronic records and non-printed materials shall be provided free of charge, but the public agency may charge for the actual costs of any needed supplies such as computer discs."

Records provided via e-mail and facsimile are free of charge. Custodians must charge the actual cost to provide access to all other electronic materials such as CD-ROMs, DVDs, videotapes, audiotapes, etc. No specific calculation is required to determine the actual cost of these supplies. The actual cost is the specific fee the agency paid to purchase the materials. For example, if the GRC purchased a package of 100 CD-ROMs for \$100 and provided records to a requestor on 1 CD-ROM, the actual cost of said CD-ROM is \$1.00 ( $\$100 \div 100 = \$1.00$ ).

**These changes became effective for all New Jersey public agencies on Tuesday November 9, 2010.**

#### Deposits

OPRA permits the custodian to require a deposit against costs for reproducing records sought from anonymous requestors whenever the custodian anticipates that reproduction cost for the records requested will exceed \$5.00. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.f.

#### **What is a special service charge?**

In certain circumstances, an agency may collect a special service charge in addition to the actual cost of duplicating records embodied in printed form. Where the nature, format, manner of collection, or volume of records to be inspected or copied is such that:

- The record cannot be reproduced using ordinary equipment, in ordinary business size (e.g. a map or plan); or
- Complying with the request involves an extraordinary expenditure of time and effort,

the agency may assess a special service charge that must be reasonable and based on actual direct cost. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.c. Actual direct cost means hourly rate of the lowest level employee capable of fulfilling the request (no fringe benefits).

What warrants an imposition of a special service charge is extremely subjective and the determination is made on a case-by-case basis. No special service charges can be established in advance by ordinance.

For the Government Records Council to determine (1) whether a special service charge is warranted and (2) whether the special service charge the custodian assessed is reasonable, the custodian must provide answers to the following questions (after a Denial of Access Complaint is filed):

1. What records are requested?
2. Give a general nature description and number of the government records requested.
3. What is the period of time over which the records extend?
4. Are some or all of the records sought archived or in storage?
5. What is the size of the agency (total number of employees)?
6. What is the number of employees available to accommodate the records request?
7. To what extent do the requested records have to be redacted?
8. What is the level of personnel, hourly rate and number of hours, if any, required for a government employee to locate, retrieve and assemble the records for copying?
9. What is the level of personnel, hourly rate and number of hours, if any, required for a government employee to monitor the inspection or examination of the records requested?
10. What is the level of personnel, hourly rate and number of hours, if any, required for a government employee to return records to their original storage place?
11. What is the reason that the agency employed, or intends to employ, the particular level of personnel to accommodate the records request?
12. Who (name and job title) in the agency will perform the work associated with the records request and that person's hourly rate?
13. What is the availability of information technology and copying capabilities?
14. Give a detailed estimate categorizing the hours needed to identify, copy or prepare for inspection, produce and return the requested documents.

The custodian must notify the requestor in advance of the special service charge. The requestor has the right to disagree with the special service charge. If the custodian and requestor cannot reach an agreement regarding the special service charge, the request is considered denied. Complainants may challenge a custodian's special service charge by filing a Denial of Access Complaint with the Government Records Council or filing an action in the Superior Court of New Jersey.

### **Can the custodian "black out" portions of the records I requested?**

Under OPRA, a government record that is otherwise publicly accessible may contain non-disclosable information that should be redacted. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.g. Redaction means editing a

record to prevent public viewing of material that cannot lawfully be disclosed. Words, sentences, paragraphs, or whole pages may be subject to redaction.

#### How Custodians Can Redact

If a record contains material that must be redacted, such as a social security number, redaction *must be accomplished by using a visually obvious method that shows the requestor the specific location of any redacted material in the record*. For example, if redacting a social security number or similar type of small-scale redaction, custodians should:

Make a paper copy of the original record and manually "black out" the information on the copy with a dark colored marker. Then provide a copy of the blacked-out record to the requestor.

