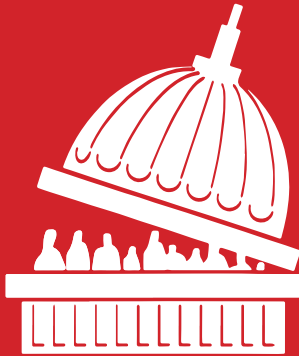


Sunshine Laws



**GEORGIA FIRST
AMENDMENT
FOUNDATION**

Fighting for free speech and government transparency

A Guide to Open Government in Georgia

Your access to public records and meetings

In cooperation with the
Office of the Georgia Attorney General
Chris Carr, Attorney General

Sixth Edition, June 2019



Openness and transparency are vital to upholding the public trust and maintaining an efficient, well-functioning government and bureaucracy.

As your Attorney General, I am pleased to continue a long tradition at the Georgia Department of Law of ensuring our Sunshine Laws are understood and observed.

This edition of the Red Book, *Sunshine Laws: A Guide to Open Government in Georgia* by the Georgia First Amendment Foundation, greatly helps in this endeavor by providing citizens, reporters and public officials with an easy-to-understand guide to Georgia's open record and open meeting laws.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Carr".

Chris Carr
Attorney General of Georgia



**GEORGIA FIRST
AMENDMENT
FOUNDATION**

Fundamental to a healthy democracy is the ability of the public to make good decisions based on good information. That means government must be transparent, even if it is uncomfortable for the public officials in whom we have placed our trust.

Over the years, Georgia's public officials have understood the need for transparency. The result is the collection of laws detailed in this sixth edition of the Red Book, *Sunshine Laws: A Guide to Open Government in Georgia*. This book arms you with the tools to exercise your right to see public records and attend meetings where decisions are made.

But those who are seeking public records should remember what our mothers told us: "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar." Seasoned journalists will tell you that starting off a request for records in a confrontational style usually is counterproductive. As you write your records requests, remember politeness goes a long way.

The Georgia First Amendment Foundation advocates every day for open, transparent government and free speech. We are the only organization in Georgia solely focused on this mission. Our broad membership, including journalists, librarians, teachers, lawyers and public officials, reflects how Sunshine Laws touch all of us.

GFAF also provides extensive education and training on these issues. To learn more and find out how we can help you or your organization, visit our website, gfaf.org. You can find answers to frequently asked questions and become a member.

We at the foundation would like to thank the William S. Morris Chair in News Strategy and Management at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, the National Freedom of Information Coalition and the Georgia Press Association for providing vital funding for this project.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard T. Griffiths". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Richard T. Griffiths, President
Georgia First Amendment Foundation

Sunshine Laws
A GUIDE TO OPEN GOVERNMENT IN GEORGIA

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A GUIDE TO OPEN GOVERNMENT IN GEORGIA

Overview

Georgia has a long and proud tradition of encouraging openness in public meetings and records. As Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Charles Weltner stated in *Davis v. City of Macon*: “Because public men and women are amenable ‘at all times’ to the people, they must conduct the public’s business out in the open.”¹ The Georgia Constitution states that public officials are “servants of the people.”²

A democratic government assumes that those who elect public officials will have free access to what public officials are doing. Access to government meetings and records provides the public with the information needed to participate in the democratic process and to insist that government officials are held accountable for their actions. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once said, “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.”³

The purpose of this book is to provide a brief, general and nontechnical discussion of Georgia’s Sunshine Laws so that Georgians may better participate in their government.

Open Government Protections in Georgia

Principles of openness in government are found in the Constitution of Georgia, the common law of the State of Georgia, and our state statutes. The two acts that apply to most meetings and records are known as “Sunshine Laws,” which in 2012 underwent their first major revision in more than a decade. These consist of the Open Meetings Act (O.C.G.A. §§ 50-14-1 through 6) and the Open Records Act (O.C.G.A. § 50-18-70 through 77). Complete copies of these statutes are found in the appendices to this book.

The starting place under Georgia law for citizens seeking to attend meetings of governmental bodies or to inspect governmental records is the presumption that the meetings and records are open. For instance, O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(b)(1) states: “Except as otherwise provided by law, all meetings shall be open to the public” Similarly, O.C.G.A. § 50-18-70(a) declares “a strong presumption” in favor of inspection, stating that public records should be made available “without delay.” The Act should be broadly construed to allow inspection and its exceptions

interpreted narrowly. The Attorney General has helped the public enforce its rights under the Sunshine Laws and has issued numerous opinions concerning them. In 1998, the General Assembly amended both the Open Meetings Act and the Open Records Act to give the Attorney General specific authority to enforce the Sunshine Laws (O.C.G.A § 50-14-5 and § 50-18-73, as amended) at his discretion. Sweeping revisions enacted in 2012 enhanced that authority.

Both the Open Meetings Act and the Open Records Act apply to all entities that are an “agency” of the state or local government in Georgia. In addition, they apply to associations whose members are themselves “agencies” if the association itself receives a substantial part of its budget from agencies. The term “agency” is broadly defined in O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(a)(1) to include the following:

- Every state department, agency, board, bureau, commission, public corporation and authority
- Every county, city, school district and other political subdivision
- Every department, agency, board, bureau, commission, authority and similar body of each county, city or other political subdivision of the state
- Every local, regional or other authority established pursuant to state law
- Nonprofit organizations that receive more than one-third of their funds from a direct allocation of funds from the governing authority of an agency

Records of private persons and entities are public records if prepared and maintained or received in the performance of a service or function “for or on behalf of an agency.”⁴

Georgia’s Open Records Act

The preface to Georgia’s Open Records Act declares “the strong public policy of this state is in favor of open government; that open government is essential to a free, open, and democratic society; and that public access to public records should be encouraged to foster confidence in government and so that the public can evaluate the expenditure of public funds and the efficient and proper functioning of its institutions... .” O.C.G.A. § 50-18-70(a).

A. What records are available to the public?

Georgia’s Open Records Act provides the public with broad access to governmental records and documents.⁵ The public has a right to see, inspect and copy all “public records.” “Public records” are broadly defined to include the following:

- Documents
- Papers
- Letters
- Maps
- Books
- Tapes
- Photographs
- Computer-based or -generated information
- Data
- Data fields
- Similar material prepared and maintained or received by an agency.⁶

Public records include records prepared, maintained or received by an agency or by a private person or entity in the performance of a service on behalf of an agency. Such documents also are public if they have been transferred to a private person or entity by an agency for storage or future governmental use.⁷ Records prepared or maintained by a private entity in cooperation with public officials or records that document contemplation of the use of public resources and funds are considered public records and are subject to the Open Records Act.⁸

The Open Records Act specifically designates “computer records” as public records subject to the law. For example, the Act mandates that if a county maintains a computerized index of county real estate deed records, the index must be printed and made available for public inspection no less than every 30 days.⁹ Additionally, courts have held that agencies may not keep details of litigation settlements secret.¹⁰ A diverse array of information useful to the public for a variety of purposes is available for public inspection and copying. Just a few examples of documents subject to the Open Records Act are: police incident reports; public officials’ salaries and expense reports; municipal bid offers; licensing, permitting and zoning regulations and decisions; reports of restaurants’ sanitation conditions; campaign contributors and amounts; and education budgets.

The Open Records Act provides a range of limited exceptions; see

O.C.G.A § 50-18-72 in Appendix 1. Under the Act, these exclusions are to be interpreted narrowly, and only that portion of a public record to which the exclusion is directly applicable is exempted.¹¹ In addition, many of the exclusions are discretionary, permitting public disclosure even when not required.¹²

A requestor of public records does not have to state the purpose of the request. The right of access extends to “any person,” including individuals outside the state..¹³

B. What is the open records process?

Open records requests may be made to any custodian of the desired records. A written request is not required but often advisable to eliminate any dispute as to what was requested or when the request was made. A lawsuit to enforce compliance with the law or to punish noncompliance is only available for requests made in writing.¹⁴ An agency can require that all written requests go to a specifically designated records custodian. The custodian must be identified on the agency’s website if it has one.¹⁵ (Sample open records requests are included at the back of this book.)

The agency must produce for inspection the records requested within a reasonable amount of time — not to exceed three business days — of receiving the request, except as noted below.¹⁶ If the records exist and are subject to inspection but are not available within three business days, a description of the available records and a timetable for their inspection and copying must be provided within the three-day time period, and the records or access to them must be provided “as soon as practicable.”¹⁷

The law provides detailed guidelines related to requests for records maintained electronically. Specifically, agencies must provide electronic or printed copies of electronic records using the computer programs that the agency uses, and individuals are entitled to request production in the format in which the agency keeps the record or in a standard export format such as ASCII.¹⁸ If data fields are requested, it is not sufficient for an agency to make the data available in whole or in its constituent parts only via a publicly accessible website; the requester is entitled to the data in the electronic format in which it is kept.¹⁹

If access to a record is denied, in whole or in part, the agency must provide in writing the specific legal authority (the statute code section, subsection and paragraph) exempting the record from disclosure.²⁰

C. What are the appropriate fees for copies of records?

Public agencies may charge a reasonable fee for copies of public documents but usually may not charge more than 10 cents per page.²¹ Agencies may also charge those requesting documents for search, retrieval, redaction and other administrative costs. Hourly charges for administrative tasks may not exceed the salary of the lowest paid, full-time employee who, in the discretion of the custodian of the records, has the necessary skill and training to perform the request. No charge may be made for the first quarter hour of administrative time. And agencies must provide copies of the requested documents via “the most economical means reasonably calculated to identify and produce responsive, non-excluded documents.” The Georgia Supreme Court has held that no fee may be charged when a person seeks only to inspect records that are routinely subject to public inspection, such as deeds, city ordinances and zoning maps.²² An agency also may not charge for time its attorneys spend advising whether records should be disclosed.²³

D. What are the remedies and penalties for noncompliance?

Requestors may find that agencies take longer than anticipated in processing public records requests. Although the Open Records Act does not address informal methods of following up on requests, inquiries to the agency’s custodian of records as to the status of a particular request may be helpful in expediting the process. Informal negotiations with the records custodian also may help reduce the costs associated with the request initially cited by the agency.

The Attorney General’s Office has established an informal mediation program that enables attorneys with the Law Department to answer questions and address concerns about a local government’s response to a public records request and its obligations under the Open Meetings Act. Upon receiving a complaint, these lawyers will evaluate whether a plausible legal claim exists that open records or open meetings requirements have been violated. If so, they will contact the local government involved to attempt to resolve the dispute. While they do not represent the public in such disputes, their goal is to make sure all records to which the requestor is entitled under the Open Records Act are made available. The Law Department helps members of the public and agencies resolve disputes without resorting to legal action.

If informal discussions with agency officials and the Attorney General’s mediation program fail to resolve disputes, the Open Records Act allows any person, firm, corporation or other entity to bring a civil action to

enforce compliance with the law. Moreover, the Attorney General may bring a civil or criminal action to enforce compliance with the law.²⁴ An attempt to mediate an open government dispute does not preclude the Attorney General's Office from taking legal action in the dispute if it believes such action is warranted.

Courts have the authority to address any and all issues related to compliance with the law, including whether an agency's denial of a request was improper and whether the fees assessed for and any delays in processing a request violated the law. In the course of bringing such action, the cost of attorneys' fees may be imposed on either party if the court determines that the party acted without substantial justification, either in not complying with the law or in instituting the litigation.²⁵

Anyone who the court finds "knowingly and willfully" failed or refused to provide timely access to records not subject to exemption is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by a fine not in excess of \$1,000.²⁶

Alternatively, a court may impose a civil penalty not to exceed \$1,000 against anyone who negligently fails or refuses to provide timely access to such records. The court also may impose a criminal fine or civil penalty not in excess of \$2,500 for each additional violation committed within a year of the first violation.

Georgia's Open Meetings Act

Georgia's Open Meetings Act²⁷ requires that state and local governmental bodies conduct their business so the public can review and monitor elected officials and others working on their behalf. The law requires that government meetings be open to the public. The law also requires governmental bodies to provide reasonable notice of all meetings.

