

# Legislative Recommendations - General

We currently have two main issues we recommend the Legislature consider addressing regarding the obligations and concerns of public entities with regard to public records requests. Although there are exceptions, if a local public entity withholds or hesitates to disclose requested records it is usually for one or more of the following reasons:

1. **They do not understand their obligations under the public records laws.**
2. **They fear reprisals – public or legal -- for disclosing what should not be disclosed, or what the person who is the subject matter of the request believes should not be disclosed.** Typically risk-averse by nature of the job, they err on the side of non-disclosure.

Each of these is addressed further below, with recommendations.

## 1. They do not understand their obligations under the public records laws.

Most public entities have at least one person on staff or on the governing board who knows to consult ORS chapter 192 as well as the AG's *Public Records and Meetings Manual* for guidance on public records questions. And, those who have an attorney to advise them will usually consult with him or her when in doubt about how to respond.

Clarifying and streamlining ORS chapter 192 so that it is easier for a layperson to read, and revising the AG's Manual accordingly, would help to encourage timely compliance by creating as much of a "bright line" as possible for public entities to know what the law does and does not require.

Continued emphasis should be placed on education and training of public officials, both staff (who typically respond to records request) and elected officials (who turn over about every four years and often have no experience working in the public sector). Opportunities for the AG's office and the Office of the Public Records Advocate to work with other organizations that provide this kind of training should continue to be explored. Such organizations include the Association of Oregon Counties, League of Oregon Cities, and Special Districts Association of Oregon.

2. They fear reprisals – public or legal -- for disclosing what should not be disclosed, or what the person who is the subject matter of the request believes should not be disclosed.

The fear of public reprisals can be mitigated somewhat by providing clarifying direction as discussed in section 1 above. With respect to legal protections, ORS chapter 192 already includes three statutes that protect public entities from liability for inadvertently, or otherwise acting in good faith, disclosing protected information:

**192.335 Immunity from liability for disclosure of public record; effect of disclosure on privilege.** (1) A public body that, acting in good faith, discloses a public record in response to a request for public records is not liable for any loss or damages based on the disclosure unless the disclosure is affirmatively prohibited by state or federal law or by a court order applicable to the public body. Nothing in this subsection shall be interpreted to create liability on the part of a public body, or create a cause of action against a public body, based on the disclosure of a public record.

(2) A public body that discloses any information or record in response to a written request for public records under ORS 192.311 to 192.478 that is privileged under ORS 40.225 to 40.295 does not waive its right to assert the applicable privilege to prevent the introduction of the information or record as evidence pursuant to ORS 40.225 to 40.295.

**192.368 Nondisclosure on request of home address, home telephone number and electronic mail address; rules of procedure; duration of effect of request; liability; when not applicable.**

(1) An individual may submit a written request to a public body not to disclose a specified public record indicating the home address, personal telephone number or electronic mail address of the individual. A public body may not disclose the specified public record if the individual demonstrates to the satisfaction of the public body that the personal safety of the individual or the personal safety of a family member residing with the individual is in danger if the home address, personal telephone number or electronic mail address remains available for public inspection.

\*\*\* (5) A public body may not be held liable for granting or denying an exemption from disclosure under this section or any other unauthorized release of a home address, personal telephone number or electronic mail address granted an exemption from disclosure under this section.

**192.380 Immunity from liability for disclosure of certain personal information; recovery of costs.** (1) A public body or any official of the public body that determines that a party requesting information under ORS 192.355 (3), 192.363 or 192.365 has demonstrated by clear and

convincing evidence that the public interest requires disclosure in a particular instance is immune from civil or criminal liability associated with the disclosure.

(2) A public body that receives a request for disclosure of records under ORS 192.355 (3) or 192.365 is entitled to recover the cost of complying with ORS 192.363 without regard to whether the public body determines that the party requesting disclosure has demonstrated by clear and convincing evidence that the public interest requires disclosure in a particular instance.

It would be clearer and more powerful to combine these into one overarching statute, and possibly move it toward the beginning of the chapter to emphasize this protection.