

BANGOR COMMUNITY FIRE DEPARTMENT
VAN BUREN COUNTY, MICHIGAN

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT PROCEDURES & GUIDELINES

Preamble: Statement of Principles

It is the policy of the Bangor Community Fire Department that all persons, except those who are serving a sentence of imprisonment, consistent with the Michigan Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), are entitled to full and complete information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts of those who represent them as public officials and employees. The people shall be informed so that they fully participate in the democratic process.

The Bangor Community Fire Department policy with respect to FOIA requests is to comply with State law in all respects and to respond to FOIA requests in a consistent, fair, and even-handed manner regardless of who makes such a request.

The Bangor Community Fire Department acknowledges that it has a legal obligation to disclose all nonexempt public records in its possession pursuant to a FOIA request. Bangor Community Fire Department acknowledges that sometimes it is necessary to invoke the exemptions identified under FOIA in order to ensure the effective operation of government and to protect the privacy of individuals.

Bangor Community Fire Department will protect the public's interest in disclosure, while balancing the requirement to withhold or redact portions of certain records. Bangor Community Fire Department policy is to disclose public records consistent with and in compliance with State law.

Section 1: General Policies

Bangor Community Fire Department acting pursuant to the authority at MCL 15.236 designates the Departments attorney as the departments FOIA Coordinator. He or she is authorized designate other department staff to act on his or her behalf to accept and process written requests for the departments public records and approve denials.

If a request for a public record is received by facsimile or e-mail, the request is deemed to have been received on the following business day. If a request is sent by e-mail and delivered to a department spam or junk-mail folder, the request is not deemed received until one day after the FOIA Coordinator first becomes aware of the request. The FOIA Coordinator shall note in the FOIA log both the date the request was delivered to the spam or junk-mail folder and the date the FOIA Coordinator became aware of the request.

The FOIA Coordinator may, in his or her discretion, implement administrative rules, consistent with State law and these Procedures and Guidelines to administer the acceptance and processing of FOIA requests.

Bangor Community Fire Department is not obligated to create a new public record or make a compilation or summary of information which does not already exist. Neither the FOIA Coordinator nor other department staff are obligated to provide answers to questions contained in requests for public records or regarding the content of the records themselves.

The FOIA Coordinator shall keep a copy of all written requests for public records received by the Department on file for a period of at least one year.

Section 2: Inspection of Records

Upon receiving a verbal request to inspect Fire Department records, the Fire Department shall furnish the requesting person with a reasonable opportunity and reasonable facilities for inspection and examination of its public records.

A person shall be allowed to inspect public records during usual business hours, not less than four hours per day. The public does not have unlimited access to Fire Department offices or facilities, and a person may be required to inspect records at a specified counter or table, and in view of Fire Department personnel.

Fire Department officials, appointees, staff or consultants/contractors assisting with inspection of public records shall inform any person inspecting records that only pencils, and no pens or ink, may be used to take notes.

The FOIA coordinator is responsible for identifying if records or information requested by the public is stored in digital files or e-mail, even if the public does not specifically request a digital file or e-mail.

A person cannot remove books, records or files from the place the Fire Department has provided for the inspection.

No documents shall be removed from the office of the custodian of those documents without permission of that custodian, except by court order, subpoena or for audit purposes. The official shall be given a receipt listing the records being removed. Documents may be removed from the office of the custodian of those documents with permission of that custodian to accommodate public inspection of those documents.

In coordination with the official responsible for the records, the FOIA coordinator will determine on a case-by-case basis when the Fire Department will provide copies of original records for inspection, to allow for blacking out exempt information, to protect old or delicate original records, or because the original record is a digital file or database not available for public inspection.

A fee will be charged for copies made to enable public inspection of records, according to the Fire Department FOIA policy.

Section 3: Requesting Copies of Public Records

A person requesting to inspect or obtain copies of public records prepared, owned, used, possessed or retained by Bangor Community Fire Department must do so in writing. The request must sufficiently describe a public record so as to enable City personnel to identify and find the requested public record.