A. Which entities must transact business in the open?

Under the Open Meetings Act, each of the following must transact business in the open:

- City councils
- County commissions
- Regional development authorities
- Library boards
- School boards
- Commissions or authorities, such as hospital authorities, established by state or local governments

- Planning commissions
- Zoning boards
- Most committees of the University System of Georgia (such as those involving grievances, disciplinary matters, athletic matters and other student-related matters not specifically related to education)
- Nonprofit corporations operating public hospitals

In short, the law applies to nearly every group that performs any function of a government entity. Very few governmental bodies are exempt from coverage. But the state’s Sunshine Laws do not explicitly cover the Georgia General Assembly or its committees (under the Georgia Constitution, Art. III, Sec. IV, Para. XI, legislative sessions must be open to the public)²⁸ and judicial proceedings including judicial branch agency and committee meetings (under state and federal constitutional law, most court proceedings must be open to the public).²⁹ Georgia courts have determined that these governmental bodies are governed by separate legal standards.

B. Which meetings are open to the public?

Most meetings of entities covered by the Open Meetings Act must be open. Whenever a quorum of the members of an agency — again, broadly defined — meets for the discussion or presentation of official business or policy or takes official action, the meeting must be open to the public. This means public officials may not exclude the public from workshops, fact-finding and purely deliberative sessions simply because no final action is taken or anticipated. Even meetings conducted by telephonic, electronic, wireless or other virtual means must be open.³⁰

Courts have held that committee meetings relating to policy or official business must be open to the public. The courts have also stated that a committee need not be exclusively composed of members of the agency to be deemed an “agency” subject to the law.³¹ Any official action of any type taken at a meeting that is not open is invalid and may be set aside if an action is brought promptly.³²

Although some law enforcement meetings and some meetings involving personnel discussions are exempt from the Act, the law does not generally exempt agency decision-making sessions. It also does not exempt budget sessions, coroner inquests or meetings regarding business or industry relations, federal programs, financial data, gifts, trusts, honorary degrees, licensing examinations, negotiations, collective

bargaining of public employees, national or state security (subject to the law enforcement exemption) or student discipline and other student-related matters not specifically related to education. Federal and state laws, however, prohibit disclosure of the identity of students in certain instances.

The Open Meetings Act provides exceptions that allow certain closed meetings and some confidential actions. A government entity may close a meeting only if a specific statutory exception applies.³³ See O.C.G.A. § 50-14-3 in Appendix 2. A meeting can be closed to the public only by majority vote taken in a properly noticed and open meeting.

Like the exceptions to the Open Records Act, exceptions to the Open Meetings Act should be narrowly interpreted so as not to undermine the general purpose of the law.³⁴ The most commonly used exceptions are for personnel matters (but only for discussion and deliberation by the governmental entity, not for votes); attorney-client discussion of actual or potential lawsuits or claims³⁵; and real estate. In a closed meeting, an agency may take preliminary votes regarding real estate, but a transaction does not become binding until a public vote is taken. Agencies may also close a meeting for the discussion of matters made confidential by statutes other than the Open Meetings Act.³⁶

C. How must government provide access?

The public must be given full access to all open meetings and may make video and audio recordings of all open meetings.³⁷

In addition to mandating open meetings, the law requires that agencies provide notice to the public in advance of all meetings, even emergency meetings.³⁸ That means agencies must make information available to the general public by, in the case of regular meetings, posting at least one week in advance a notice containing the information in a conspicuous location at the agency's regular meeting place and on its website, if the agency has one. The notice must do more than simply meet the technical requirements of the law. It must be sufficient to reasonably apprise a concerned party of an upcoming meeting and must not be misleading.

Special or emergency meetings that are not held at the regularly posted time and place require more rigorous notice procedures. At least 24 hours in advance, notice must be posted at the regular meeting place and oral notification must be provided to the newspaper that serves as the legal organ for the county. In counties where the legal organ is published less

than four times a week, notice also must be given to any local media outlets that make a written request to be so notified. Such outlets must be notified at least 24 hours in advance of the called meeting. In those rare circumstances where a meeting must be held upon less than 24 hours' notice, either the county's legal organ or a newspaper having a circulation at least as high as that of the legal organ must be notified, as well as other media that have requested to be notified by the agency.

Prior to all meetings, including emergency meetings, the agency holding the meeting must make an agenda of all matters expected to be considered. The agenda must be available upon request, and it must be posted at the meeting site as far in advance as possible — at a minimum within the two weeks before the meeting.³⁹ Items not on the agenda may be considered at a meeting where it becomes “necessary” to do so and such items were not anticipated in advance and deliberately omitted from the agenda.

Minutes of all public meetings must be kept in writing and made available to the public for inspection no later than immediately following the next regular agency meeting. Such minutes must contain, at a minimum, the names of the members present at the meeting; a description of each motion or other proposal made; the identity of the individuals making and seconding the motion or other proposal; and a record of all votes. These minutes are subject to the Open Records Act after approval, unless voluntarily released before approval. A summary of the meeting also must be provided by the agency within two business days following the meeting.

D. What are the remedies and penalties for noncompliance?

All actions taken during a meeting closed in violation of the Open Meetings Act are void and can be set aside by a court if challenged within 90 days of discovery.⁴⁰ Anyone who “knowingly and willfully” conducts or participates in a meeting without complying with every part of the law is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by a fine not in excess of \$1,000.⁴¹ Alternatively, a court may impose a civil penalty not to exceed \$1,000 against anyone who negligently conducts or participates in a meeting without complying with the law. The court also may impose a criminal fine or civil penalty not in excess of \$2,500 for each additional violation committed within a year of the first violation.

Additionally, public officials who participate in closed meetings in violation of the law can be subject to recall.⁴² Moreover, failure to give

adequate notice can result in the invalidation of the proceedings, the issuance of legal injunctions and the requirement to pay the objecting party's legal costs.⁴³ In addition, the Attorney General may bring a civil or criminal action to enforce compliance with the law. As with the Open Records Act, a government agency may be liable for the attorney's fees of a party who brings a lawsuit to require compliance with the law if that agency has acted without substantial justification.⁴⁴

Lastly, the Open Meetings Act does not require that any meetings be closed. Agencies may close meetings only as permitted by a specific exemption provided by law. A meeting may not be closed to the public except by a majority vote of those agency members present. That portion of a meeting prior to closure by majority vote must be open to the public. An agency must state the specific reasons for closure of the meeting in the official minutes, and the person presiding over such meeting must execute a notarized affidavit stating under oath that the closed portion of the meeting was devoted to matters within the exceptions provided by law and must identify the specific relevant exception.⁴⁵

The law requires that minutes of these "executive sessions" be kept in writing so that a court can examine them should a legal dispute about the propriety of the closed session arise.⁴⁶ These minutes are not available to the public for inspection.

Conclusion

It is the public policy of Georgia that all agencies of our state should conduct business in the open and maintain records that are available to the public. Experience has shown that openness is the best policy in government, both to help assure honest and forthright decisions by governmental officials and to continue the perception that governmental decisions are made in the brightness of Georgia's sunshine.

Appendix 1

TIPS FOR OBTAINING PUBLIC INFORMATION

Information about your government belongs to you. That’s an essential element of our democracy and a right that’s protected by our federal Constitution and by Georgia’s open records and open meetings laws. Want to know more about how your government operates? Here’s what to do.

1. **Just ask.** By law, most public information is available to you — the public. If you want to find out what your city pays for garbage collection, how much local businesses contribute to your county’s tax coffers or whether elected officials emailed each other about a controversial issue before voting on it, call the government agency’s office and ask for the records.
2. **Ask again, in writing.** A letter may help your request get to the right people, for example agency employees who are custodians of the records governmental bodies must keep and provide to the public. Be as specific as possible in your request, and keep the tone polite and professional. See our sample letters for general and electronic data requests in Appendix 4 below. Keep a record of all your communications with the agency.
3. **Still not getting the public information you want? Let the Georgia First Amendment Foundation know.** Our mission is to protect and expand citizens’ access to public records, meetings and proceedings. Fill out the request-for-help form at gfaf.org, and we’ll be in touch.

Appendix 2

SAMPLE RECORDS REQUESTS

Use this letter for general records requests.

[DATE]

[ADDRESSEE: Check agency website to determine if agency has designated Open Records Act officer]

Re: Open Records Act Request

Dear _____:

I am writing to request access to inspect and copy the following public records:

[Identify records as specifically as possible. Be careful about broad requests that would overwhelm both the records custodian and you.]

As the Georgia Open Records Act requires, please let me know if the search, copying and retrieval fees are estimated to exceed \$25.

If my records request is denied, in whole or in part, please provide me with the section of the Act on which the denial or redaction is based. In cases where a portion of the document(s) is exempt, please redact that portion and release the remainder.

If the document(s) exists in electronic format, I request that they be provided in electronic form, in accordance with the Act.

I look forward to your response no later than three working days from today.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need clarification to fulfill this request or can suggest an easier way for me to get the information I am requesting.

In the interest of timeliness, I ask that you do not attempt to contact me by postal mail. My email address is [email], and my phone is [phone number].

Thank you,

[NAME]

[Contact Details]

Use this letter for electronic records requests.

[DATE]

[ADDRESSEE: Check agency website to determine if agency has designated Open Records Act officer]

Re: Open Records Act Request

Dear _____:

I am writing to request access to inspect and copy the following public electronic records:

[Identify electronic records as specifically as possible. Be careful about broad requests that would overwhelm the records custodian and you.]

As the Georgia Open Records Act requires, please let me know if search, retrieval and digital media copying fees are estimated to exceed \$25.

Please provide copies of the electronic records in a standard data export format, including Microsoft Excel (.xls or .xlsx) or Access (.mdb), DBF (.dbf) database files or ASCII text (tab-, semicolon-, pipe-, or comma-delimited). Please be sure to include any data dictionaries, code definitions, schema descriptions or other documentation required to accurately import and interpret the records.

To simplify the effort and reduce the workload, any data that is stored separately in relational tables may be supplied in separate electronic files. If separate tables are provided, please include any unique identifying fields that link the information to the requested database.

If my records request is denied, in whole or in part, please provide me with the section of the Act on which the denial or redaction is based. In cases where a portion of the data is exempt, please redact that portion and release the remainder.

I look forward to your response no later than three working days from today.

Please contact me if you need clarification to fulfill this request or can suggest an easier way for me to get the information I am requesting.

In the interest of timeliness, I ask that you do not attempt to contact me by postal mail. My email is [email], and my phone is [phone number].

Thank you,

[NAME]

[Contact Details]

Appendix 3
THE GEORGIA OPEN RECORDS ACT

O.C.G.A. TITLE 50 Chapter 18 Article 4

Current through the 2018 Extra Session of the General Assembly

Official Code of Georgia Annotated > TITLE 50. STATE GOVERNMENT > CHAPTER 18. STATE PRINTING AND DOCUMENTS > ARTICLE 4. INSPECTION OF PUBLIC RECORDS

O.C.G.A. § 50-18-70

§ 50-18-70. Legislative intent; definitions

(a) The General Assembly finds and declares that the strong public policy of this state is in favor of open government; that open government is essential to a free, open, and democratic society; and that public access to public records should be encouraged to foster confidence in government and so that the public can evaluate the expenditure of public funds and the efficient and proper functioning of its institutions. The General Assembly further finds and declares that there is a strong presumption that public records should be made available for public inspection without delay. This article shall be broadly construed to allow the inspection of governmental records. The exceptions set forth in this article, together with any other exception located elsewhere in the Code, shall be interpreted narrowly to exclude only those portions of records addressed by such exception.

(b) As used in this article, the term:

(1) "Agency" shall have the same meaning as in Code Section 50-14-1 and shall additionally include any association, corporation, or other similar organization that has a membership or ownership body composed primarily of counties, municipal corporations, or school districts of this state, their officers, or any combination thereof and derives more than 33 1/3 percent of its general operating budget from payments from such political subdivisions.

