

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS

BILL #: PCB OTA 18-09 OGSR/Agency Employee Misconduct
SPONSOR(S): Oversight, Transparency & Administration Subcommittee
TIED BILLS: **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** SB 7018

REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR or BUDGET/POLICY CHIEF
Orig. Comm.: Oversight, Transparency & Administration Subcommittee		Toliver	Harrington

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

The Open Government Sunset Review Act requires the Legislature to review each public record and each public meeting exemption five years after enactment. If the Legislature does not reenact the exemption, it automatically repeals on October 2nd of the fifth year after enactment.

Current law protects complaints of misconduct filed with an agency against an agency employee and all information obtained from an investigation by the agency of the complaint of misconduct. The records are confidential and exempt from public record requirements until the investigation ceases to be active or the agency provides written notice to the employee that the agency has concluded the investigation with a finding to proceed with disciplinary action or to not proceed with disciplinary action.

The bill reenacts the public record exemption, which will repeal on October 2, 2018, if this bill does not become law.

The bill does not appear to have a fiscal impact on state or local governments.

FULL ANALYSIS

I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

A. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

Background

Open Government Sunset Review Act

The Open Government Sunset Review Act (Act)¹ sets forth a legislative review process for newly created or substantially amended public record or public meeting exemptions. It requires an automatic repeal of the exemption on October 2nd of the fifth year after creation or substantial amendment, unless the Legislature reenacts the exemption.²

The Act provides that a public record or public meeting exemption may be created or maintained only if it serves an identifiable public purpose. In addition, it may be no broader than is necessary to meet one of the following purposes:

- Allow the state or its political subdivisions to effectively and efficiently administer a governmental program, which administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption.
- Protect sensitive personal information that, if released, would be defamatory or would jeopardize an individual's safety; however, only the identity of an individual may be exempted under this provision.
- Protect trade or business secrets.³

If, and only if, in reenacting an exemption that will repeal, the exemption is expanded (essentially creating a new exemption), then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are required.⁴ If the exemption is reenacted with grammatical or stylistic changes that do not expand the exemption, if the exemption is narrowed, or if an exception to the exemption is created then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are not required.

Public Record Exemption under Review

Current law requires that complaints of misconduct filed with an agency⁵ against an agency employee be kept confidential and exempt⁶ from public records requirements.⁷ If an agency investigates such a complaint, the information obtained from the investigation is also confidential and exempt.⁸ The complaint and the investigative information remain confidential and exempt until either the investigation ceases to be active or the agency provides written notice to the employee who is the subject of the complaint.⁹ The written notice may be delivered personally or by mail and must state that the agency

¹ Section 119.15, F.S.

² Section 119.15(3), F.S.

³ Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S.

⁴ Section 24(c), Art. I, FLA. CONST.

⁵ Section 119.011(2), F.S., defines "agency" to mean any state, county, district, authority, or municipal officer, department, division, board, bureau, commission, or other separate unit of government created or established by law including, for the purposes of this chapter, the Commission on Ethics, the Public Service Commission, and the Office of Public Counsel, and any other public or private agency, person, partnership, corporation, or business entity acting on behalf of any public agency.

⁶ There is a difference between records the Legislature designates exempt from public record requirements and those the Legislature deems confidential and exempt. A record classified as exempt from public disclosure may be disclosed under certain circumstances. (*See WFTV, Inc. v. The School Board of Seminole*, 874 So.2d 48, 53 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004), review denied 892 So.2d 1015 (Fla. 2004); *City of Riviera Beach v. Barfield*, 642 So.2d 1135 (Fla. 4th DCA 1994); *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So.2d 687 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991). If the Legislature designates a record as confidential and exempt from public disclosure, such record may not be released, by the custodian of public records, to anyone other than the persons or entities specifically designated in statute. (*See Attorney General Opinion 85-62*, August 1, 1985).

⁷ Section 119.071(2)(k)1., F.S.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

has concluded the investigation with a finding to proceed with disciplinary action or file charges¹⁰ or not to proceed.¹¹

The 2013 public necessity statement¹² for the exemption provides the following policy rationale for its enactment:

The disclosure of information, such as the nature of the complaint against an agency employee and testimony and evidence given in the investigation of the complaint, could injure an individual and deter that person from providing information pertaining to internal investigations, thus impairing the ability of an agency to conduct an investigation that is fair and reasonable. In the performance of its lawful duties and responsibilities, an agency may need to obtain information for the purpose of determining an administrative action. Without an exemption from public record requirements to protect information of a sensitive personal nature provided to an agency in the course of an internal investigation, such information becomes a public record when received and must be divulged upon request. Disclosure of information obtained during an internal investigation conducted by an agency inhibits voluntary participation of individuals during internal investigations and makes it difficult if not impossible to determine the truth.¹³

Pursuant to the Open Government Sunset Review Act, the public meeting exemption will repeal on October 2, 2018, unless reenacted by the Legislature.

Open Government Sunset Review Results

During the 2017 interim, subcommittee staff sent a questionnaire to every state agency, county, city, sheriff's office, public defender's office, and state attorney's office. In all, 62 questionnaire responses were received.¹⁴ A majority of respondents recommended that the exemption be reenacted without changes and no respondents recommended letting the exemption repeal. Many respondents reported that their agency had received public record requests for the exempt information. The most common rationale offered for maintaining the exemption was that the temporary confidentiality it afforded the agency allowed it to maintain the fairness and integrity of the investigation that in turn encouraged all parties involved to be candid and forthcoming.

Effect of the Bill

The bill removes the repeal date thereby reenacting the public records exemption for complaints of misconduct filed with an agency against an agency employee and all information obtained from an investigation by the agency of the complaint of misconduct.

B. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1 amends s. 119.071, F.S., to save from repeal the public records exemption for complaints of misconduct and information obtained from an investigation stemming from a complaint of misconduct.

Section 2 provides an effective October 1, 2018.

¹⁰ Section 119.071(2)(k)1.b., F.S.

¹¹ Section 119.071(2)(k)1.a., F.S.

¹² Article I, s. 24(c), FLA. CONST., requires each public record exemption "state with specificity the public necessity statement justifying" its existence.

¹³ Chapter 2013-248, L.O.F.

¹⁴ The questionnaire and responses are on file with the House Oversight, Transparency & Administration Subcommittee.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

None.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.

III. COMMENTS

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

Not applicable. The bill does not appear to require counties or municipalities to take an action requiring the expenditure of funds, reduce the authority that counties or municipalities have to raise revenue in the aggregate, nor reduce the percentage of state tax shared with counties or municipalities.

2. Other:

None.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

None.

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

None.

IV. AMENDMENTS/ COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES

Not applicable.