The blacked out area shows where information was redacted, while the double copying ensures that the requestor will not be able to "see-through" to the original, non-accessible text. If "white-out" correction fluid is used to redact material, some visual symbol should be placed in the space formerly occupied by the redacted material to show the location of redacted material.

If full pages are to be redacted, the custodian should give the requestor a visible indication that a particular page of that record is being redacted, such as a blank sheet bearing the words "Page Redacted" or a written list of the specific page numbers being withheld. The purpose is to provide formal notification to the requestor making it clear that material was redacted and is not being provided.

If an electronic document is subject to redaction (i.e., word processing or Adobe Acrobat files), custodians should be sure to delete the material being redacted and insert in place of the redacted material asterisks to obviously indicate the redaction. Techniques such as "hiding" text or changing its color so it is invisible should not be used as sophisticated computer users can detect the changes and potentially undo the "hiding" functions.

#### Explaining Why a Redaction is Made

When redactions are made to a record, the custodian can use either the request form to explain why parts of a record are redacted, or use a separate document, depending on the circumstances, and must also refer to the OPRA exception which allows the redaction. This principle also applies if pages of information are redacted. The bottom line is that the requestor has a right to know the reason for the redaction, and the custodian has the responsibility to provide an explanation.

Custodians must identify the legal basis for **each** redaction.

#### **What is a broad and/or unclear request?**

If a request does not name specifically identifiable records or is overly broad, a custodian may deny access pursuant to the following court decisions: MAG Entertainment, LLC v. Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J.Super. 534 (App. Div. 2005), Bent v. Stafford Police

Department, 381 N.J. Super. 30 (App. Div. 2005), New Jersey Builders Association v. New Jersey Council on Affordable Housing, 390 N.J. Super. 166 (App. Div. 2007), and Schuler v. Borough of Bloomsbury, GRC Complaint No. 2007-151 (February 2009).

A custodian may also seek clarification of a broad or unclear request. The custodian's request for clarification must be in writing, within seven (7) business days of receipt of the request. If a custodian seeks clarification of an OPRA request, the response time clock stops until the requestor provides a response to the custodian.

Example of an overly broad request: "Any and all records related to the construction of the new high school."

The term "records" does not reasonably identify a specific government record.

Example of a valid request: "Any and all e-mails between Jane Doe and John Smith regarding the construction of the new high school from January 1, 2009 to February 28, 2009."

This request identifies a specific type of record, parties to the correspondence, dates and subject matter.

A custodian is obligated to **search** her files to **find** the identifiable government records listed in the Complainant's OPRA request. A custodian is not required to **research** her files to figure out which records, if any, might be responsive to a broad and unclear OPRA request.

### **What is a substantial disruption to agency operations?**

If a request for access to a government record would substantially disrupt agency operations, the custodian may deny access to the record only **after** first attempting to reach a reasonable solution with the requestor that accommodates the interests of both the requestor and the agency. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.g.

This is a subjective determination based on an agency's resources available to fulfill a request.

Example: Caggiano v. NJ Dept. of Law & Public Safety, Div. of Consumer Affairs, GRC Complaint No. 2007-69 (September 2007). The Custodian certified that an extended review of records as contemplated by the Complainant (for approximately a week) would substantially disrupt agency operations by requiring the extended attendance of a Division of Consumer Affairs employee and a NJ State Police Officer at the Complainant's inspection of the requested records. The Council stated that:

"[t]he Custodian has reasonably offered to provide the Complainant with copies of all the records responsive upon payment of the statutory copying rates, which the Complainant has declined. The Custodian has also reasonably offered the Complainant two (2) hours to inspect the seven hundred forty-five (745) pages responsive to the Complainant's request, of which the Custodian states a substantial portion are records which the Complainant himself submitted to the Division.

Additionally, the Custodian has reasonably offered to accommodate the Complainant's request by charging a special service charge for the hourly rate of a Division of Consumer Affairs employee to monitor the Complainant's inspection of the requested records in the event that said inspection exceeds two (2) hours. Further, the Custodian has reasonably offered to copy the remaining records at the OPRA copying costs in the event the Complainant exceeds a reasonable amount of time for the record inspection, which the Custodian states is one (1) business day. However, the Complainant objects to paying any inspection fees, as well as a two (2) hour inspection time limit."