(2) "Public record" means all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, computer based or generated information, data, data fields, or similar material prepared and maintained or received by an agency or by a private person or entity in the performance of a service or function for or on behalf of an agency or when such documents have been transferred to a private person or entity by an agency for storage or future governmental use.

History

Ga. L. 1959, p. 88, § 1; Code 1981, § 50-18-70; Ga. L. 1982, p. 1789, § 1; Ga. L. 1988, p. 243, § 1; Ga. L. 1992, p. 1061, § 5; Ga. L. 1992, p. 1545, § 1; Ga. L. 1992, p. 2829, § 2; Ga. L. 1993, p. 1394, § 2; Ga. L. 1993, p. 1436, §§ 1, 2; Ga. L. 1994, p. 618, § 1; Ga. L. 1998, p. 128, § 50; Ga. L. 1999, p. 552, §§ 1, 2; Ga. L. 2012, p. 173, § 1-38/HB 665; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 2/HB 397.

O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71

§ 50-18-71. Right of access; timing; fees; denial of requests; impact of electronic records

(a) All public records shall be open for personal inspection and copying, except those which by order of a court of this state or by law are specifically exempted from disclosure. Records shall be maintained by agencies to the extent and in the manner required by Article 5 of this chapter.

(b) (1) (A) Agencies shall produce for inspection all records responsive to a request within a reasonable amount of time not to exceed three business days of receipt of a request; provided, however, that nothing in this chapter shall require agencies to produce records in response to a request if such records did not exist at the time of the request. In those instances where some, but not all, records are available within three business days, an agency shall make available within that period those records that can be located and produced. In any instance where records are unavailable within three business days of receipt of the request, and responsive records exist, the agency shall, within such time period, provide the requester with a description of such records and a timeline

for when the records will be available for inspection or copying and provide the responsive records or access thereto as soon as practicable.

(B) A request made pursuant to this article may be made to the custodian of a public record orally or in writing. An agency may, but shall not be obligated to, require that all written requests be made upon the responder's choice of one of the following: the agency's director, chairperson, or chief executive officer, however denominated; the senior official at any satellite office of an agency; a clerk specifically designated by an agency as the custodian of agency records; or a duly designated open records officer of an agency; provided, however, that the absence or unavailability of the designated agency officer or employee shall not be permitted to delay the agency's response. At the time of inspection, any person may make photographic copies or other electronic reproductions of the records using suitable portable devices brought to the place of inspection. Notwithstanding any other provision of this chapter, an agency may, in its discretion, provide copies of a record in lieu of providing access to the record when portions of the record contain confidential information that must be redacted.

(2) Any agency that designates one or more open records officers upon whom requests for inspection or copying of records may be delivered shall make such designation in writing and shall immediately provide notice to any person upon request, orally or in writing, of those open records officers. If the agency has elected to designate an open records officer, the agency shall so notify the legal organ of the county in which the agency's principal offices reside and, if the agency has a website, shall also prominently display such designation on the agency's website. In the event an agency requires that requests be made upon the individuals identified in subparagraph (B) of paragraph (1) of this subsection, the three-day period for response to a written request shall not begin to run until the request is made in writing upon such individuals. An agency shall permit receipt of written requests by e-mail or facsimile transmission in addition to any other methods of transmission approved by the agency, provided such agency uses e-mail or facsimile in the normal course of its business.

(3) The enforcement provisions of Code Sections 50-18-73 and 50-18-74 shall be available only to enforce compliance and punish noncompliance when a written request is made consistent

with this subsection and shall not be available when such request is made orally.

(c)

(1) An agency may impose a reasonable charge for the search, retrieval, redaction, and production or copying costs for the production of records pursuant to this article. An agency shall utilize the most economical means reasonably calculated to identify and produce responsive, nonexcluded documents. Where fees for certified copies or other copies or records are specifically authorized or otherwise prescribed by law, such specific fee shall apply when certified copies or other records to which a specific fee may apply are sought. In all other instances, the charge for the search, retrieval, or redaction of records shall not exceed the prorated hourly salary of the lowest paid full-time employee who, in the reasonable discretion of the custodian of the records, has the necessary skill and training to perform the request; provided, however, that no charge shall be made for the first quarter hour.

(2) In addition to a charge for the search, retrieval, or redaction of records, an agency may charge a fee for the copying of records or data, not to exceed 10 cent(s) per page for letter or legal size documents or, in the case of other documents, the actual cost of producing the copy. In the case of electronic records, the agency may charge the actual cost of the media on which the records or data are produced.

(3) Whenever any person has requested to inspect or copy a public record and does not pay the cost for search, retrieval, redaction, or copying of such records when such charges have been lawfully estimated and agreed to pursuant to this article, and the agency has incurred the agreed-upon costs to make the records available, regardless of whether the requester inspects or accepts copies of the records, the agency shall be authorized to collect such charges in any manner authorized by law for the collection of taxes, fees, or assessments by such agency.

(d) In any instance in which an agency is required to or has decided to withhold all or part of a requested record, the agency shall notify the requester of the specific legal authority exempting the requested record or records from disclosure by Code section, subsection, and paragraph within a reasonable amount of time not to exceed three business days or in the event the search and retrieval of records is delayed pursuant to this

subsection or pursuant to subparagraph (b)(1)(A) of this Code section, then no later than three business days after the records have been retrieved. In any instance in which an agency will seek costs in excess of \$25.00 for responding to a request, the agency shall notify the requester within a reasonable amount of time not to exceed three business days and inform the requester of the estimate of the costs, and the agency may defer search and retrieval of the records until the requester agrees to pay the estimated costs unless the requester has stated in his or her request a willingness to pay an amount that exceeds the search and retrieval costs. In any instance in which the estimated costs for production of the records exceeds \$500.00, an agency may insist on prepayment of the costs prior to beginning search, retrieval, review, or production of the records. Whenever any person who has requested to inspect or copy a public record has not paid the cost for search, retrieval, redaction, or copying of such records when such charges have been lawfully incurred, an agency may require prepayment for compliance with all future requests for production of records from that person until the costs for the prior production of records have been paid or the dispute regarding payment resolved.

(d.1) Any other provision of this Code section to the contrary notwithstanding, the period within which any production, access, response, or notice is required from an agency with respect to a request for records, other than salary information for nonclerical staff, of intercollegiate sports programs of any unit of the University System of Georgia, including athletic departments and related private athletic associations, shall be 90 business days from the date the agency received the request.

(e) Requests by civil litigants for records that are sought as part of or for use in any ongoing civil or administrative litigation against an agency shall be made in writing and copied to counsel of record for that agency contemporaneously with their submission to that agency. The agency shall provide, at no cost, duplicate sets of all records produced in response to the request to counsel of record for that agency unless the counsel of record for that agency elects not to receive the records.

(f) As provided in this subsection, an agency's use of electronic record-keeping systems must not erode the public's right of access to records under this article. Agencies shall produce electronic copies of or, if the requester prefers, printouts of electronic records or data from data base fields that the agency maintains using the computer programs that the agency has in its possession. An agency shall not refuse to produce such

electronic records, data, or data fields on the grounds that exporting data or redaction of exempted information will require inputting range, search, filter, report parameters, or similar commands or instructions into an agency's computer system so long as such commands or instructions can be executed using existing computer programs that the agency uses in the ordinary course of business to access, support, or otherwise manage the records or data. A requester may request that electronic records, data, or data fields be produced in the format in which such data or electronic records are kept by the agency, or in a standard export format such as a flat file electronic American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) format, if the agency's existing computer programs support such an export format. In such instance, the data or electronic records shall be downloaded in such format onto suitable electronic media by the agency.

(g) Requests to inspect or copy electronic messages, whether in the form of e-mail, text message, or other format, should contain information about the messages that is reasonably calculated to allow the recipient of the request to locate the messages sought, including, if known, the name, title, or office of the specific person or persons whose electronic messages are sought and, to the extent possible, the specific data bases to be searched for such messages.

(h) In lieu of providing separate printouts or copies of records or data, an agency may provide access to records through a website accessible by the public. However, if an agency receives a request for data fields, an agency shall not refuse to provide the responsive data on the grounds that the data is available in whole or in its constituent parts through a website if the requester seeks the data in the electronic format in which it is kept. Additionally, if an agency contracts with a private vendor to collect or maintain public records, the agency shall ensure that the arrangement does not limit public access to those records and that the vendor does not impede public record access and method of delivery as established by the agency or as otherwise provided for in this Code section.

(i) Any computerized index of county real estate deed records shall be printed for purposes of public inspection no less than every 30 days, and any correction made on such index shall be made a part of the printout and shall reflect the time and date that such index was corrected.

(j) No public officer or agency shall be required to prepare new reports, summaries, or compilations not in existence at the time of the request.

History

Ga. L. 1959, p. 88, § 2; Ga. L. 1982, p. 1789, § 1; Ga. L. 1988, p. 243, § 2; Ga. L. 1992, p. 1061, § 6; Ga. L. 1996, p. 313, § 1; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 2/HB 397; Ga. L. 2013, p. 141, § 50/HB 79; Ga. L. 2016, p. 6, § 1/SB 323.

O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71.1

Official Code of Georgia Annotated > TITLE 50. STATE GOVERNMENT > CHAPTER 18. STATE PRINTING AND DOCUMENTS > ARTICLE 4. INSPECTION OF PUBLIC RECORDS

§§ 50-18-71.1 and 50-18-71.2

Repealed by Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 2/HB 397, effective April 17, 2012.

O.C.G.A. § 50-18-72

§ 50-18-72. When public disclosure not required

- (a) Public disclosure shall not be required for records that are:
- (1) Specifically required by federal statute or regulation to be kept confidential;
 - (2) Medical or veterinary records and similar files, the disclosure of which would be an invasion of personal privacy;
 - (3) Except as otherwise provided by law, records compiled for law enforcement or prosecution purposes to the extent that production of such records is reasonably likely to disclose the identity of a confidential source, disclose confidential investigative or prosecution material which would endanger the life or physical safety of any person or persons, or disclose the existence of a confidential surveillance or investigation;
 - (4) Records of law enforcement, prosecution, or regulatory agencies in any pending investigation or prosecution of criminal or unlawful activity, other than initial police arrest reports and initial incident reports; provided, however, that an investigation or prosecution shall

no longer be deemed to be pending when all direct litigation involving such investigation and prosecution has become final or otherwise terminated; and provided, further, that this paragraph shall not apply to records in the possession of an agency that is the subject of the pending investigation or prosecution; and provided, further, that the release of booking photographs shall only be permissible in accordance with Code Section 35-1-18;

(5) Individual Georgia Uniform Motor Vehicle Accident Reports, except upon the submission of a written statement of need by the requesting party to be provided to the custodian of records and to set forth the need for the report pursuant to this Code section; provided, however, that any person or entity whose name or identifying information is contained in a Georgia Uniform Motor Vehicle Accident Report shall be entitled, either personally or through a lawyer or other representative, to receive a copy of such report; and provided, further, that Georgia Uniform Motor Vehicle Accident Reports shall not be available in bulk for inspection or copying by any person absent a written statement showing the need for each such report pursuant to the requirements of this Code section. For the purposes of this subsection, the term "need" means that the natural person or legal entity who is requesting in person or by representative to inspect or copy the Georgia Uniform Motor Vehicle Accident Report:

(A) Has a personal, professional, or business connection with a party to the accident;

(B) Owns or leases an interest in property allegedly or actually damaged in the accident;

(C) Was allegedly or actually injured by the accident;

(D) Was a witness to the accident;

(E) Is the actual or alleged insurer of a party to the accident or of property actually or allegedly damaged by the accident;

(F) Is a prosecutor or a publicly employed law enforcement officer;

(G) Is alleged to be liable to another party as a result of the accident;

(H) Is an attorney stating that he or she needs the requested reports as part of a criminal case, or an investigation of a

potential claim involving contentions that a roadway, railroad crossing, or intersection is unsafe;

