

**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 Banking and Insurance Committee

BILL: SB 1576

INTRODUCER: Senator Fasano

SUBJECT: Public Records

DATE: March 14, 2010

REVISED: \_\_\_\_\_

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Snider	Burgess	BI	<b>Favorable</b>
2.			GO	
3.			RC	
4.				
5.				
6.				

**I. Summary:**

This bill creates a new exemption from public records law for credit history information and credit scores held by the Office of Financial Regulation (OFR) for licensure purposes under ch. 494, F.S. pursuant to the Federal Secure and Fair Enforcement for Mortgage Licensing (S.A.F.E.) Act of 2008.

The bill provides that the confidentiality provisions of Part I, ch. 494, F.S. be contained within a single section by moving the existing public records exemption for “all audited financial statements” currently found s. 494.0021, F.S. into s. 494.00125, F.S.

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, this bill requires a two-thirds vote for passage. This bill also provides for repeal of the exemption on October 2, 2015, unless reviewed and saved from repeal by the Legislature. The bill provides a public necessity statement as required by the State Constitution.

This bill substantially amends the following sections of the Florida Statutes: 494.00125, 494.0021.

## II. Present Situation:

### Background on Florida's Public Records Laws

Florida has a long history of providing public access to government records. The Legislature enacted the first public records law in 1892.<sup>1</sup> More comprehensive legislation was adopted in 1967 with the enactment of ch. 119, F.S.

In 1992, Floridians adopted an amendment to the State Constitution that raised the statutory right of access to public records to a constitutional level.<sup>2</sup> Article I, s. 24 of the State Constitution provides that:

Every person<sup>3</sup> has 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, except with respect to records exempted pursuant to this section or specifically made confidential by this Constitution.

The Public Records Act<sup>4</sup> specifies conditions under which access must be provided to agency<sup>5</sup> records. Unless specifically exempted, all agency records are available for public inspection. The term "public record" is broadly defined 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.<sup>6</sup>

The Florida Supreme Court has interpreted this definition to encompass all materials prepared in connection with official agency business which are intended to perpetuate, communicate, or formalize knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Such materials, regardless of whether they are in final form, are open for public inspection unless specifically exempted.<sup>8</sup>

Only the Legislature is authorized to create exemptions.<sup>9</sup> An exemption must be created in general law, must state the public necessity justifying it, and must not be broader than necessary to meet that public necessity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Section 1390, 1391 F.S. (Rev. 1892).

<sup>2</sup> Article I, s. 24 of the State Constitution.

<sup>3</sup> Section 1.01(3) F.S., defines "person" to include individuals, children, firms, associations, joint adventures, partnerships, estates, trusts, business trusts, syndicates, fiduciaries, corporations, and all other groups or combinations.

<sup>4</sup> Chapter 119, F.S.

<sup>5</sup> The word "agency" is defined in s. 119.011(2), to mean "...any state, county, district authority, or municipal officer, department, division, board, bureau, commission, or other separate unit of government created or established by law, including, for the purposes of 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."

<sup>6</sup> Section 119.011(12), F.S.

<sup>7</sup> *Shevin v. Byron, Harless, Schaffer, Reid and Associates, Inc.*, 379 So.2d 633, 640 (Fla. 1980).

<sup>8</sup> *Wait v. Florida Power & Light Co.*, 372 So.2d 420 (Fla. 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution.

The Open Government Sunset Review Act<sup>11</sup> provides for the systematic review, through a 5-year cycle ending October 2 of the fifth year following enactment, of exemptions. By June 1, the Division of Statutory Revision of the Office of Legislative Services must certify to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives the language and statutory citation of each exemption scheduled for repeal the following year.

Under the Public Records Act, an exemption may be created, revised, or maintained only if it serves an identifiable public purpose and if the exemption is no broader than necessary to meet the public purpose it serves. An identifiable public purpose is served if the exemption meets one of three specified criteria and if the Legislature finds that the purpose is sufficiently compelling to override the strong public policy of open government and cannot be accomplished without the exemption. The three statutory criteria are:

1. If the exemption allows the state or its political subdivisions to effectively and efficiently administer a governmental program, which administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;
2. If the exemption protects information of a sensitive personal nature concerning individuals, the release of which would be defamatory or cause unwarranted damage to the good name or reputation of such individuals or would jeopardize their safety; or
3. If the exemption protects information of a confidential nature concerning entities, including, but not limited to, a formula, pattern, device, combination of devices, or compilation of information that is used to protect or further a business advantage over those who do not know or use it, the disclosure of which would injure the affected entity in the marketplace.<sup>12</sup>

The Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008<sup>13</sup> was enacted on July 30, 2008. Title V of this act is titled the “Secure and Fair Enforcement for Mortgage Licensing Act of 2008” or “S.A.F.E. Mortgage Licensing Act of 2008” (S.A.F.E.). The intent of S.A.F.E. is to provide greater accountability and regulation of loan originators, defined to include mortgage brokers and lenders, and enhance consumer protections by:

- Providing uniform license applications and reporting requirements for state-licensed loan originators.
- Providing increased accountability and tracking of loan originators.
- Enhancing consumer protections and supporting anti-fraud measures.
- Establishing a means by which residential mortgage loan originators would, to the greatest extent possible, be required to act in the best interests of the consumer.
- Facilitating responsible behavior in the subprime mortgage marketplace and provides comprehensive training and examination requirements related to subprime mortgage lending.

