VIRGINIA ACTS OF ASSEMBLY -- 2017 SESSION

CHAPTER 645

An Act to amend and reenact §§ 2.2-3704.1 and 30-179 of the Code of Virginia, relating to the Virginia Freedom of Information Act; Freedom of Information Advisory Council; online public comment form.

[H 2146]

Approved March 20, 2017

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That §§ 2.2-3704.1 and 30-179 of the Code of Virginia are amended and reenacted as follows:

§ 2.2-3704.1. Posting of notice of rights and responsibilities by state and local public bodies; assistance by the Freedom of Information Advisory Council.

A. All state public bodies subject to the provisions of this chapter and any county or city, and any town with a population of more than 250, shall make available the following information to the public upon request and shall post a link to such information on the homepage of their respective public government websites:

1. A plain English explanation of the rights of a requester under this chapter, the procedures to obtain public records from the public body, and the responsibilities of the public body in complying with this chapter. For purposes of this section, "plain English" means written in nontechnical, readily understandable language using words of common everyday usage and avoiding legal terms and phrases or other terms and words of art whose usage or special meaning primarily is limited to a particular field or profession;

2. Contact information for the FOIA officer designated by the public body pursuant to § 2.2-3704.2 to (i) assist a requester in making a request for records or (ii) respond to requests for public records;

3. A general description, summary, list, or index of the types of public records maintained by such state public body;

4. A general description, summary, list, or index of any exemptions in law that permit or require such public records to be withheld from release;

5. Any policy the public body has concerning the type of public records it routinely withholds from release as permitted by this chapter or other law; and

6. The following statement: "A public body may make reasonable charges not to exceed its actual cost incurred in accessing, duplicating, supplying, or searching for the requested records. No public body shall impose any extraneous, intermediary, or surplus fees or expenses to recoup the general costs associated with creating or maintaining records or transacting the general business of the public body. Any duplicating fee charged by a public body shall not exceed the actual cost of duplication. All charges for the supplying of requested records shall be estimated in advance at the request of the citizen as set forth in subsection F of § 2.2-3704 of the Code of Virginia."

B. Any state public body subject to the provisions of this chapter and any county or city, and any town with a population of more than 250, shall post a link on its official public government website to the online public comment form on the Freedom of Information Advisory Council's website to enable any requester to comment on the quality of assistance provided to the requester by the public body.

~~B.~~ *C.* The Freedom of Information Advisory Council, created pursuant to § 30-178, shall assist in the development and implementation of the provisions of subsection A, upon request.

§ 30-179. Powers and duties of the Council.

The Council shall:

1. Furnish, upon request, advisory opinions or guidelines, and other appropriate information regarding the Freedom of Information Act (§ 2.2-3700 et seq.) to any person or agency of state or local government, in an expeditious manner;

2. Conduct training seminars and educational programs for the members and staff of public bodies and other interested persons on the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act (§ 2.2-3700 et seq.);

3. Publish such educational materials as it deems appropriate on the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act (§ 2.2-3700 et seq.);

4. Request from any agency of state or local government such assistance, services and information as will enable the Council to effectively carry out its responsibilities. Information provided to the Council by an agency of state or local government shall not be released to any other party unless authorized by such agency;

5. Assist in the development and implementation of the provisions of § 2.2-3704.1;

6. Develop the public comment form for use by designated public bodies in accordance with subsection F of § 2.2-3708; ~~and~~

7. Develop an online public comment form to be posted on the Council's official public government website to enable any requester to comment on the quality of assistance provided to the requester by a

public body; and

~~7.~~ *8.* Report annually on or before December 1 of each year on its activities and findings regarding the Freedom of Information Act (§ 2.2-3700 et seq.), including recommendations for changes in the law, to the General Assembly and the Governor. The annual report shall be published as a state document.