

The Public Information Act

Texas Government Code, Chapter 552, gives you the right to access government records; and an officer for public information and the officer's agent may not ask why you want them. All government information is presumed to be available to the public. Certain exceptions may apply to the disclosure of the information. Governmental bodies shall **promptly** release requested information that is not confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision, or information for which an exception to disclosure has not been sought.

Rights of Requestors

You have the right to:

- Prompt access to information that is not confidential or otherwise protected;
- Receive treatment **equal** to all other requestors, including accommodation in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements;
- Receive certain kinds of **information without exceptions**, like the voting record of public officials, and other information;
- Receive a **written statement of estimated charges**, when charges will exceed \$40, in advance of work being started and opportunity to modify the request in response to the itemized statement;
- Choose whether to inspect the requested information (most often at no charge), receive copies of the information or both;
- A **waiver** or reduction of charges if the governmental body determines that access to the information primarily benefits the general public;
- Receive a copy of the communication from the governmental body asking the Office of the Attorney General for a ruling on whether the information can be withheld under one of the accepted exceptions, or if the communication discloses the requested information, a redacted copy;
- Lodge a written complaint about overcharges for public information with the Office of the Attorney General. Complaints of other possible violations may be filed with the county or district attorney of the county where the governmental body, other than a state agency, is located. If the complaint is against the county or district attorney, the complaint must be filed with the Office of the Attorney General.

Responsibilities of Governmental Bodies

All governmental bodies responding to information requests have the responsibility to:

- Establish **reasonable procedures** for inspecting or copying public information and inform requestors of these procedures;
- Treat **all** requestors uniformly and shall give to the requestor all reasonable comfort and facility, including accommodation in accordance with ADA requirements;
- Be informed about open records laws and educate employees on the requirements of those laws;
- Inform requestors of the estimated charges greater than \$40 and any changes in the estimates above 20 percent of the original estimate, and **confirm that the requestor** accepts the charges, has amended the request, or has sent a complaint of overcharges to the Office of the Attorney General, in writing before finalizing the request;
- Inform the requestor if the information cannot be provided promptly and set a **date and time to provide it** within a reasonable time;
- Request a **ruling from the Office of the Attorney General** regarding any information the governmental body wishes to withhold, and send a copy of the request for ruling, or a redacted copy, to the requestor;
- **Segregate** public information from information that may be withheld and provide that public information **promptly**;
- Make a good faith attempt to **inform third parties** when their proprietary information is being requested from the governmental body;
- Respond in writing to all written communications from the Office of the Attorney General regarding charges for the information. Respond to the Office of the Attorney General regarding complaints about violations of the Act.

Procedures to Obtain Information

- ✓ Submit a request by mail, fax, email or in person according to a governmental body's reasonable procedures.
- ✓ Include enough description and detail about the information requested to enable the governmental body to accurately identify and locate the information requested.
- ✓ Cooperate with the governmental body's reasonable efforts to clarify the type or amount of information requested.

A. Information to be released

- You may review it promptly, and if it cannot be produced within 10 working days the public information officer will notify you in writing of the reasonable date and time when it will be available.
- Keep all appointments to inspect records and to pick up copies. Failure to keep appointments may result in losing the opportunity to inspect the information at the time requested.

Cost of Records

- **You must respond to any written estimate of charges within 10 business days of the date the governmental body sent it or the request is considered automatically withdrawn.**
- If estimated costs exceed \$100.00 (or \$50.00 if a governmental body has fewer than 16 full time employees) the governmental body may require a bond, prepayment or deposit.
- You may ask the governmental body to determine whether providing the information primarily benefits the general public, resulting in a waiver or reduction of charges.
- Make a timely payment for all mutually agreed charges. A governmental body can demand payment of overdue balances exceeding \$100.00, or obtain a security deposit, before processing additional requests from you.