(I) Is gathering information as a representative of a news media organization; provided, however, that such representative submits a statement affirming that the use of such accident report is in compliance with Code Section 33-24-53. Any person who knowingly makes a false statement in requesting such accident report shall be guilty of a violation of Code Section 16-10-20;

(J) Is conducting research in the public interest for such purposes as accident prevention, prevention of injuries or damages in accidents, determination of fault in an accident or accidents, or other similar purposes; provided, however, that this subparagraph shall apply only to accident reports on accidents that occurred more than 60 days prior to the request and which shall have the name, street address, telephone number, and driver's license number redacted; or

(K) Is a governmental official, entity, or agency, or an authorized agent thereof, requesting reports for the purpose of carrying out governmental functions or legitimate governmental duties;

(6) Jury list data, including, but not limited to, persons' names, dates of birth, addresses, ages, race, gender, telephone numbers, social security numbers, and when it is available, the person's ethnicity, and other confidential identifying information that is collected and used by The Council of Superior Court Clerks of Georgia for creating, compiling, and maintaining state-wide master jury lists and county master jury lists for the purpose of establishing and maintaining county jury source lists pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 12 of Title 15; provided, however, that when ordered by the judge of a court having jurisdiction over a case in which a challenge to the array of the grand or trial jury has been filed, The Council of Superior Court Clerks of Georgia, superior court clerk, or jury clerk shall provide data within the time limit established by the court for the limited purpose of such challenge. The Council of Superior Court Clerks of Georgia, superior court clerk, or jury clerk shall not be liable for any use or misuse of such data;

(7) Records consisting of confidential evaluations submitted to, or examinations prepared by, a governmental agency and prepared in connection with the appointment or hiring of a public officer or

employee;

(8) Records consisting of material obtained in investigations related to the suspension, firing, or investigation of complaints against public officers or employees until ten days after the same has been presented to the agency or an officer for action or the investigation is otherwise concluded or terminated, provided that this paragraph shall not be interpreted to make such investigatory records privileged;

(9) Real estate appraisals, engineering or feasibility estimates, or other records made for or by the state or a local agency relative to the acquisition of real property until such time as the property has been acquired or the proposed transaction has been terminated or abandoned;

(10) Pending, rejected, or deferred sealed bids or sealed proposals and detailed cost estimates related thereto until such time as the final award of the contract is made, the project is terminated or abandoned, or the agency in possession of the records takes a public vote regarding the sealed bid or sealed proposal, whichever comes first;

(11) Records which identify persons applying for or under consideration for employment or appointment as executive head of an agency or of a unit of the University System of Georgia; provided, however, that at least 14 calendar days prior to the meeting at which final action or vote is to be taken on the position of executive head of an agency or five business days prior to the meeting at which final action or vote is to be taken on the position of president of a unit of the University System of Georgia, all documents concerning as many as three persons under consideration whom the agency has determined to be the best qualified for the position shall be subject to inspection and copying. Prior to the release of these documents, an agency may allow such a person to decline being considered further for the position rather than have documents pertaining to such person released. In that event, the agency shall release the documents of the next most qualified person under consideration who does not decline the position. If an agency has conducted its hiring or appointment process without conducting interviews or discussing or deliberating in executive session in a manner otherwise consistent with Chapter 14 of this title, it shall not be required to delay final action on the position. The agency shall not be required to release such records of other applicants or persons under consideration, except at the request

of any such person. Upon request, the hiring agency shall furnish the number of applicants and the composition of the list by such factors as race and sex. The agency shall not be allowed to avoid the provisions of this paragraph by the employment of a private person or agency to assist with the search or application process;

(12) Reserved;

(13) Records that are of historical research value which are given or sold to public archival institutions, public libraries, or libraries of a unit of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia when the owner or donor of such records wishes to place restrictions on access to the records. No restriction on access, however, may extend more than 75 years from the date of donation or sale. This exemption shall not apply to any records prepared in the course of the operation of state or local governments of the State of Georgia;

(14) Records that contain information from the Department of Natural Resources inventory and register relating to the location and character of a historic property or of historic properties as those terms are defined in Code Sections 12-3-50.1 and 12-3-50.2 if the Department of Natural Resources through its Division of Historic Preservation determines that disclosure will create a substantial risk of harm, theft, or destruction to the property or properties or the area or place where the property or properties are located;

(15) Records of farm water use by individual farms as determined by water-measuring devices installed pursuant to Code Section 12-5-31 or 12-5-105; provided, however, that compilations of such records for the 52 large watershed basins as identified by the eight-digit United States Geologic Survey hydrologic code or an aquifer that do not reveal farm water use by individual farms shall be subject to disclosure under this article;

(16) Agricultural or food system records, data, or information that are considered by the Department of Agriculture to be a part of the critical infrastructure, provided that nothing in this paragraph shall prevent the release of such records, data, or information to another state or federal agency if the release of such records, data, or information is necessary to prevent or control disease or to protect public health, safety, or welfare. As used in this paragraph, the term "critical infrastructure" shall have the same meaning as in 42 U.S.C. Section 5195c(e). Such records, data, or information shall be subject to disclosure only upon the order of a court of competent

jurisdiction;

(17) Records, data, or information collected, recorded, or otherwise obtained that is deemed confidential by the Department of Agriculture for the purposes of the national animal identification system, provided that nothing in this paragraph shall prevent the release of such records, data, or information to another state or federal agency if the release of such records, data, or information is necessary to prevent or control disease or to protect public health, safety, or welfare. As used in this paragraph, the term "national animal identification program" means a national program intended to identify animals and track them as they come into contact with or commingle with animals other than herdmates from their premises of origin. Such records, data, or information shall be subject to disclosure only upon the order of a court of competent jurisdiction;

(18) Records that contain site-specific information regarding the occurrence of rare species of plants or animals or the location of sensitive natural habitats on public or private property if the Department of Natural Resources determines that disclosure will create a substantial risk of harm, theft, or destruction to the species or habitats or the area or place where the species or habitats are located; provided, however, that the owner or owners of private property upon which rare species of plants or animals occur or upon which sensitive natural habitats are located shall be entitled to such information pursuant to this article;

(19) Records that reveal the names, home addresses, telephone numbers, security codes, e-mail addresses, or any other data or information developed, collected, or received by counties or municipalities in connection with neighborhood watch or public safety notification programs or with the installation, servicing, maintaining, operating, selling, or leasing of burglar alarm systems, fire alarm systems, or other electronic security systems; provided, however, that initial police reports and initial incident reports shall remain subject to disclosure pursuant to paragraph (4) of this subsection;

(20) (A) Records that reveal an individual's social security number, mother's birth name, credit card information, debit card information, bank account information, account number, utility account number, password used to access his or her account, financial data or information, insurance or medical information in all records, unlisted

telephone number if so designated in a public record, personal e-mail address or cellular telephone number, day and month of birth, and information regarding public utility, television, Internet, or telephone accounts held by private customers, provided that nonitemized bills showing amounts owed and amounts paid shall be available. Items exempted by this subparagraph shall be redacted prior to disclosure of any record requested pursuant to this article; provided, however, that such information shall not be redacted from such records if the person or entity requesting such records requests such information in a writing signed under oath by such person or a person legally authorized to represent such entity which states that such person or entity is gathering information as a representative of a news media organization for use in connection with news gathering and reporting; and provided, further, that such access shall be limited to social security numbers and day and month of birth; and provided, further, that the news media organization exception in this subparagraph shall not apply to paragraph (21) of this subsection.

(B) This paragraph shall have no application to:

- (i)** The disclosure of information contained in the records or papers of any court or derived therefrom including without limitation records maintained pursuant to Article 9 of Title 11;
- (ii)** The disclosure of information to a court, prosecutor, or publicly employed law enforcement officer, or authorized agent thereof, seeking records in an official capacity;
- (iii)** The disclosure of information to a public employee of this state, its political subdivisions, or the United States who is obtaining such information for administrative purposes, in which case, subject to applicable laws of the United States, further access to such information shall continue to be subject to the provisions of this paragraph;
- (iv)** The disclosure of information as authorized by the order of a court of competent jurisdiction upon good cause shown to have access to any or all of such information upon such conditions as may be set forth in such order;
- (v)** The disclosure of information to the individual in respect of whom such information is maintained, with the authorization thereof, or to an authorized agent thereof;

provided, however, that the agency maintaining such information shall require proper identification of such individual or such individual's agent, or proof of authorization, as determined by such agency;

(vi) The disclosure of the day and month of birth and mother's birth name of a deceased individual;

(vii) The disclosure by an agency of credit or payment information in connection with a request by a consumer reporting agency as that term is defined under the federal Fair Credit Reporting Act (15 U.S.C. Section 1681, et seq.);

(viii) The disclosure by an agency of information in its records in connection with the agency's discharging or fulfilling of its duties and responsibilities, including, but not limited to, the collection of debts owed to the agency or individuals or entities whom the agency assists in the collection of debts owed to the individual or entity;

(ix) The disclosure of information necessary to comply with legal or regulatory requirements or for legitimate law enforcement purposes; or

(x) The disclosure of the date of birth within criminal records.

(C) Records and information disseminated pursuant to this paragraph may be used only by the authorized recipient and only for the authorized purpose. Any person who obtains records or information pursuant to the provisions of this paragraph and knowingly and willfully discloses, distributes, or sells such records or information to an unauthorized recipient or for an unauthorized purpose shall be guilty of a misdemeanor of a high and aggravated nature and upon conviction thereof shall be punished as provided in Code Section 17-10-4. Any person injured thereby shall have a cause of action for invasion of privacy.

(D) In the event that the custodian of public records protected by this paragraph has good faith reason to believe that a pending request for such records has been made fraudulently, under false pretenses, or by means of false swearing, such custodian shall apply to the superior court of the county in which such records are maintained for a protective order limiting or prohibiting

access to such records.

(E) This paragraph shall supplement and shall not supplant, overrule, replace, or otherwise modify or supersede any provision of statute, regulation, or law of the federal government or of this state as now or hereafter amended or enacted requiring, restricting, or prohibiting access to the information identified in subparagraph (A) of this paragraph and shall constitute only a regulation of the methods of such access where not otherwise provided for, restricted, or prohibited;

(21) Records concerning public employees that reveal the public employee's home address, home telephone number, day and month of birth, social security number, insurance or medical information, mother's birth name, credit card information, debit card information, bank account information, account number, utility account number, password used to access his or her account, financial data or information other than compensation by a government agency, unlisted telephone number if so designated in a public record, and the identity of the public employee's immediate family members or dependents. This paragraph shall not apply to public records that do not specifically identify public employees or their jobs, titles, or offices. For the purposes of this paragraph, the term "public employee" means any officer, employee, or former employee of:

(A) The State of Georgia or its agencies, departments, or commissions;

(B) Any county or municipality or its agencies, departments, or commissions;

(C) Other political subdivisions of this state;

(D) Teachers in public and charter schools and nonpublic schools; or

(E) Early care and education programs administered through the Department of Early Care and Learning;

(21.1) (A) Records of the Department of Human Services concerning any foster parent or former foster parent that reveal his or her home address, home telephone number, day and month of birth, social security number, insurance or medical information, mother's birth name, credit card information, debit card information, bank account information, account number, utility account number,

password used to access his or her account, financial data or information other than compensation by a government agency, or unlisted telephone number if so designated in a public record or that reveal the identity of his or her immediate family members or dependents.