No specific form to submit a request for a public record is required. However the FOIA Coordinator may make available a FOIA Request Form for use by the public.

Written requests for public records may be submitted in person or by mail. Requests may also be submitted electronically by facsimile and e-mail. Upon their receipt, requests for public records shall be promptly forwarded to the FOIA Coordinator for processing.

A person may request that public records be provided on non-paper physical media, electronically mailed or other otherwise provided to him or her in lieu of paper copies. The Fire Department will comply with the request only if it possesses the necessary technological capability to provide records in the requested non-paper physical media format.

A person who makes a verbal, non-written request for information believed to be available on the Fire Department website, where practicable and to the best ability of the employee receiving the request, shall be informed of the pertinent website address.

A person serving a sentence of imprisonment in a local, state or federal correctional facility is not entitled to submit a request for a public record. The FOIA Coordinator will deny all such requests.

Section 4: Processing a Request

Unless otherwise agreed to in writing by the person making the request, within five (5) business days of receipt of a FOIA request the Fire Department will issue a response. If a request is received by facsimile, e-mail or other electronic transmission, the request is deemed to have been received on the following business day. The City will respond to the request in one of the following ways:

- Grant the request.
- Issue a written notice denying the request.
- Grant the request in part and issue a written notice denying in part the request.
- Issue a notice indicating that due to the nature of the request the Fire Department needs an additional 10 business days to respond. Only one such extension is permitted.
- Issue a written notice indicating that the public record requested is available at no charge on the Fire Department website.

If the request is granted, or granted in part, the FOIA Coordinator will require that payment be made in full for the allowable fees associated with responding to the request before the public record is made available. The FOIA Coordinator shall provide a detailed itemization of the allowable costs incurred to process the request to the person making the request. A copy of these Procedures and Guidelines shall be provided to the requesting party with the response to a written request for public records, provided however, that if these Procedures and Guidelines, and its Written Public Summary are maintained on the Fire Department website, then a website link to those documents may be provided in lieu of providing paper copies.

If the cost of processing a FOIA request is \$50.00 or less, the requester will be notified of the amount due and where the documents can be obtained.

If based on a good faith calculation by the Fire Department, the cost of processing a FOIA request is expected to exceed \$50.00, or if the requesting party has not fully paid for a previously granted request, the Fire Department will require a good-faith deposit before processing the request. In making the request for a good-faith deposit the FOIA Coordinator shall provide the requesting party with a detailed itemization of the allowable costs estimated to be incurred by the Fire Department to process the request and also provide a best efforts estimate of a time frame it will take the Fire Department to provide the records to the requesting party. The best efforts estimate shall be nonbinding on the Fire Department, but will be made in good faith and will strive to be reasonably accurate, given the nature of the request in the particular instance, so as to provide the requested records in a manner based on the public policy expressed by Section 1 of the FOIA.

If the request is denied or denied in part, the FOIA Coordinator will issue a Notice of Denial which shall provide in the applicable circumstance:

- An explanation as to why a requested public record is exempt from disclosure; or
- A certificate that the requested record does not exist under the name or description provided by the requesting party, or another name reasonably known by the Fire Department; or
- An explanation or description of the public record or information within a public record that is separated or deleted from the public record; and
- An explanation of the person's right to submit an appeal of the denial to either the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board or seek judicial review in the Van Buren County Circuit Court; and

- An explanation of the right to receive attorneys' fees, costs, and disbursements as well actual or compensatory damages, and punitive damages of \$1,000.00, should they prevail in Circuit Court.
- The Notice of Denial shall be signed by the FOIA Coordinator.

If a request does not sufficiently describe a public record, the FOIA Coordinator may, in lieu of issuing a Notice of Denial indicating that the request is deficient, seek clarification or amendment of the request by the person making the request. Any clarification or amendment will be considered a new request subject to the timelines described in this Section.