B. Information that may be withheld due to an exception

- By the 10th business day after a governmental body receives your written request, a governmental body must:
 1. request an Attorney General opinion and state which exceptions apply;
 2. notify the requestor of the referral to the Attorney General; and
 3. notify third parties if the request involves their proprietary information.
- Failure to request an Attorney General opinion and notify the requestor within 10 business days will result in a presumption that the information is open unless there is a compelling reason to withhold it.
- Requestors may send a letter to the Attorney General arguing for release, and may review arguments made by the governmental body. If the arguments disclose the requested information, the requestor may obtain a redacted copy.
- The Attorney General must issue a decision no later than the 45th working day from the day after the attorney general received the request for a decision. The attorney general may request an additional 10 working day extension.
- Governmental bodies may not ask the Attorney General to "reconsider" an opinion.

To request information from the Harris County Auditor's Office of this governmental body, please contact:

By Mail: Harris County Auditor's Office
Public Information Coordinator
1001 Preston, Suite 800
Houston, TX 77002

By E-mail to: AuditorsInternetEmail@hctx.net

By Fax to: 713-437-4813

In person at: 1001 Preston, Suite 800, Houston, TX 77002

For complaints regarding failure to release public information please contact your local County or District Attorney. Please ask and you will be provided with this information.

- You may also contact the **Office of the Attorney General**, Open Government Hotline, at 512-478-6736 or toll-free at 1-877-673-6839.
- For complaints regarding overcharges, please contact the **Office of the Attorney General's Cost Rules Administrator** at 512-475-2497.

If you need special accommodation pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), please contact our ADA coordinator, _____ at _____.

REQUESTS FOR PUBLIC INFORMATION FROM THE HARRIS COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

REFERENCES

County Auditor's Form 9, *Public Records Request Form*

PURPOSE

To prescribe the method and manner for requesting public information from and in the custody of the Harris County Auditor's Office.

BACKGROUND

Pursuant to VTCA, Government Code, Chapter 552, it is the policy of the State of Texas that each person is entitled, except where expressly provided by law, to complete information about the affairs of government and official acts of officials and employees at all times. The chapter shall be liberally construed in favor of granting a request for information. This chapter authorizes the administrative officers of the Harris County departments to prescribe reasonable rules of procedure under which public records, in their custody, may be inspected at any time during normal business hours.

INTRODUCTION

Public information is defined as information collected, assembled, or maintained by or for a governmental body which owns or has right of access to it. This procedure does not apply to disclosure of proprietary information routinely requested by vendors (i.e., information regarding their own accounts with the Harris County), personnel information authorized, in writing, by the inquired upon employee (i.e., employment verifications), or information requested by other governmental departments. Likewise, disclosure of published media, such as monthly or annual reports or budget manuals, do not require an open records request before being released. Information is excepted from disclosure if it is considered confidential by law or otherwise allowed by State statute.

Public information requests must be submitted in writing via mail, email, fax, or in person. A request should include enough description and detail about the information requested that we can accurately identify and locate the information requested. We may contact the requestor only to clarify the type, amount, etc., of information requested. Requests for information not maintained in the Harris County Auditor's Office should be submitted to the other appropriate department/entity directly. The Harris County Auditor's Office may try to suggest such other department/entity to the requestor accordingly.

Public information may be disclosed orally, via email, by providing personal examination of physical records, or by reproducing the records. All requests for information received by the Harris County Auditor's Office must be directed to the Systems & Procedures Department.

Additionally, the Harris County Auditor's Office Public Information Coordinator will require an 85% deposit from the requestor if the request requires charges and is determined to cost more than \$100.00 prior to having the information gathered by the applicable processing department.

STEPS TO OBTAIN PUBLIC INFORMATION

1. Requestor submits the public information request in writing (letter/form) to the Harris County Auditor's Office via mail, email, fax, or in person, detailing exactly what information is being requested.

Mailing address: Harris County Auditor's Office
Public Information Coordinator
1001 Preston, Suite 800
Houston, TX 77002

Email address: AuditorsInternetEmail@hctx.net

Fax number: 713-437-4813

2. Requestor includes on the request the contact name, phone number(s), email address, and preference they have as to contacting them, if necessary.