The Council held that "because the Custodian has made numerous attempts to reasonably accommodate the Complainant's request but has been rejected by the Complainant, the Custodian has not unlawfully denied access to the requested record under N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.c. and N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.g.

### **Can a custodian deny me access to government records?**

Yes. There are 24 specific exemptions to public access contained in OPRA. These exemptions are listed in Section 1 of this guide. If a record requested, or portions of a record requested, fit into any of OPRA's 24 exemptions, the custodian may deny access.

If the custodian is unable to comply with a request for access, the custodian must indicate the specific reason for denying access on the request form and promptly return a copy to the requestor. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.g. The form must be signed and dated by the custodian, as it may serve as the basis for an appeal by the requestor to Superior Court or the Government Records Council. A custodian's response may be provided in another written format other than on the OPRA request form.

When responding to an OPRA request, a custodian must provide a response to each record requested.

### **What can I do if a custodian denies me access to government records?**

OPRA provides that a person who is denied access to a government record can choose:

1. to file suit in Superior Court; or
2. to file a complaint with the Government Records Council. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6.

A requestor cannot do both.

In Superior Court, a complaint must be filed within 45 days of the denial of access (Mason v. City of Hoboken, 196 NJ 51 (2008)). There is no statute of limitations for filing a Denial of Access Complaint with the GRC.

### **How are complaints filed?**

To start a summary (expedited) lawsuit in the New Jersey Superior Court, a written complaint and an order to show cause must be prepared and filed with the court. The court requires a filing fee and the requestor must serve the lawsuit papers on the appropriate public official(s).

The court will schedule a hearing and resolve the dispute. Decisions may be appealed to the Appellate Division of the New Jersey Superior Court. Successful plaintiffs may be entitled to reasonable attorney fees. Plaintiffs should consider consulting with an attorney to learn about initiating and pursuing lawsuits in the New Jersey Superior Court.

The process for filing a complaint with the Government Records Council is described in Section 3 of this guide.

## **SECTION 3 – THE GRC**

### **What is the Government Records Council?**

OPRA established the Government Records Council (GRC) in the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs.

The members of the Government Records Council are the Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs or the Commissioner's designee; the Commissioner of the Department of Education or the Commissioner's designee; and three public members appointed by the Governor, with the advice and consent of the Senate, not more than two of whom shall be of the same political party. A public member shall not hold any other state or local elected or appointed office or employment while serving as a member of the Council.

OPRA permits the Government Records Council to employ an executive director and such professional and clerical staff as is necessary to help it carry out its functions.

### **What are the duties of the Government Records Council?**

The Government Records Council has the statutory responsibility to:

- Establish an informal mediation program to facilitate the resolution of disputes regarding access to government records;
- Receive, hear, review, and adjudicate a complaint filed by any person concerning a denial of access to a government record by a records custodian;
- Issue advisory opinions, on its own initiative, as to whether a particular type of record is a government record which is accessible to the public;
- Prepare guidelines and an informational pamphlet for use by records custodians in complying with the law governing access to public records;
- Prepare an informational pamphlet explaining the public's right of access to government records and the methods for resolving disputes regarding access, which records custodians shall make available to persons requesting access to a government record;
- Prepare lists for use by records custodians of the types of records in the possession of public agencies which are government records;
- Make training opportunities available for records custodians and other public officers and employees to explain the law governing access to public records; and
- Operate an informational Web site and a toll-free help-line staffed by knowledgeable employees of the Council during regular business hours which will enable any person, including records custodians, to call for information regarding the law governing access to public records and allow any person to request mediation or to file a complaint with the Government Records Council when access has been denied.

### **What is the scope of the GRC's authority?**

- The GRC only has authority over access to records maintained by a public agency at the time of an OPRA request.