The Fire Department shall provide reasonable facilities and opportunities for persons to examine and inspect public records during normal business hours. The FOIA Coordinator is authorized to promulgate rules regulating the manner in which records may be viewed so as to protect Fire Department records from loss, alteration, mutilation or destruction and to prevent excessive interference with normal Fire Department operations.

The FOIA Coordinator shall, upon written request, furnish a certified copy of a public record at no additional cost to the person requesting the public record.

Section 5: Fee Deposits

If the fee estimate is expected to exceed \$50.00 based on a good-faith calculation by the Fire Department, the requesting party will be asked to provide a deposit not exceeding one-half of the total estimated fee.

If a request for public records is from a person who has not fully paid the Fire Department for copies of public records made in fulfillment of a previously granted written request, the FOIA Coordinator will require a deposit of 100% of the estimated processing fee before beginning to search for a public record for any subsequent written request by that person when all of the following conditions exist:

- the final fee for the prior written request is not more than 105% of the estimated fee;
- the public records made available contained the information sought in the prior written request and remain in the Fire Department possession;
- the public records were made available to the individual, subject to payment, within the time frame estimated by the Fire Department to provide the records;
- 90 days have passed since the FOIA Coordinator notified the individual in writing that the public records were available for pickup or mailing;
- the individual is unable to show proof of prior payment to the Fire Department; and
- the FOIA Coordinator has calculated a detailed itemization that is the basis for the current written request's increased estimated fee deposit.

The FOIA Coordinator will not require an increased estimated fee deposit if any of the following apply:

- the person making the request is able to show proof of prior payment in full to the Fire Department;
- the Fire Department is subsequently paid in full for the applicable prior written request; or
- 365 days have passed since the person made the request for which full payment was not remitted to the Fire Department.

Section 6: Calculation of Fees

A fee will not be charged for the cost of search, examination, review and the deletion and separation of exempt from nonexempt information unless failure to charge a fee would result in unreasonably high costs to the Fire Department because of the nature of the request in the particular instance, and the Fire Department specifically identifies the nature of the unreasonably high costs.

The following factors shall be used to determine an unreasonably high cost to the Fire Department:

- The particular request incurs costs greater than incurred from the typical or usual request received by the Fire Department.
- Volume of the public record requested
- Amount of time spent to search for, examine, review and separate exempt from non-exempt information in the record requested.
- Whether public records from more than one Fire Department is necessary to respond to the request.
- The available staffing to respond to the request.
- Any other similar factors identified by the FOIA Coordinator in responding to the particular request.

The Fire Department may charge for the following costs associated with processing a FOIA request:

- Labor costs directly associated with searching for, locating and examining a requested public record.
- Labor costs associated with a review of a record to separate and delete information exempt from disclosure of information which is disclosed.
- The actual cost of computer discs, computer tapes or other digital or similar media.
- The cost of duplication of publication, not including labor, of paper copies of public records.
- The cost of labor associated with duplication or publication, including making paper copies, making digital copies or transferring digital public records to non-paper physical media or through the Internet or other electronic means.
- The actual cost of mailing or sending a public record.

Labor costs will be calculated based on the following requirements:

- All labor costs will be estimated and charged in 15 minute increments with all partial time increments rounded down*.
- Labor costs will be charged at the hourly wage of the lowest-paid City employee capable of doing the work in the specific fee category, regardless of who actually performs work.
- Labor costs will also include a charge to cover or partially cover the cost of fringe benefits. The Fire Department may add up to 50% to the applicable labor charge amount to cover or partially cover the cost of fringe benefits, but in no case may it exceed the actual cost of fringe benefits.
- Overtime wages will not be included in labor costs until agreed to by the requesting party; overtime costs will not be used to calculate the fringe benefit cost.

The cost to provide records on non-paper physical media when so requested will be based on the following requirements:

*The cost of labor directly associated with duplication, publication or transferring records to nonpaper physical media can be charged in time increments of the public body's choosing with all partial increments rounded down.