(B) For the purposes of this paragraph, the term "foster parent or former foster parent" means individuals who were approved to serve in such capacity by the Division of Family and Children Services of the Department of Human Services or a child-placing agency licensed in accordance with Code Section 49-5-12;

(22) Records of the Department of Early Care and Learning that contain the:

(A) Names of children and day and month of each child's birth;

(B) Names, addresses, telephone numbers, or e-mail addresses of parents, immediate family members, and emergency contact persons; or

(C) Names or other identifying information of individuals who report violations to the department;

(23) Public records containing information that would disclose or might lead to the disclosure of any component in the process used to execute or adopt an electronic signature, if such disclosure would or might cause the electronic signature to cease being under the sole control of the person using it. For purposes of this paragraph, the term "electronic signature" has the same meaning as that term is defined in Code Section 10-12-2;

(24) Records acquired by an agency for the purpose of establishing or implementing, or assisting in the establishment or implementation of, a carpooling or ridesharing program, including, but not limited to, the formation of carpools, vanpools, or buspools, the provision of transit routes, rideshare research, and the development of other demand management strategies such as variable working hours and telecommuting;

(25) (A) Records the disclosure of which would compromise security against sabotage or criminal or terrorist acts and the nondisclosure of which is necessary for the protection of life, safety, or public property, which shall be limited to the following:

(i) Security plans and vulnerability assessments for any public

utility, technology infrastructure, building, facility, function, or activity in effect at the time of the request for disclosure or pertaining to a plan or assessment in effect at such time;

(ii) Any plan for protection against terrorist or other attacks that depends for its effectiveness in whole or in part upon a lack of general public knowledge of its details;

(iii) Any document relating to the existence, nature, location, or function of security devices designed to protect against terrorist or other attacks that depend for their effectiveness in whole or in part upon a lack of general public knowledge;

(iv) Any plan, blueprint, or other material which if made public could compromise security against sabotage, criminal, or terroristic acts; and

(v) Records of any government sponsored programs concerning training relative to governmental security measures which would identify persons being trained or instructors or would reveal information described in divisions (i) through (iv) of this subparagraph.

(B) In the event of litigation challenging nondisclosure pursuant to this paragraph by an agency of a document covered by this paragraph, the court may review the documents in question in camera and may condition, in writing, any disclosure upon such measures as the court may find to be necessary to protect against endangerment of life, safety, or public property.

(C) As used in division (i) of subparagraph (A) of this paragraph, the term "activity" means deployment or surveillance strategies, actions mandated by changes in the federal threat level, motorcades, contingency plans, proposed or alternative motorcade routes, executive and dignitary protection, planned responses to criminal or terrorist actions, after-action reports still in use, proposed or actual plans and responses to bioterrorism, and proposed or actual plans and responses to requesting and receiving the National Pharmacy Stockpile;

(25.1) School safety plans prepared pursuant to Code Section 20-2-1185, whether in the possession of a local school system, a local law enforcement agency, a local emergency management agency, the

Department of Education, the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency, or any other public entity;

(26) Unless the request is made by the accused in a criminal case or by his or her attorney, public records of an emergency 9-1-1 system, as defined in paragraph (5) of Code Section 46-5-122, containing information which would reveal the name, address, or telephone number of a person placing a call to a public safety answering point. Such information may be redacted from such records if necessary to prevent the disclosure of the identity of a confidential source, to prevent disclosure of material which would endanger the life or physical safety of any person or persons, or to prevent the disclosure of the existence of a confidential surveillance or investigation;

(26.1) In addition to the exemption provided by paragraph (26) of this subsection, audio recordings of a 9-1-1 telephone call to a public safety answering point which contain the speech in distress or cries in extremis of a caller who died during the call or the speech or cries of a person who was a minor at the time of the call, except to the following, provided that the person seeking the audio recording of a 9-1-1 telephone call submits a sworn affidavit that attests to the facts necessary to establish eligibility under this paragraph:

(A) A duly appointed representative of a deceased caller's estate;

(B) A parent or legal guardian of a minor caller;

(C) An accused in a criminal case when, in the good faith belief of the accused, the audio recording of the 9-1-1 telephone call is relevant to his or her criminal proceeding;

(D) A party to a civil action when, in the good faith belief of such party, the audio recording of the 9-1-1 telephone call is relevant to the civil action;

(E) An attorney for any of the persons identified in subparagraphs (A) through (D) of this paragraph; or

(F) An attorney for a person who may pursue a civil action when, in the good faith belief of such attorney, the audio recording of the 9-1-1 telephone call is relevant to the potential civil action;

(26.2) Audio and video recordings from devices used by law enforcement officers in a place where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy when there is no pending investigation, except

to the following, provided that the person seeking the audio or video recording submits a sworn affidavit that attests to the facts necessary to establish eligibility under this paragraph:

(A) A duly appointed representative of a deceased's estate when the decedent was depicted or heard on such recording;

(B) A parent or legal guardian of a minor depicted or heard on such recording;

(C) An accused in a criminal case when, in the good faith belief of the accused, such recording is relevant to his or her criminal proceeding;

(D) A party to a civil action when, in the good faith belief of such party, such recording is relevant to the civil action;

(E) An attorney for any of the persons identified in subparagraphs (A) through (D) of this paragraph; or

(F) An attorney for a person who may pursue a civil action when, in the good faith belief of such attorney, such recording is relevant to the potential civil action;

(27) Records of athletic or recreational programs, available through the state or a political subdivision of the state, that include information identifying a child or children 12 years of age or under by name, address, telephone number, or emergency contact, unless such identifying information has been redacted;

(28) Records of the State Road and Tollway Authority which would reveal the financial accounts or travel history of any individual who is a motorist upon any toll project;

(29) Records maintained by public postsecondary educational institutions in this state and associated foundations of such institutions that contain personal information concerning donors or potential donors to such institutions or foundations; provided, however, that the name of any donor and the amount of donation made by such donor shall be subject to disclosure if such donor or any entity in which such donor has a substantial interest transacts business with the public postsecondary educational institution to which the donation is made within three years of the date of such donation. As used in this paragraph, the term "transact business" means to sell or lease any personal property, real property, or services on behalf of oneself or on behalf of any third party as an

agent, broker, dealer, or representative in an amount in excess of \$10,000.00 in the aggregate in a calendar year; and the term "substantial interest" means the direct or indirect ownership of more than 25 percent of the assets or stock of an entity;

(30) Records of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority or of any other transit system that is connected to that system's TransCard, SmartCard, or successor or similar system which would reveal the financial records or travel history of any individual who is a purchaser of a TransCard, SmartCard, or successor or similar fare medium. Such financial records shall include, but not be limited to, social security number, home address, home telephone number, e-mail address, credit or debit card information, and bank account information but shall not include the user's name;

(31) Building mapping information produced and maintained pursuant to Article 10 of Chapter 3 of Title 38;

(32) Notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph (4) of this subsection, any physical evidence or investigatory materials that are evidence of an alleged violation of Part 2 of Article 3 of Chapter 12 of Title 16 and are in the possession, custody, or control of law enforcement, prosecution, or regulatory agencies;

(33) Records that are expressly exempt from public inspection pursuant to Code Sections 47-1-14 and 47-7-127;

(34) Any trade secrets obtained from a person or business entity that are required by law, regulation, bid, or request for proposal to be submitted to an agency. An entity submitting records containing trade secrets that wishes to keep such records confidential under this paragraph shall submit and attach to the records an affidavit affirmatively declaring that specific information in the records constitute trade secrets pursuant to Article 27 of Chapter 1 of Title 10. If such entity attaches such an affidavit, before producing such records in response to a request under this article, the agency shall notify the entity of its intention to produce such records as set forth in this paragraph. If the agency makes a determination that the specifically identified information does not in fact constitute a trade secret, it shall notify the entity submitting the affidavit of its intent to disclose the information within ten days unless prohibited from doing so by an appropriate court order. In the event the entity wishes to prevent disclosure of the requested records, the entity may file an action in superior court to obtain an order that the requested records

are trade secrets exempt from disclosure. The entity filing such action shall serve the requestor with a copy of its court filing. If the agency makes a determination that the specifically identified information does constitute a trade secret, the agency shall withhold the records, and the requester may file an action in superior court to obtain an order that the requested records are not trade secrets and are subject to disclosure;

(35) Data, records, or information of a proprietary nature produced or collected by or for faculty or staff of state institutions of higher learning, or other governmental agencies, in the conduct of, or as a result of, study or research on commercial, scientific, technical, or scholarly issues, whether sponsored by the institution alone or in conjunction with a governmental body or private concern, where such data, records, or information has not been publicly released, published, copyrighted, or patented;

(36) Any data, records, or information developed, collected, or received by or on behalf of faculty, staff, employees, or students of an institution of higher education or any public or private entity supporting or participating in the activities of an institution of higher education in the conduct of, or as a result of, study or research on medical, scientific, technical, scholarly, or artistic issues, whether sponsored by the institution alone or in conjunction with a governmental body or private entity, until such information is published, patented, otherwise publicly disseminated, or released to an agency whereupon the request must be made to the agency. This paragraph shall apply to, but shall not be limited to, information provided by participants in research, research notes and data, discoveries, research projects, methodologies, protocols, and creative works;

(37) Any record that would not be subject to disclosure, or the disclosure of which would jeopardize the receipt of federal funds, under 20 U.S.C. Section 1232g or its implementing regulations;

(38) Unless otherwise provided by law, records consisting of questions, scoring keys, and other materials constituting a test that derives value from being unknown to the test taker prior to administration which is to be administered by an agency, including, but not limited to, any public school, any unit of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, any public technical school, the State Board of Education, the Office of Student

Achievement, the Professional Standards Commission, or a local school system, if reasonable measures are taken by the owner of the test to protect security and confidentiality; provided, however, that the State Board of Education may establish procedures whereby a person may view, but not copy, such records if viewing will not, in the judgment of the board, affect the result of administration of such test. These limitations shall not be interpreted by any court of law to include or otherwise exempt from inspection the records of any athletic association or other nonprofit entity promoting intercollegiate athletics;

(39) Records disclosing the identity or personally identifiable information of any person participating in research on commercial, scientific, technical, medical, scholarly, or artistic issues conducted by the Department of Community Health, the Department of Public Health, the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, or a state institution of higher education whether sponsored by the institution alone or in conjunction with a governmental body or private entity;

(40) Any permanent records maintained by a judge of the probate court pursuant to Code Section 16-11-129, relating to weapons carry licenses, or pursuant to any other requirement for maintaining records relative to the possession of firearms, except to the extent that such records relating to licensing and possession of firearms are sought by law enforcement agencies or a judge of the probate court as provided by law;

(41) Records containing communications subject to the attorney-client privilege recognized by state law; provided, however, that this paragraph shall not apply to the factual findings, but shall apply to the legal conclusions, of an attorney conducting an investigation on behalf of an agency so long as such investigation does not pertain to pending or potential litigation, settlement, claims, administrative proceedings, or other judicial actions brought or to be brought by or against the agency or any officer or employee; and provided, further, that such investigations conducted by hospital authorities to ensure compliance with federal or state law, regulations, or reimbursement policies shall be exempt from disclosure if such investigations are otherwise subject to the attorney-client privilege. Attorney-client communications, however, may be obtained in a proceeding under Code Section 50-18-73 to prove justification or lack thereof in refusing disclosure of documents under this Code section provided

the judge of the court in which such proceeding is pending shall first determine by an in camera examination that such disclosure would be relevant on that issue. In addition, when an agency withholds information subject to this paragraph, any party authorized to bring a proceeding under Code Section 50-18-73 may request that the judge of the court in which such proceeding is pending determine by an in camera examination whether such information was properly withheld;

(42) Confidential attorney work product; provided, however, that this paragraph shall not apply to the factual findings, but shall apply to the legal conclusions, of an attorney conducting an investigation on behalf of an agency so long as such investigation does not pertain to pending or potential litigation, settlement, claims, administrative proceedings, or other judicial actions brought or to be brought by or against the agency or any officer or employee; and provided, further, that such investigations conducted by hospital authorities to ensure compliance with federal or state law, regulations, or reimbursement policies shall be exempt from disclosure if such investigations are otherwise subject to confidentiality as attorney work product. In addition, when an agency withholds information subject to this paragraph, any party authorized to bring a proceeding under Code Section 50-18-73 may request that the judge of the court in which such proceeding is pending determine by an in camera examination whether such information was properly withheld;

(43) Records containing tax matters or tax information that is confidential under state or federal law;

(44) Records consisting of any computer program or computer software used or maintained in the course of operation of a public office or agency; provided, however, that data generated, kept, or received by an agency shall be subject to inspection and copying as provided in this article;