- The GRC lacks authority over the accuracy of record content.
- The GRC does not have authority over the condition of records.
- The GRC lacks authority over records retention. For retention schedules, contact the New Jersey Department of State, Division of Archives and Records Management (DARM).
- The GRC does not have jurisdiction over the Judicial or Legislative Branches of State Government or any agency, officer, or employee of those branches.
- The GRC does not have authority over other types of records requests (administrative, common law, discovery).
- The GRC does not have authority over how a custodian uses his/her legal counsel.
- The GRC cannot adjudicate a complaint currently pending or previously adjudicated in New Jersey Superior Court.

### **What can the Government Records Council do for me?**

The Government Records Council can provide guidance regarding the accessibility of government records. If you want to request a specific record or you have been denied access to a specific record, the GRC can inform you about any past decisions regarding the same or similar records, if any such cases exist. The GRC can also provide guidance regarding the request process and what to expect once an OPRA request is submitted. Also, the GRC can investigate your allegation of a denial of access should you decide to file an official complaint.

### **How is a Denial of Access Complaint filed and handled?**

A complaint to the Government Records Council must be in writing on the official Denial of Access Complaint form. The complaint should set forth the facts regarding the request for access to the government records, describing the specific records requested, and the circumstances under which the records were requested, and the denial of access by the records custodian of the public agency. Complaint forms are available from the Council office or from the Council's website at [www.state.nj.us/grc/register/](http://www.state.nj.us/grc/register/).

Upon receipt of a complaint, the Government Records Council offers the parties the opportunity to resolve the dispute through mediation before a neutral mediator. Mediation is an informal, non-adversarial process having the objective of helping the parties reach a mutually acceptable, voluntary agreement.

The mediator will help the parties to identify issues, will encourage joint problem-solving, and will explore settlement alternatives with the parties.

If any party declines mediation or if mediation fails to resolve the matter to the satisfaction of the parties, the Government Records Council will initiate an investigation concerning the facts and circumstances set forth in the complaint.

At the request of the Government Records Council, the public agency must provide a Statement of Information setting forth the facts regarding the request for access to the government records, describing the specifics of the custodian's denial to those records.

### **What happens when the Government Records Council starts investigating a complaint?**

All proceedings of the Government Records Council are conducted as expeditiously as possible.

*Step 1:* The Council must decide whether the complaint is within its jurisdiction or whether the complaint is frivolous or without any reasonable factual basis.

*Step 2:* If the Council concludes that the complaint is outside its jurisdiction or that the complaint is frivolous or without factual basis, it will issue a decision in writing to dismiss the complaint. A copy of the Council's decision is sent to the complainant and the records custodian.

*Step 3:* If the Council determines that the complaint is within its jurisdiction and is not frivolous and has a factual basis, the Council will notify the records custodian of the nature of the complaint and the facts and circumstances set forth in the complaint.

*Step 4:* The custodian will have the opportunity to provide the Council with a response containing information concerning the complaint.

*Step 5:* If the Council is able to make a determination about whether a record should be provided based upon the complaint and the custodian's response, the Council will issue a decision in writing and send it to the complainant and the records custodian.

*Step 6:* If the Council is unable to make a determination about whether a record should be provided based solely upon the submissions, the Council may conduct a hearing on the matter at its discretion. The hearing will be held in conformity with the rules and regulations for hearings by a state agency in contested cases under the Administrative Procedure Act (N.J.S.A. 52:14B-1 et seq.), when they are applicable.

*Step 7:* Following the hearing, the Council will, by a majority vote of its members, render a decision as to whether the government record in question, or a portion of it, must be made available for public access to the requestor.

*Step 8:* If the Council determines by a majority vote that a custodian **knowingly** and **willfully** violated OPRA and is found to have **unreasonably** denied access under the **totality of the circumstances**, the Council will impose penalties provided for under OPRA.

*Step 9:* A final decision of the Council may be appealed to the Appellate Division of the New Jersey Superior Court.

Meetings held by the Council are subject to the Open Public Meetings Act. The Council may move into closed session during that portion of any proceeding in which the contents of a contested record would be disclosed.

Finally, the Council will not charge any party a fee in regard to complaints filed with the Council.

