

SENATE STAFF ANALYSIS AND ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

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

Prepared By: Community Affairs Committee

BILL: CS/SB 1922

SPONSOR: Community Affairs Committee and Senator Sebesta

SUBJECT: Public Records Exemption

DATE: April 19, 2005

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Vickers	Yeatman	CA	Fav/CS
2.			GO	
3.			RC	
4.				
5.				
6.				

I. Summary:

Current law provides a public records and public meetings exemption for the Commission on Ethics and a county-established Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, with regards to information concerning a complaint or preliminary investigation conducted by those commissions. This CS extends the current exemption to a Commission on Ethics and Public Trust that is established by a municipality. It provides for future review and repeal of the exemptions on October 2, 2010, and provides a statement of public necessity.

This committee substitute (CS) substantially amends section 112.324 of the Florida Statutes. This bill also creates unnumbered sections of the Florida Statutes.

II. Present Situation:

Commission on Ethics - Section 112.320, F.S., provides that the Commission on Ethics is to serve as guardian of the standards of conduct for officers and employees of the state, and of a county, city, or other political subdivision of the state. It also serves as the independent code of ethics commission provided for in the State Constitution.¹ The nine-member Commission is appointed by the Governor and the presiding officers of the Senate and House of Representatives, and serves without compensation. Section 112.322, F.S., establishes the duties and powers of the Commission. Chief among these responsibilities is the duty to receive and investigate sworn complaints of violation of the code of ethics and of any other breach of the public trust, as provided in s. 8(f), Art. II of the State Constitution, including investigation of all facts and parties materially related to the complaint. Florida law also authorizes counties and municipalities to establish a Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.

¹ Section 8(f), Art. II of the State Constitution.

Section 112.324, F.S., provides a public records exemption for a complaint or any records relating to the complaint or to any preliminary investigation by the Commission or a county established Commission on Ethics and Public Trust. In addition, any proceedings regarding a complaint or preliminary investigation are exempt from public meetings requirements. Such exemptions no longer apply when the:

- Complaint is dismissed as legally insufficient;
- Alleged violator requests in writing that the records and proceedings be made public; or
- Commission or Commission on Ethics and Public Trust determines there is probable cause to believe that a violation has occurred.

The public records and public meetings exemptions do not currently apply to a municipally established Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.

Public Records Requirements - Article I, s. 24 of the State Constitution, provides every person with the right to inspect or copy any public record made or received in connection with the official business of any public body, officer, or employee of the state, or persons acting on their behalf. The section specifically includes the legislative, executive, and judicial branches and each agency or department created under them. It also includes counties, municipalities, and districts, as well as constitutional officers, boards, and commissions or entities created pursuant to law or the State Constitution.

The term “public records” has been defined by the Legislature in s. 19.011(1), F.S., to include:

. . . all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, films, sound recordings, data processing software, or other material, regardless of the physical form, characteristics, or means of transmission, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance or in connection with the transaction of official business by any agency.

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

The State Constitution authorizes exemptions to open government requirements and establishes the means by which these exemptions are to be established. Under Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution, the Legislature may provide by general law for the exemption of records. A law enacting an exemption must state with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption, be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law, relate to one subject, and contain only exemptions to public records or meetings requirements. The law enacting an exemption may contain provisions governing enforcement.

Exemptions to public records requirements are strictly construed because the general purpose of open records requirements is to allow Florida’s citizens to discover the actions of their government. *Christy v. Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office*, 698 So.2d 1365, 1366 (Fla. 4th

DCA 1997). The Public Records Act is liberally construed in favor of open government, and exemptions from disclosure are to be narrowly construed so they are limited to their stated purpose. *Krischer v. D'Amato*, 674 So.2d 909, 911 (Fla. 4th DCA 1996); *Seminole County v. Wood*, 512 So.2d 1000, 1002 (Fla. 5th DCA 1987), review denied, 520 So.2d 586 (Fla. 1988); *Tribune Company v. Public Records*, 493 So.2d 480, 483 (Fla. 2d DCA 1986), review denied sub nom., *Gillum v. Tribune Company*, 503 So.2d 327 (Fla. 1987).

There is a difference between records that the Legislature has made exempt from public inspection and those that are exempt and confidential. If the Legislature makes certain records confidential, with no provision for its release such that its confidential status will be maintained, such information may not be released by an agency to anyone other than to the persons or entities designated in the statute. Attorney General Opinion 85-625. If a record is not made confidential but is simply exempt from mandatory disclosure requirements, an agency is not prohibited from disclosing the record in all circumstances. *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So.2d 683, 687 (Fla. 5th DCA), review denied, 589 So.2d 289 (Fla. 1991).

Under s. 119.10, F.S., any public officer violating any provision of this chapter is guilty of a noncriminal infraction, punishable by a fine not exceeding \$500. In addition, any person willfully and knowingly violating any provision of the chapter is guilty of a first degree misdemeanor, punishable by potential imprisonment not exceeding one year and a fine not exceeding \$1,000. Section 119.02, F.S., also provides a first degree misdemeanor penalty for public officers who knowingly violate the provisions of s. 119.07(1), F.S., relating to the right to inspect public records, as well as suspension and removal or impeachment from office.