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<sup>10</sup> *Memorial Hospital-West Volusia v. News-Journal Corporation*, 729 So.2d 373, 380 (Fla. 1999); *Halifax Hospital Medical Center v. News-Journal Corporation*, 724 So.2d 567, 568-69 (Fla. 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Section 119.15, F.S.

<sup>12</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S.

<sup>13</sup> Pub. L. 110-289, 122 Stat. 2654 (2008).

- Facilitating the collection and disbursement of consumer complaints on behalf of State and Federal mortgage regulators.<sup>14</sup>

The act creates national minimum standards for the licensure and regulation of loan originators and requires states to bring their policies and procedures into compliance. The S.A.F.E. Act imposes the following requirements, among others, for licensure of loan originators:

- Loan originators must:
  - undergo state licensure and annual renewal.
  - provide fingerprints to the regulator for submission to any state or national entity authorized to conduct a criminal background check.
  - allow the regulator to obtain a credit report.
- Loan originators must never have had their license revoked, nor been convicted of a felony in the previous seven years.

The National Mortgage Licensing System and Registry (registry) is a national registration system created under the S.A.F.E. Act containing information on loan originators.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of the registry is to:

- Create a common information pool on loan originators among federal and state regulators;
- Make public the employment history of loan originators; and,
- Make public the history of disciplinary and enforcement actions against loan originators.

The federal act creates common confidentiality standards for the federal and state regulators who participate in the registry, which collects a common pool of information from each participant. Except as otherwise provided, any requirement under federal or state law bestowing privacy or confidentiality on any information or material provided to the registry still applies once that information or material is placed in the registry. This information and material may be shared with all state and federal regulatory officials with mortgage industry oversight authority without the loss of privilege or the original confidentiality protection under federal or state law that conferred it. Any state law in conflict with this standard is superseded to the extent it provides less confidentiality or privilege.<sup>16</sup> These requirements do not apply to whatever material or information is in the registry regarding a loan originator's employment history, or the loan originator's publicly adjudicated disciplinary and enforcement history.<sup>17</sup>

In 2009, the Legislature enacted and the Governor approved legislation<sup>18</sup> bringing the state into compliance with the S.A.F.E. Mortgage Licensing Act of 2008. Commencing October 1, 2010, the OFR will begin accepting and processing loan originator license applications. This process includes a review of the applicant's credit report and credit information which may be contained

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<sup>14</sup> Title V, sec. 1502.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Title V, sec. 1512(a)-(c).

<sup>17</sup> Title V, sec. 1512(d).

<sup>18</sup> Chapter 2009-241, Laws of Florida.

within the registry. If the OFR notes specific items of concern, the applicant is notified, in writing, and provided an opportunity to explain the circumstances surrounding the item and provide any information that the applicant believes is relevant.

### III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

**Section 1.** This section makes technical and clarifying changes to subsection (1) of s. 494.00125, F.S., which contains the public records exemption for information relative to an investigation or examination by the OFR pursuant to ch. 494, F.S. (Mortgage Brokerage and Mortgage Lending).

It moves the existing language in s. 494.0021, F.S., which creates a public records exemption for “all audited financial statements” and places that language in the newly created s. 494.00125(2), F.S.

The bill creates a new public records exemption for credit history information and credit scores held by the OFR for licensing purposes pursuant to ch. 494, F.S. This would include, but not be limited to:

- Credit reports
- Credit scores
- Correspondence seeking, providing, or clarifying credit history information
- Documentation regarding credit history information
- Information and material placed in the registry pursuant to the requirements of other state or federal law, and not under the requirements of ch. 494, F.S., which is privileged or confidential under other state or federal law

The bill provides for compliance with the confidentiality requirements of the S.A.F.E. Mortgage Licensing Act of 2008 by ensuring that other state or federal laws governing confidentiality are not compromised. In addition, it provides for maintaining the confidentiality of a Florida applicant’s information provided to or placed in the registry.

This exemption does not prevent the OFR from sharing the information and materials with those federal entities or entities of other states that possess relevant oversight, regulatory, or law enforcement authority. Likewise this exemption does not extend to information or material relating to the employment history of loan originators in the registry or publicly adjudicated disciplinary and enforcement actions against them.

The bill provides for future review and repeal of the exemptions on October 2, 2015, pursuant to the Open Government Sunset Review Act of 1995. These exemptions are automatically repealed on October 2, 2015, in accordance with s. 119.15, F.S., unless the Legislature renews them by that time.

**Section 2.** The bill provides a statement of public necessity. It provides that the Legislature finds that it is a public necessity that credit history information and credit scores held by the OFR and related to the licensing provisions of ch. 494, F.S., be made confidential and exempt from public records requirements. The reason for the confidentiality is that credit history information and

credit scores contain sensitive financial information, and thus their disclosure would make those persons vulnerable to identity theft and other crimes.

**Section 3.** This bill shall take effect on July 1, 2010.

**IV. Constitutional Issues:**

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings 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, this bill requires a two-thirds vote for passage.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

**V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

Indeterminate. The bill could create a fiscal impact on OFR because OFR staff would have to be trained with regard to the categories of information made confidential and exempt from public disclosure versus records that are available for public inspection and copying. OFR could also incur costs associated with redacting confidential and exempt information prior to releasing a record.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

None.

**VIII. Additional Information:**

- A. **Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:**  
(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

- B. **Amendments:**

None.

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This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.

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