## **What else should I know about Council hearings and actions?**

### Prevailing Party Attorney's Fees

If represented by counsel, a requestor who prevails in any proceeding shall be entitled to a reasonable attorney's fee. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6.

Pursuant to Teeters v. DYFS, 387 N.J. Super. 423 (App.Div. 2006), a complainant is a "prevailing party" if he/she achieves the desired result because the complaint brought about a change (voluntary or otherwise) in the custodian's conduct. Also, when the requestor is successful (or partially successful) via a judicial decree, a quasi-judicial determination, or a settlement of the parties that indicates access was improperly denied and the requested records are disclosed.

Additionally, pursuant to Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51 (2008), a complainant is a "prevailing party" if he/she can demonstrate:

1. a factual causal nexus between plaintiff's litigation and the relief ultimately achieved; and
2. that the relief ultimately secured by plaintiffs had a basis in law.

If the decision of the public agency to deny access to the requested record is upheld, the public agency is not entitled to an attorney's fee from the requestor under OPRA.

### Knowing and Willful Penalty

A public official, officer, employee, or custodian who knowingly and willfully violates OPRA and is found to have unreasonably denied access under the totality of the circumstances shall be subject to a civil penalty of \$1,000 for an initial violation, \$2,500 for a second violation, and \$5,000 for a third violation that occurs within 10 years of an initial violation. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-11. The penalty shall be collected and enforced in proceedings in accordance with the Penalty Enforcement Law of 1999.

An employee other than the custodian may be assessed a penalty. Appropriate disciplinary proceedings may be initiated against a public official, officer, employee, or custodian against whom a penalty has been imposed.

### GRC's Regulations

For more information about the rules pertaining to the GRC's complaint process, see the GRC's promulgated regulations (N.J.A.C. 5:105 (2008)) on our website at [www.state.nj.us/grc/home/rules/pdf/Promulgated\\_Regulations.pdf](http://www.state.nj.us/grc/home/rules/pdf/Promulgated_Regulations.pdf).

## **SECTION 4 – SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES**

### **Can I have access to government records under OPRA for commercial use?**

Yes. There is no restriction against the commercial use of government records under OPRA. See Spaulding v. County of Passaic, GRC Complaint No. 2004-199 (September 2006) and Burnett v. County of Bergen, 198 N.J. 408 (2009).

### **How many OPRA requests can I make to one agency?**

There is no restriction on the number of OPRA requests one person can submit to a particular agency.

### **Can I bring my own photocopier into an agency's office to make copies?**

A custodian may, in his or her discretion, allow the use of personal photocopiers by requestors depending upon factors including, but not limited to, the specific circumstances of the request, the particular documents requested, the office hours, the available space within the office, the availability of personnel, the availability of appropriate electrical outlets, the consumption of energy, the need to preserve the security of public records or documents and protect them from damage, or other legitimate concerns. A custodian may require that photocopying be done on the agency's photocopier if to allow otherwise would disrupt operations, interfere with the security of public records, or expose records to potential damage.

### **Can the custodian provide on-site inspection but deny copies of records requested?**

No. If a record is subject to public access under OPRA, the record is available for public inspection as well as copying. Also, copyright law does not prohibit access to records that are otherwise accessible under OPRA.

### **Can I request the same records more than once?**

In Bart v. City of Paterson Housing Authority, 403 N.J. Super. 609 (App. Div. 2008), the Appellate Division held that a complainant could not have been denied access to a requested record if he already had in his possession at the time of the OPRA request the document he sought pursuant to OPRA. The Appellate Division noted that requiring a custodian to duplicate another copy of the requested record and send it to the complainant does not advance the purpose of OPRA, which is to ensure an informed citizenry.

**It is important to note that the court's findings turned on the specific facts of this case. Specifically, the requestor attached a copy of the requested record to his OPRA request, thus proving that he was already in possession of said record at the time of his request. As such, a custodian cannot deny access solely because he/she previously provided the records to the requestor. The custodian must have evidence that the requestor is in possession of the records at the time of the OPRA request.**