- Computer disks, computer tapes or other digital or similar media will be at the actual and most reasonably economical cost for the non-paper media.
- This cost will only be assessed if the Fire Department has the technological capability necessary to provide the public record in the requested non-paper physical media format.
- In order to ensure the integrity and security of the Fire Department technological infrastructure, the Fire Department will procure any requested non-paper media and will not accept non-paper media from the requesting party

The cost to provide paper copies of records will be based on the following requirements:

- Paper copies of public records made on standard letter (8 ½ x 11) or legal (8 ½ x 14) sized paper will not exceed \$0.10 per sheet of paper. Copies for non-standard sized sheets of paper will reflect the actual cost of reproduction.
- The Fire Department may provide records using double-sided printing, if cost-saving and available.

The cost to mail records to a requesting party will be based on the following requirements:

- The actual cost to mail public records using a reasonably economical and justified means.
- The Fire Department may charge for the least expensive form of postal delivery confirmation.
- No cost will be made for expedited shipping or insurance unless requested.

If the FOIA Coordinator does not respond to a written request in a timely manner, the following shall be required:

- Reduce the labor costs by 5% for each day the Fire Department exceeds the time permitted under FOIA up to a 50% maximum reduction, if any of the following applies:
 - The late response was willful and intentional.
 - The written request, within the first 250 words of the body of a letter facsimile, e-mail or e-mail attachment conveyed a request for information
 - The written request included the words, characters, or abbreviations for “freedom of information”, “information”, “FOIA”, “copy” or a recognizable misspelling of such, or legal code reference to MCL 15.231 et seq. or 1976 Public Act 442 on the front of an envelope or in the subject line of an e-mail, letter or facsimile cover page.
- Fully note the charge reduction in the Detailed Itemization of Costs Form

Section 7: Waiver of Fees

The cost of the search for and copying of a public record may be waived or reduced if in the sole judgment of the FOIA Coordinator a waiver or reduced fee is in the public interest because such can be considered as primarily benefitting the general public.

The FOIA Coordinator will waive the first \$20.00 of the processing fee for a request if the person requesting a public record submits an affidavit stating that they are:

- indigent and receiving specific public assistance; or
- if not receiving public assistance stating facts demonstrating an inability to pay because of indigency.

An individual is not eligible to receive the waiver if:

- the requesting party has previously received discounted copies of public records from the Fire Department twice during the calendar year; or
- the requesting party requests information in connection with other persons who are offering or providing payment to make the request.

An affidavit is sworn statement. The FOIA Coordinator may make a Fee Waiver Affidavit Form available for use by the public.

A nonprofit organization designated to by the State to carry out activities under subtitle C of the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 200 and the Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness Act, or their successors, if the request meets all of the following requirements:

- is made directly on behalf of the organization or its clients;
- is made for a reason wholly consistent with the mission and provisions of those laws under Section 931 of the Mental Health Code, MCL 330.1931;
- is accompanied by documentation of its designation by the State.

Section 8: Appeal of a Denial of a Public Record

When a requesting party believes that all or a portion of a public record has not been disclosed or has been improperly exempted from disclosure, he or she may file an appeal of the denial with the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board. The appeal must be in writing, specifically state the word "appeal" and identify the reason or reasons the requesting party is seeking a reversal of the denial.

Within ten (10) business days of receiving the appeal the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board will respond in writing by:

- reversing the disclosure denial;
- upholding the disclosure denial; or
- reverse the disclosure denial in part and uphold the disclosure denial in part.
- Under unusual circumstances, such as the need to examine or review a voluminous amount of separate and distinct public records or the need to collect the requested records from numerous facilities located apart from the office receiving or processing the request, the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board may issue not more than 1 notice of extension for not more than 10 business days to respond to the appeal

Whether or not a requesting party submitted an appeal of a denial to the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board, he or she may file a civil action in Van Buren County Circuit Court within 180 days after the Fire Department final determination to deny the request.