(45) Records pertaining to the rating plans, rating systems, underwriting rules, surveys, inspections, statistical plans, or similar proprietary information used to provide or administer liability insurance or self-insurance coverage to any agency;

(46) Documents maintained by any agency, as such term is defined in subparagraph (a)(1)(A) of Code Section 50-14-1, which pertain to an economic development project until the economic development project is secured by binding commitment, provided that any such

documents shall be disclosed upon proper request after a binding commitment has been secured or the project has been terminated. No later than five business days after the Department of Economic Development secures a binding commitment and the department has committed the use of state funds from the OneGeorgia Authority or funds from Regional Economic Business Assistance for the project pursuant to Code Section 50-8-8, or other provisions of law, the Department of Economic Development shall give notice that a binding commitment has been reached by posting on its website notice of the project in conjunction with a copy of the Department of Economic Development's records documenting the bidding commitment made in connection with the project and the negotiation relating thereto and by publishing notice of the project and participating parties in the legal organ of each county in which the economic development project is to be located. As used in this paragraph, the term "economic development project" means a plan or proposal to locate a business, or to expand a business, that would involve an expenditure of more than \$25 million by the business or the hiring of more than 50 employees by the business;

(47) Records related to a training program operated under the authority of Article 3 of Chapter 4 of Title 20 disclosing an economic development project prior to a binding commitment having been secured, relating to job applicants, or identifying proprietary hiring practices, training, skills, or other business methods and practices of a private entity. As used in this paragraph, the term "economic development project" means a plan or proposal to locate a business, or to expand a business, that would involve an expenditure of more than \$25 million by the business or the hiring of more than 50 employees by the business;

(48) Records that are expressly exempt from public inspection pursuant to Code Section 47-20-87;

(49) Data, records, or information acquired by the Commissioner of Labor or the Department of Labor as part of any investigation required pursuant to Code Section 39-2-18, relating to minors employed as actors or performers; or

(50) Held by the Georgia Superior Court Clerks' Cooperative Authority or any other public or private entity for and on behalf of a clerk of superior court; provided, however, that such records may be obtained from a clerk of superior court unless otherwise exempted

from disclosure.

(b) This Code section shall be interpreted narrowly so as to exclude from disclosure only that portion of a public record to which an exclusion is directly applicable. It shall be the duty of the agency having custody of a record to provide all other portions of a record for public inspection or copying.

(c)

(1) Notwithstanding any other provision of this article, an exhibit tendered to the court as evidence in a criminal or civil trial shall not be open to public inspection without approval of the judge assigned to the case.

(2) Except as provided in subsection (d) of this Code section, in the event inspection is not approved by the court, in lieu of inspection of such an exhibit, the custodian of such an exhibit shall, upon request, provide one or more of the following:

- (A)** A photograph;
- (B)** A photocopy;
- (C)** A facsimile; or
- (D)** Another reproduction.

(3) The provisions of this article regarding fees for production of a record, including, but not limited to, subsections (c) and (d) of Code Section 50-18-71, shall apply to exhibits produced according to this subsection.

(d) Any physical evidence that is used as an exhibit in a criminal or civil trial to show or support an alleged violation of Part 2 of Article 3 of Chapter 12 of Title 16 shall not be open to public inspection except by court order. If the judge approves inspection of such physical evidence, the judge shall designate, in writing, the facility owned or operated by an agency of the state or local government where such physical evidence may be inspected. If the judge permits inspection, such property or material shall not be photographed, copied, or reproduced by any means. Any person who violates the provisions of this subsection shall be guilty of a felony and, upon conviction thereof, shall be punished by imprisonment for not less than one nor more than 20 years, a fine of not more than \$100,000.00, or both.

History

Ga. L. 1967, p. 455, § 1; Ga. L. 1970, p. 163, § 1; Code 1981, § 50-18-72, enacted by Ga. L. 1982, p. 1789, § 1; Ga. L. 1986, p. 1090, § 2; Ga. L. 1987, p. 377, § 1; Ga. L. 1988, p. 13, § 50; Ga. L. 1988, p. 243, § 3; Ga. L. 1989, p. 553, § 2; Ga. L. 1989, p. 827, § 1; Ga. L. 1990, p. 341, § 1; Ga. L. 1992, p. 1061, § 8; Ga. L. 1993, p. 968, § 1; Ga. L. 1993, p. 1336, § 1; Ga. L. 1993, p. 1669, § 1; Ga. L. 1995, p. 704, § 1; Ga. L. 1996, p. 6, § 50; Ga. L. 1997, p. 1052, § 2; Ga. L. 1998, p. 1652, § 1; Ga. L. 1999, p. 552, §§ 4, 4.1; Ga. L. 1999, p. 809, §§ 4, 5; Ga. L. 1999, p. 1222, §§ 1, 2; Ga. L. 2000, p. 136, § 50; Ga. L. 2000, p. 1556, §§ 1, 2; Ga. L. 2001, p. 4, § 50; Ga. L. 2001, p. 327, § 1; Ga. L. 2001, p. 331, § 1; Ga. L. 2001, p. 491, § 1; Ga. L. 2001, p. 820, § 13; Ga. L. 2002, p. 415, § 50; Ga. L. 2003, p. 602, § 1; Ga. L. 2003, p. 880, § 2; Ga. L. 2004, p. 107, § 22; Ga. L. 2004, p. 161, § 15; Ga. L. 2004, p. 341, § 1A; Ga. L. 2004, p. 410, § 9; Ga. L. 2004, p. 770, § 1; Ga. L. 2005, p. 334, § 30-2/HB 501; Ga. L. 2005, p. 558, § 1/HB 437; Ga. L. 2005, p. 595, § 1/SB 121; Ga. L. 2005, p. 660, § 11/HB 470; Ga. L. 2005, p. 1133, § 1/HB 340; Ga. L. 2006, p. 72, § 50/SB 465; Ga. L. 2006, p. 536, § 1/HB 955; Ga. L. 2007, p. 87, § 1/SB 212; Ga. L. 2007, p. 160, § 1/HB 101; Ga. L. 2008, p. 564, § 2/SB 33; Ga. L. 2008, p. 829, § 4/HB 1020; Ga. L. 2009, p. 8, § 50/SB 46; Ga. L. 2009, p. 37, §§ 1, 1.1, 1.2/SB 26; Ga. L. 2009, p. 453, § 1-4/HB 228; Ga. L. 2009, p. 698, § 7/HB 126; Ga. L. 2010, p. 243, §§ 1, 2/HB 1086; Ga. L. 2010, p. 286, § 23/SB 244; Ga. L. 2010, p. 415, § 2/HB 249; Ga. L. 2010, p. 963, § 2-21/SB 308; Ga. L. 2011, p. 59, §§ 3-1, 1-68/HB 415; Ga. L. 2011, p. 611, § 1/HB 261; Ga. L. 2011, p. 705, § 5-29/HB 214; Ga. L. 2012, p. 211, § 4/SB 402; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 2/HB 397; Ga. L. 2012, p. 775, § 50/HB 942; Ga. L. 2013, p. 141, § 50/HB 79; Ga. L. 2014, p. 418, § 2/HB 828; Ga. L. 2014, p. 451, § 15/HB 776; Ga. L. 2014, p. 692, § 1/HB 449; Ga. L. 2014, p. 742, § 2/HB 845; Ga. L. 2014, p. 866, § 50/SB 340; Ga. L. 2015, p. 805, § 13/HB 492; Ga. L. 2015, p. 943, § 5/HB 366; Ga. L. 2015, p. 1046, § 5/SB 94; Ga. L. 2015, p. 1065, § 2-3/SB 135; Ga. L. 2016, p. 6, § 2/SB 323; Ga. L. 2018, p. 753, § 3/HB 763; Ga. L. 2018, p. 927, § 4-1/HB 906.

O.C.G.A. § 50-18-73

§ 50-18-73. Jurisdiction to enforce article; attorney's fees and litigation expenses; good faith reliance as defense to action

(a) The superior courts of this state shall have jurisdiction in law and in equity to entertain actions against persons or agencies having custody of records open to the public under this article to enforce compliance with the provisions of this article. Such actions may be brought by any person, firm, corporation, or other entity. In addition, the Attorney General shall have authority to bring such actions in his or her discretion as may be appropriate to enforce compliance with this article and to seek either civil or criminal penalties or both.

(b) In any action brought to enforce the provisions of this chapter in which the court determines that either party acted without substantial justification either in not complying with this chapter or in instituting the litigation, the court shall, unless it finds that special circumstances exist, assess in favor of the complaining party reasonable attorney's fees and other litigation costs reasonably incurred. Whether the position of the complaining party was substantially justified shall be determined on the basis of the record as a whole which is made in the proceeding for which fees and other expenses are sought.

(c) Any agency or person who provides access to information in good faith reliance on the requirements of this chapter shall not be liable in any action on account of such decision.

History

Code 1981, § 50-18-73, enacted by Ga. L. 1982, p. 1789, § 1; Ga. L. 1988, p. 243, § 4; Ga. L. 1992, p. 1061, § 9; Ga. L. 1998, p. 595, § 2; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 2/HB 397.

O.C.G.A. § 50-18-74

§ 50-18-74. Penalty for violations; procedure for commencement of prosecution.

(a) Any person or entity knowingly and willfully violating the provisions of this article by failing or refusing to provide access to records not subject to exemption from this article, by knowingly and

willingly failing or refusing to provide access to such records within the time limits set forth in this article, or by knowingly and willingly frustrating or attempting to frustrate the access to records by intentionally making records difficult to obtain or review shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction shall be punished by a fine not to exceed \$1,000.00 for the first violation. Alternatively, a civil penalty may be imposed by the court in any civil action brought pursuant to this article against any person who negligently violates the terms of this article in an amount not to exceed \$1,000.00 for the first violation. A civil penalty or criminal fine not to exceed \$2,500.00 per violation may be imposed for each additional violation that the violator commits within a 12 month period from the date the first penalty or fine was imposed. It shall be a defense to any criminal action under this Code section that a person has acted in good faith in his or her actions. In addition, persons or entities that destroy records for the purpose of preventing their disclosure under this article may be subject to prosecution under Code Section 45-11-1.

(b) A prosecution under this Code section may only be commenced by issuance of a citation in the same manner as an arrest warrant for a peace officer pursuant to Code Section 17-4-40; such citation shall be personally served upon the accused. The defendant shall not be arrested prior to the time of trial, except that a defendant who fails to appear for arraignment or trial may thereafter be arrested pursuant to a bench warrant and required to post a bond for his or her future appearance.

History

Code 1981, § 50-18-74, enacted by Ga. L. 1999, p. 552, § 5; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 2/HB 397.

O.C.G.A. § 50-18-75

§ 50-18-75. Redesignated

O.C.G.A. § 50-18-76

§ 50-18-76. Written matter exempt from disclosure under Code Section 31-10-25

No form, document, or other written matter which is required by law or rule or regulation to be filed as a vital record under the provisions of Chapter 10 of Title 31, which contains information which is exempt from disclosure under Code Section 31-10-25, and which is temporarily kept or maintained in any file or with any other documents in the office of the judge or clerk of any court prior to filing with the Department of Public Health shall be open to inspection by the general public, even though the other papers or documents in such file may be open to inspection.

History

Code 1981, § 50-18-76, enacted by Ga. L. 1991, p. 1943, § 1; Ga. L. 2009, p. 453, § 1-4/HB 228; Ga. L. 2011, p. 705, § 6-3/HB 214; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 2/HB 397.

O.C.G.A. § 50-18-77

§ 50-18-77. Inapplicable to public records

The procedures and fees provided for in this article shall not apply to public records, including records that are exempt from disclosure pursuant to Code Section 50-18-72, which are requested in writing by a state or federal grand jury, taxing authority, law enforcement agency, or prosecuting attorney in conjunction with an ongoing administrative, criminal, or tax investigation. The lawful custodian shall provide copies of such records to the requesting agency unless such records are privileged or disclosure to such agencies is specifically restricted by law.