An exemption from disclosure requirements does not render a record automatically privileged for discovery purposes under the Florida Rules of Civil Procedure. *Department of Professional Regulation v. Spiva*, 478 So.2d 382 (Fla. 1st DCA 1985). For example, the Fourth District Court of Appeal has found that an exemption for active criminal investigative information did not override discovery authorized by the Rules of Juvenile Procedure and permitted a mother who was a party to a dependency proceeding involving her daughter to inspect the criminal investigative records relating to the death of her infant. *B.B. v. Department of Children and Family Services*, 731 So.2d 30 (Fla. 4th DCA 1999). The Second District Court of Appeal also has held that records that are exempt from public inspection may be subject to discovery in a civil action upon a showing of exceptional circumstances and if the trial court takes all precautions to ensure the confidentiality of the records. *Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles v. Krejci Company Inc.*, 570 So.2d 1322 (Fla. 2d DCA 1990).

In *B.B.*, *infra*, at 34, the Court noted with regard to criminal discovery the following:

In the context of a criminal proceeding, the first district has indicated that “the provisions of Section 119.07, Florida Statutes, are not intended to limit the effect of Rule 3.220, the discovery provisions of the Florida Rules of Criminal Procedure,” so that a public records exemption cannot limit a criminal defendant’s access to discovery. *Ivester v. State*, 398 So.2d 926, 931 (Fla. 1st DCA 1981). Moreover, as the Supreme Court just reiterated in *Henderson v. State*, No. 92,885, 745 So.2d ----, 1999 WL 90142 (Fla. Feb. 18, 1999), “we do not equate the acquisition of public documents under chapter 119 with the rights of

discovery afforded a litigant by judicially created rules of procedure.” Slip op. at 6, --- So.2d ---- (quoting *Wait v. Florida Power & Light Co.*, 372 So.2d 420, 425 (Fla.1979)).

In a footnote, (*B.B.*, *infra*, at 34 n. 4) the Court also noted:

We note that section 119.07(8), Florida Statutes (1997), provides that section 119.07 is “not intended to expand or limit the provisions of Rule 3.220, Florida Rules of Criminal Procedure, regarding the right and extent of discovery by the state or by a defendant in a criminal prosecution....”

Section 119.15, F.S., the Open Government Sunset Review Act of 1995, establishes a review and repeal process for exemptions to public records or meetings requirements. Under s. 119.15(3)(a), F.S., a law that enacts a new exemption or substantially amends an existing exemption must state that the exemption is repealed at the end of 5 years. Further, a law that enacts or substantially amends an exemption must state that the exemption must be reviewed by the Legislature before the scheduled repeal date. An exemption is substantially amended if the amendment expands the scope of the exemption to include more records or information or to include meetings as well as records. An exemption is not substantially amended if the amendment narrows the scope of the exemption.

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

Under the requirements of the Open Government Sunset Review Act, an exemption is to be maintained only if:

- (a) The exempted record or meeting is of a sensitive, personal nature concerning individuals;
- (b) The exemption is necessary for the effective and efficient administration of a governmental program; or
- (c) The exemption affects confidential information concerning an entity.

As part of the review process, s. 119.15(4)(a), F.S., requires the consideration of the following specific questions:

- (a) What specific records or meetings are affected by the exemption?
- (b) Whom does the exemption uniquely affect, as opposed to the general public?
- (c) What is the identifiable public purpose or goal of the exemption?
- (d) Can the information contained in the records or discussed in the meeting be readily obtained by alternative means? If so, how?

Further, under the Open Government Sunset Review Act, an exemption may be created or maintained only if it serves an identifiable public purpose. An identifiable public purpose is served if the exemption:

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

Further, the exemption must be no broader than is necessary to meet the public purpose it serves. The Legislature must find that the purpose is sufficiently compelling to override the strong public policy of open government and cannot be accomplished without the exemption.

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1 amends s. 112.324, F.S., to create a public records and meetings exemption for a Commission on Ethics and Public Trust established by a municipality. In addition, the CS provides for the future review and repeal of the exemption on October 2, 2010, pursuant to the Open Government Sunset Review Act of 1995.

Section 2 provides a statement of public necessity for protecting certain information concerning individuals under investigation for alleged violations of part III of ch. 112, F.S., the Code of Ethics for Public Officers and Employees, or any other alleged breach of the public trust within the jurisdiction of a Commission on Ethics and Public Trust established by a municipality.

Section 3 provides the CS shall take effect upon becoming a law.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. Other Constitutional Issues:

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution, requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for passage of a newly created public records or public meetings exemption. Thus, the CS requires a two-thirds vote for passage.

V. Economic Impact and Fiscal Note:**A. Tax/Fee Issues:**

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

Compliance with public records requirements has a fiscal impact, though unquantifiable. Government employees must locate requested records and must examine every requested record to determine if a public records exemption prohibits release of all or part of a record.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Summary of Amendments:

None.

This Senate staff analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's sponsor or the Florida Senate.