If the court determines that the public record is not exempt from disclosure, the court will award the appellant reasonable attorneys' fees, cost and disbursements. If the court determines that the appellant prevails only in part, the court in its discretion may award all or an appropriate portion of reasonable attorneys' fees, costs and disbursements.

If the court determines that the City arbitrarily and capriciously violated the FOIA by refusing or delaying the disclosure of copies of a public record, it shall award the appellant punitive damages in the \$1,000.00. The court shall also order that the public body pay a civil fine of \$1000.00 to the general fund of the State treasury.

Section 9: Appeal of an Excessive FOIA Processing Fee

If a requesting party believes that the fee charged by the Fire Department to process a FOIA request exceeds the amount permitted by state law, he or she must first submit a written appeal for a fee reduction to the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board. The appeal must be in writing, specifically state the word "appeal" and identify how the required fee exceeds the amount permitted.

Within ten (10) business days after receiving the appeal, the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board will respond in writing by:

- waive the fee;
- reduce the fee and issue a written determination indicating the specific basis that supports the remaining fee, accompanied by a certification by the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board that the statements in the determination are accurate and the reduced fee amount complies with these Procedures and Guidelines and Section 4 of the FOIA;
- uphold the fee and issue a written determination indicating the specific basis under Section 4 of the FOIA that supports the required fee, accompanied by a certification by the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board that the statements in the determination are accurate and the fee amount complies with these Procedures and Guidelines and Section 4 of the FOIA; or
- issue a notice detailing the reason or reasons for extending for not more than 10 business days the period during which the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board will respond to the written appeal.

Within 45 days after receiving notice of the Chairman of the A.B.B. Fire Board determination of a fee appeal, a requesting party may commence a civil action in Van Buren County Circuit Court for a fee reduction. If a civil action is filed appealing the fee, the Fire Department is not obligated to process the request for the public record until the Court resolves the fee dispute.

If the court determines that the Fire Department required a fee that exceeds the amount permitted, it shall reduce the fee to a permissible amount. If the appellant in the civil action prevails by receiving a reduction of 50% or more of the total fee, the court may award all or appropriate amount of reasonable attorneys' fees, costs and disbursements.

If the court determines that Fire Department has acted arbitrarily and capriciously by charging an excessive fee, the court shall also award the appellant punitive damages in the amount of \$500.00.

If the court determines in either an appeal of a denial of a public record, or the appeal of an excessive fee, that the public body willfully and intentionally failed to comply with the FOIA or otherwise acted in bad faith, then in addition to any another award or sanction, the court shall impose a civil fine of not less than \$2500.00 or more than \$7500.00 for each occurrence. The court is required to consider the budget of the public body and whether the public body has been previously been assisted penalties for violations of the FOIA. The civil fine is to be deposited to the general fund of the State treasury.

Section 10: Conflict with Prior FOIA Policies and Procedures; Effective Date

To the extent that these Procedures and Guidelines conflict with previous FOIA policies promulgated by A.B.B. Fire Board these Procedures and Guidelines are controlling. To the extent that any administrative rule promulgated by the FOIA Coordinator subsequent to the adoption of this resolution is found to be in conflict with any previous policy promulgated by the A.B.B. Fire Board, the administrative rule promulgated by the FOIA Coordinator is controlling.

To the extent that any provision of these Procedures and Guidelines or any administrative rule promulgated by the FOIA Coordinator pertaining to the release of public records is found to be in conflict with any State statute, the applicable statute shall control. The FOIA Coordinator is authorized to modify this policy and all previous policies adopted by the A.B.B. Fire Board, and to adopt such administrative rules as he or she may deem necessary, to facilitate the legal review and processing of requests for public records made pursuant to Michigan's FOIA statute, provided that such modifications and rules are consistent with State law. The FOIA Coordinator shall inform the A.B.B. Fire Board of any change these Policies and Guidelines.

These FOIA Policies and Guidelines become effective July 1, 2015.