History

Code 1981, § 50-18-77, enacted by Ga. L. 1999, p. 809, § 6; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 2/HB 397.

Appendix 4

THE GEORGIA OPEN MEETINGS ACT

O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1

Current through the 2018 Extra Session of the General Assembly

Official Code of Georgia Annotated > TITLE 50. STATE GOVERNMENT > CHAPTER 14. OPEN AND PUBLIC MEETINGS

§ 50-14-1. Meetings to be open to public; limitation on action to contest agency action; recording; notice of time and place; access to minutes; teleconference

(a) As used in this chapter, the term:

(1) "Agency" means:

(A) Every state department, agency, board, bureau, office, commission, public corporation, and authority;

(B) Every county, municipal corporation, school district, or other political subdivision of this state;

(C) Every department, agency, board, bureau, office, commission, authority, or similar body of each such county, municipal corporation, or other political subdivision of the state;

(D) Every city, county, regional, or other authority established pursuant to the laws of this state; and

(E) Any nonprofit organization to which there is a direct allocation of tax funds made by the governing body of any agency as defined in this paragraph which constitutes more than 33 1/3 percent of the funds from all sources of such organization; provided, however, that this subparagraph shall not include hospitals, nursing homes, dispensers of pharmaceutical products, or any other type organization, person, or firm furnishing medical or health services to a citizen for which they receive reimbursement from the state whether directly or indirectly; nor shall this term include a subagency or affiliate of such a

nonprofit organization from or through which the allocation of tax funds is made.

(2) "Executive session" means a portion of a meeting lawfully closed to the public.

(3) (A) "Meeting" means:

(i) The gathering of a quorum of the members of the governing body of an agency at which any official business, policy, or public matter of the agency is formulated, presented, discussed, or voted upon; or

(ii) The gathering of a quorum of any committee of the members of the governing body of an agency or a quorum of any committee created by the governing body at which any official business, policy, or public matter of the committee is formulated, presented, discussed, or voted upon.

(B) "Meeting" shall not include:

(i) The gathering of a quorum of the members of a governing body or committee for the purpose of making inspections of physical facilities or property under the jurisdiction of such agency at which no other official business of the agency is to be discussed or official action is to be taken;

(ii) The gathering of a quorum of the members of a governing body or committee for the purpose of attending state-wide, multijurisdictional, or regional meetings to participate in seminars or courses of training on matters related to the purpose of the agency or to receive or discuss information on matters related to the purpose of the agency at which no official action is to be taken by the members;

(iii) The gathering of a quorum of the members of a governing body or committee for the purpose of meeting with officials of the legislative or executive branches of the state or federal government at state or federal offices and at which no official action is to be taken by the members;

(iv) The gathering of a quorum of the members of a governing body of an agency for the purpose of traveling

to a meeting or gathering as otherwise authorized by this subsection so long as no official business, policy, or public matter is formulated, presented, discussed, or voted upon by the quorum; or

(v) The gathering of a quorum of the members of a governing body of an agency at social, ceremonial, civic, or religious events so long as no official business, policy, or public matter is formulated, presented, discussed, or voted upon by the quorum.

This subparagraph's exclusions from the definition of the term "meeting" shall not apply if it is shown that the primary purpose of the gathering or gatherings is to evade or avoid the requirements for conducting a meeting while discussing or conducting official business.

(b)

(1) Except as otherwise provided by law, all meetings shall be open to the public. All votes at any meeting shall be taken in public after due notice of the meeting and compliance with the posting and agenda requirements of this chapter.

(2) Any resolution, rule, regulation, ordinance, or other official action of an agency adopted, taken, or made at a meeting which is not open to the public as required by this chapter shall not be binding. Any action contesting a resolution, rule, regulation, ordinance, or other formal action of an agency based on an alleged violation of this provision shall be commenced within 90 days of the date such contested action was taken or, if the meeting was held in a manner not permitted by law, within 90 days from the date the party alleging the violation knew or should have known about the alleged violation so long as such date is not more than six months after the date the contested action was taken.

(3) Notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph (2) of this subsection, any action under this chapter contesting a zoning decision of a local governing authority shall be commenced within the time allowed by law for appeal of such zoning decision.

(c) The public at all times shall be afforded access to meetings declared open to the public pursuant to subsection (b) of this Code section. Visual and sound recording during open meetings shall be permitted.

(d)

(1) Every agency subject to this chapter shall prescribe the time, place, and dates of regular meetings of the agency. Such information shall be available to the general public and a notice containing such information shall be posted at least one week in advance and maintained in a conspicuous place available to the public at the regular place of an agency or committee meeting subject to this chapter as well as on the agency's website, if any. Meetings shall be held in accordance with a regular schedule, but nothing in this subsection shall preclude an agency from canceling or postponing any regularly scheduled meeting.

(2) For any meeting, other than a regularly scheduled meeting of the agency for which notice has already been provided pursuant to this chapter, written or oral notice shall be given at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting to the legal organ in which notices of sheriff's sales are published in the county where regular meetings are held or at the option of the agency to a newspaper having a general circulation in such county at least equal to that of the legal organ; provided, however, that, in counties where the legal organ is published less often than four times weekly, sufficient notice shall be the posting of a written notice for at least 24 hours at the place of regular meetings and, upon written request from any local broadcast or print media outlet whose place of business and physical facilities are located in the county, notice by telephone, facsimile, or e-mail to that requesting media outlet at least 24 hours in advance of the called meeting. Whenever notice is given to a legal organ or other newspaper, that publication shall immediately or as soon as practicable make the information available upon inquiry to any member of the public. Upon written request from any local broadcast or print media outlet, a copy of the meeting's agenda shall be provided by facsimile, e-mail, or mail through a self-addressed, stamped envelope provided by the requestor.

(3) When special circumstances occur and are so declared by an agency, that agency may hold a meeting with less than 24 hours' notice upon giving such notice of the meeting and subjects expected to be considered at the meeting as is reasonable under the circumstances, including notice to the county legal organ or a newspaper having a general circulation in the county at least equal to that of the legal organ, in which event the reason for holding the meeting within 24 hours and the nature of the notice shall be

recorded in the minutes. Such reasonable notice shall also include, upon written request within the previous calendar year from any local broadcast or print media outlet whose place of business and physical facilities are located in the county, notice by telephone, facsimile, or e-mail to that requesting media outlet.

(e)

(1) Prior to any meeting, the agency or committee holding such meeting shall make available an agenda of all matters expected to come before the agency or committee at such meeting. The agenda shall be available upon request and shall be posted at the meeting site as far in advance of the meeting as reasonably possible, but shall not be required to be available more than two weeks prior to the meeting and shall be posted, at a minimum, at some time during the two-week period immediately prior to the meeting. Failure to include on the agenda an item which becomes necessary to address during the course of a meeting shall not preclude considering and acting upon such item.

(2) (A) A summary of the subjects acted on and those members present at a meeting of any agency shall be written and made available to the public for inspection within two business days of the adjournment of a meeting.

(B) The regular minutes of a meeting subject to this chapter shall be promptly recorded and such records shall be open to public inspection once approved as official by the agency or its committee, but in no case later than immediately following its next regular meeting; provided, however, that nothing contained in this chapter shall prohibit the earlier release of minutes, whether approved by the agency or not. Such minutes shall, at a minimum, include the names of the members present at the meeting, a description of each motion or other proposal made, the identity of the persons making and seconding the motion or other proposal, and a record of all votes. The name of each person voting for or against a proposal shall be recorded. It shall be presumed that the action taken was approved by each person in attendance unless the minutes reflect the name of the persons voting against the proposal or abstaining.

(C) Minutes of executive sessions shall also be recorded but shall not be open to the public. Such minutes shall specify each issue discussed in executive session by the agency or committee.

In the case of executive sessions where matters subject to the attorney-client privilege are discussed, the fact that an attorney-client discussion occurred and its subject shall be identified, but the substance of the discussion need not be recorded and shall not be identified in the minutes. Such minutes shall be kept and preserved for in camera inspection by an appropriate court should a dispute arise as to the propriety of any executive session.

(f) An agency with state-wide jurisdiction or committee of such an agency shall be authorized to conduct meetings by teleconference, provided that any such meeting is conducted in compliance with this chapter.

(g) Under circumstances necessitated by emergency conditions involving public safety or the preservation of property or public services, agencies or committees thereof not otherwise permitted by subsection (f) of this Code section to conduct meetings by teleconference may meet by means of teleconference so long as the notice required by this chapter is provided and means are afforded for the public to have simultaneous access to the teleconference meeting. On any other occasion of the meeting of an agency or committee thereof, and so long as a quorum is present in person, a member may participate by teleconference if necessary due to reasons of health or absence from the jurisdiction so long as the other requirements of this chapter are met. Absent emergency conditions or the written opinion of a physician or other health professional that reasons of health prevent a member's physical presence, no member shall participate by teleconference pursuant to this subsection more than twice in one calendar year.

History

Code 1981, § 50-14-1, enacted by Ga. L. 1988, p. 235, § 1; Ga. L. 1992, p. 1061, §§ 1, 2; Ga. L. 1993, p. 784, § 1; Ga. L. 1999, p. 549, §§ 1, 2; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 1/HB 397.

O.C.G.A. § 50-14-2

§ 50-14-2. Certain privileges not repealed

This chapter shall not be construed so as to repeal in any way:

- (1) The attorney-client privilege recognized by state law to the extent that a meeting otherwise required to be open to the public under this chapter may be closed in order to consult and meet with legal counsel pertaining to pending or potential litigation, settlement, claims, administrative proceedings, or other judicial actions brought or to be brought by or against the agency or any officer or employee or in which the agency or any officer or employee may be directly involved; provided, however, the meeting may not be closed for advice or consultation on whether to close a meeting; and
- (2) Those tax matters which are otherwise made confidential by state law.

History

Code 1981, § 50-14-2, enacted by Ga. L. 1988, p. 235, § 1; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 1/HB 397.

O.C.G.A. § 50-14-3

§ 50-14-3. Excluded proceedings

- (a) This chapter shall not apply to the following:
 - (1) Staff meetings held for investigative purposes under duties or responsibilities imposed by law;
 - (2) The deliberations and voting of the State Board of Pardons and Paroles; and in addition such board may close a meeting held for the purpose of receiving information or evidence for or against clemency or in revocation proceedings if it determines that the receipt of such information or evidence in open meeting would present a substantial risk of harm or injury to a witness;
 - (3) Meetings of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation or any other law enforcement or prosecutorial agency in the state, including grand jury meetings;
 - (4) Adoptions and proceedings related thereto;
 - (5) Gatherings involving an agency and one or more neutral third parties in mediation of a dispute between the agency and any other

party. In such a gathering, the neutral party may caucus jointly or independently with the parties to the mediation to facilitate a resolution to the conflict, and any such caucus shall not be subject to the requirements of this chapter. Any decision or resolution agreed to by an agency at any such caucus shall not become effective until ratified in a public meeting and the terms of any such decision or resolution are disclosed to the public. Any final settlement agreement, memorandum of agreement, memorandum of understanding, or other similar document, however denominated, in which an agency has formally resolved a claim or dispute shall be subject to the provisions of Article 4 of Chapter 18 of this title;

(6) Meetings:

(A) Of any medical staff committee of a public hospital;

(B) Of the governing authority of a public hospital or any committee thereof when performing a peer review or medical review function as set forth in Code Section 31-7-15, Articles 6 and 6A of Chapter 7 of Title 31, or under any other applicable federal or state statute or regulation; and

(C) Of the governing authority of a public hospital or any committee thereof in which the granting, restriction, or revocation of staff privileges or the granting of abortions under state or federal law is discussed, considered, or voted upon;

(7) Incidental conversation unrelated to the business of the agency; or

(8) E-mail communications among members of an agency; provided, however, that such communications shall be subject to disclosure pursuant to Article 4 of Chapter 18 of this title.

(b) Subject to compliance with the other provisions of this chapter, executive sessions shall be permitted for:

(1) Meetings when any agency is discussing or voting to:

(A) Authorize the settlement of any matter which may be properly discussed in executive session in accordance with paragraph (1) of Code Section 50-14-2;

(B) Authorize negotiations to purchase, dispose of, or lease property;

(C) Authorize the ordering of an appraisal related to the

acquisition or disposal of real estate;

(D) Enter into a contract to purchase, dispose of, or lease property subject to approval in a subsequent public vote; or

(E) Enter into an option to purchase, dispose of, or lease real estate subject to approval in subsequent public vote.

No vote in executive session to acquire, dispose of, or lease real estate, or to settle litigation, claims, or administrative proceedings, shall be binding on an agency until a subsequent vote is taken in an open meeting where the identity of the property and the terms of the acquisition, disposal, or lease are disclosed before the vote or where the parties and principal settlement terms are disclosed before the vote;

(2) Meetings when discussing or deliberating upon the appointment, employment, compensation, hiring, disciplinary action or dismissal, or periodic evaluation or rating of a public officer or employee or interviewing applicants for the position of the executive head of an agency. This exception shall not apply to the receipt of evidence or when hearing argument on personnel matters, including whether to impose disciplinary action or dismiss a public officer or employee or when considering or discussing matters of policy regarding the employment or hiring practices of the agency. The vote on any matter covered by this paragraph shall be taken in public and minutes of the meeting as provided in this chapter shall be made available. Meetings by an agency to discuss or take action on the filling of a vacancy in the membership of the agency itself shall at all times be open to the public as provided in this chapter;

(3) Meetings of the board of trustees or the investment committee of any public retirement system created by or subject to Title 47 when such board or committee is discussing matters pertaining to investment securities trading or investment portfolio positions and composition; and

(4) Portions of meetings during which that portion of a record made exempt from public inspection or disclosure pursuant to Article 4 of Chapter 18 of this title is to be considered by an agency and there are no reasonable means by which the agency can consider the record without disclosing the exempt portions if the meeting were not closed.

History

Code 1981, § 50-14-3, enacted by Ga. L. 1988, p. 235, § 1; Ga. L. 1992, p. 1061, § 3; Ga. L. 1997, p. 44, § 2; Ga. L. 2003, p. 880, § 1; Ga. L. 2006, p. 560, § 4/SB 462; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 1/HB 397.

O.C.G.A. § 50-14-4

§ 50-14-4. Procedure when meeting closed

(a) When any meeting of an agency is closed to the public pursuant to any provision of this chapter, the specific reasons for such closure shall be entered upon the official minutes, the meeting shall not be closed to the public except by a majority vote of a quorum present for the meeting, the minutes shall reflect the names of the members present and the names of those voting for closure, and that part of the minutes shall be made available to the public as any other minutes. Where a meeting of an agency is devoted in part to matters within the exceptions provided by law, any portion of the meeting not subject to any such exception, privilege, or confidentiality shall be open to the public, and the minutes of such portions not subject to any such exception shall be taken, recorded, and open to public inspection as provided in subsection (e) of Code Section 50-14-1.

(b)

(1) When any meeting of an agency is closed to the public pursuant to subsection (a) of this Code section, the person presiding over such meeting or, if the agency's policy so provides, each member of the governing body of the agency attending such meeting, shall execute and file with the official minutes of the meeting a notarized affidavit stating under oath that the subject matter of the meeting or the closed portion thereof was devoted to matters within the exceptions provided by law and identifying the specific relevant exception.

(2) In the event that one or more persons in an executive session initiates a discussion that is not authorized pursuant to Code Section 50-14-3, the presiding officer shall immediately rule the discussion out of order and all present shall cease the questioned conversation. If one or more persons continue or attempt to continue the discussion after being ruled out of order, the presiding officer shall immediately

adjourn the executive session.

History

Code 1981, § 50-14-4, enacted by Ga. L. 1988, p. 235, § 1; Ga. L. 1999, p. 549, § 3; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 1/HB 397.

O.C.G.A. § 50-14-5

§ 50-14-5. Jurisdiction to enforce chapter

(a) The superior courts of this state shall have jurisdiction to enforce compliance with the provisions of this chapter, including the power to grant injunctions or other equitable relief. In addition to any action that may be brought by any person, firm, corporation, or other entity, the Attorney General shall have authority to bring enforcement actions, either civil or criminal, in his or her discretion as may be appropriate to enforce compliance with this chapter.

(b) In any action brought to enforce the provisions of this chapter in which the court determines that an agency acted without substantial justification in not complying with this chapter, the court shall, unless it finds that special circumstances exist, assess in favor of the complaining party reasonable attorney's fees and other litigation costs reasonably incurred. Whether the position of the complaining party was substantially justified shall be determined on the basis of the record as a whole which is made in the proceeding for which fees and other expenses are sought.

(c) Any agency or person who provides access to information in good faith reliance on the requirements of this chapter shall not be liable in any action on account of having provided access to such information.

History

Code 1981, § 50-14-5, enacted by Ga. L. 1988, p. 235, § 1; Ga. L. 1992, p. 1061, § 4; Ga. L. 1998, p. 595, § 1; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 1/HB 397.

O.C.G.A. § 50-14-6

§ 50-14-6. Penalty for violation; defense

Any person knowingly and willfully conducting or participating in a meeting in violation of this chapter shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction shall be punished by a fine not to exceed \$1,000.00. Alternatively, a civil penalty may be imposed by the court in any civil action brought pursuant to this chapter against any person who negligently violates the terms of this chapter in an amount not to exceed \$1,000.00 for the first violation. A civil penalty or criminal fine not to exceed \$2,500.00 per violation may be imposed for each additional violation that the violator commits within a 12 month period from the date that the first penalty or fine was imposed. It shall be a defense to any criminal action under this Code section that a person has acted in good faith in his or her actions.

History

Code 1981, § 50-14-6, enacted by Ga. L. 1988, p. 235, § 1; Ga. L. 2012, p. 218, § 1/HB 397.

Appendix 5

ADDITIONAL OPEN GOVERNMENT RESOURCES

[Georgia Public Schools and the Open Records Act](#), 1st edition, 2007. Available from the Georgia First Amendment Foundation, gfaf.org.

[Georgia Law Enforcement and the Open Records Act](#), 2nd edition, 2005. Available from the Georgia First Amendment Foundation, gfaf.org.

[Fighting City Hall: Informal Methods of Combating Secrecy in Local Government](#), 1976. Ernest Morgan, Author. Available from the National Freedom of Information Coalition, nfoic.org.

[Access to Electronic Communications](#), 2009. Available from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, rcfp.org.

[Police Records: A Reporter's State-by-State Access Guide to Law Enforcement Records](#), 2008. Available from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, rcfp.org.

[Covering Campus Crime](#), 4th edition, 2009. Available from the Student Press Law Center, splc.org.

[Electronic Access to Court Records](#), 2007. Available from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, rcfp.org.

[Federal FOIA Appeals Wiki](#), 2016. Contributed by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, rcfp.org.

[Open Doors: Accessing Government Records](#). Available from the Society of Professional Journalists, spj.org.

[Open Government Guide](#), 2019. Available from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, rcfp.org.

[Privatization v. The Public's Right to Know](#), 2007. Available from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, rcfp.org.

Endnotes

- ¹ 262 Ga. 407 (1992) (Weltner, C.J., concurring)
- ² Ga. CONST. art. I, § 2, para. 1.
- ³ Louis D. Brandeis, What Publicity Can Do, HARPER'S WKLY., Dec. 20, 1913, reprinted in OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY AND HOW THE BANKERS USE IT 92 (1932)
- ⁴ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-70(b)(2); Smith v. Northside Hospital, 302 Ga. 517, 521 (2017)
- ⁵ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-70(a)
- ⁶ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-70(b)(2)
- ⁷ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-70(b)(2)
- ⁸ Smith v. Northside Hospital, 302 Ga. 517, 529-30 (2017)
- ⁹ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71(i). Similarly, images of deeds, liens and plats available through a statewide online information system and an index of that data satisfy the definition of a public record subject to the Law. 2012 Op. Atty. Gen. 12-5
- ¹⁰ Mullins v. City of Griffin, 886 F. Supp. 21 (N.D. Ga. 1995)
- ¹¹ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-72(b)
- ¹² Campaign for Accountability v. Consumer Credit Research Found., 303 Ga. 828 (2018)
- ¹³ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-73 (a); Atchison v. Hospital Authority of City of St. Marys, 245 Ga. 494 (1980)
- ¹⁴ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71(b)(3)
- ¹⁵ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71(b)(1)(B), (2)
- ¹⁶ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71(b)(1)(A)
- ¹⁷ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71(b)(1)(A)
- ¹⁸ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71(f)
- ¹⁹ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71(h)
- ²⁰ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71(d); Unified Gov't of Athens-Clarke Cnty. v. Athens Newspapers, LLC, 284 Ga. 192 (2008); Hoffman v. Oxendine, 268 Ga. App. 316 (2004)
- ²¹ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-71(c)(2)
- ²² McFrugal Rental v. Garr, 262 Ga. 369 (1992); Theragenics Corp. v. Dep't of Natural Res., 244 Ga. App. 829 (2000)
- ²³ Trammell v. Martin, 200 Ga. App. 435, 436 (1991)
- ²⁴ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-73; Cent. Atlanta Progress v. Baker, 278 Ga. App. 733 (2006)
- ²⁵ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-73(b)
- ²⁶ O.C.G.A. § 50-18-74(a)
- ²⁷ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(a)(3)(A)
- ²⁸ Coggin v. Davey, 233 Ga. 407 (1975)
- ²⁹ R.W. Page v. Lumpkin, 249 Ga. 576 (1982); Atlanta Journal v. Long, 258 Ga. 410 (1988); 1979 Op. Atty. Gen. 79-25
- ³⁰ Claxton Enter. v. Evans Cnty. Bd. of Comm'rs, 249 Ga. App. 870, 875 (2001)
- ³¹ See Jersawitz v. Fortson, 213 Ga. App. 796 (1994)
- ³² See O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(b)(2)
- ³³ Claxton Enter. v. Evans Cnty. Bd. of Comm'rs, 249 Ga. App. 870, 873 (2001)
- ³⁴ Decatur Cnty. v. Bainbridge Post Searchlight, Inc., 280 Ga. 706, 707 (2006)
- ³⁵ The Georgia Supreme Court has determined that the attorney-client exception to

the Open Meetings Law applies to discussions of potential litigation in limited circumstances. The Court has stressed that “potential litigation” does not include an “unrealized or idle threat of litigation.” Rather, to close a meeting under the attorney-client exception to discuss potential litigation, the government entity must show “a realistic and tangible threat of legal action against it or its officer[s] or employee[s], a threat that goes beyond a mere fear or suspicion of being sued.” The Court provided a non-exhaustive list of factors for determining whether a tangible threat of litigation exists, including: (1) a formal demand letter or other writing showing an intent to sue; (2) prior or ongoing litigation between the parties; or (3) proof that a party has retained an attorney and expressed an intent to sue. *Decatur Cnty. v. Bainbridge Post Searchlight, Inc.*, 280 Ga. 706, 708 (2006) (quoting *Claxton Enter. v. Evans Cnty. Bd. of Comm’rs*, 249 Ga. App. 870, 873 (2001))

³⁶ See 1995 Op. Atty. Gen. U95-22

³⁷ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(c)

³⁸ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(d)(1)–(3)

³⁹ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(e)(1)

⁴⁰ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(b)(2); *Moon v. Terrell Cnty.*, 249 Ga. App. 567, 569 (2001)

⁴¹ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-6

⁴² *Steele v. Honea*, 261 Ga. 644, 646 (1991)

⁴³ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-5(a),(b); *Howard v. Sumter Free Press, Inc.*, 272 Ga. 521 (2000)

⁴⁴ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-5(b); *Moon v. Terrell Cnty.*, 260 Ga. App. 433, 435 (2003)

⁴⁵ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-4(b)(1)

⁴⁶ O.C.G.A. § 50-14-1(e)(2)(C)

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