

1 SENATE BILL NO. 232
2 INTRODUCED BY J. ELLIS, B. LER, S. O'BRIEN, D. LENZ, J. WELBORN, J. FITZPATRICK, D. ZOLNIKOV, B.
3 BEARD
4

5 A BILL FOR AN ACT ENTITLED: "AN ACT GENERALLY REVISING PUBLIC RECORDS LAWS;
6 ESTABLISHING SEPARATE REQUIREMENTS FOR EXECUTIVE BRANCH AGENCIES; ESTABLISHING A
7 DEADLINE FOR EXECUTIVE BRANCH AGENCIES TO ACKNOWLEDGE RECEIPT OF A PUBLIC
8 INFORMATION REQUEST; ALLOWING FOR AN EXTENSION OF THE RESPONSE DEADLINE BY MUTUAL
9 AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE REQUESTER AND THE AGENCY; ALLOWING A PERSON TO FILE AN
10 ACTION IN DISTRICT COURT IF AN EXECUTIVE BRANCH AGENCY FAILS TO MEET THE RESPONSE
11 DEADLINE; AND AMENDING SECTIONS 2-6-1006 AND 2-6-1009, MCA."

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13 BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MONTANA:
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15 **Section 1.** Section 2-6-1006, MCA, is amended to read:

16 **"2-6-1006. Public information requests -- fees.** (1) (a) A person may request public information
17 from a public agency. A public agency shall make the means of requesting public information accessible to all
18 persons.

19 (b) (i) All public agencies are governed by this subsection (1).

20 (ii) A public agency that is not an executive branch agency must meet the requirements of
21 subsection (2) when responding to a public information request.

22 (iii) (A) Except as provided in subsections (1)(b)(iii)(B) and (1)(b)(iv), all executive branch agencies
23 must meet the requirements of subsection (3) when responding to a public information request.

24 (B) The provisions of subsection (3) apply to the secretary of state, the justice department, the
25 superintendent of public instruction, and the state auditor beginning on October 1, 2025.

26 (iv) The secretary of state must meet the requirements of subsection (4) regarding fees.

27 (2) Upon receiving a request for public information, a public agency shall respond in a timely
28 manner to the requesting person by acknowledging to the requesting person that the request was received

1 ~~within 5 days of receiving the request for information and:~~

2 ~~(a) — making the public information maintained by the public agency available for inspection and~~
3 ~~copying by the requesting person; or~~

4 ~~(b) — providing the requesting person with an estimate of the time it will take to fulfill the request if the~~
5 ~~public information cannot be readily identified and gathered and any fees that may be charged pursuant to~~
6 ~~subsection (3)(4).~~

7 ~~(3) — (a) Notwithstanding the estimate of response time required in subsection (2)(b) and except as~~
8 ~~provided in subsections (3)(b) and (3)(c), an executive branch agency shall provide the requested public~~
9 ~~information to the requesting person in a timely manner but no later than 20 working days from the date the~~
10 ~~agency acknowledges receipt of the request for information under subsection (2)(a).~~

11 ~~(b) — The agency and the requester may mutually agree to extend the deadline for response in~~
12 ~~subsection (3)(a) by an additional 20 working days.~~

13 ~~(c) — The department of corrections is not subject to the response deadline in subsection (3)(a).~~

14 ~~(3)(4)(c)~~ A public agency ~~other than the office of the secretary of state~~ may charge, pursuant to
15 ~~this subsection (1)(c),~~ a fee for fulfilling a public information request. Except where a fee is otherwise provided
16 for by law, the fee may not exceed the actual costs directly incident to fulfilling the request in the most cost-
17 efficient and timely manner possible. The fee must be documented. The fee may include the time required to
18 gather public information. The public agency may require the requesting person to pay the estimated fee prior
19 to identifying and gathering the requested public information.

20 ~~(4)(5)(d)~~ A public agency is not required to alter or customize public information to provide it in a
21 form specified to meet the needs of the requesting person.

22 ~~(5)(6)(e)~~ If a public agency agrees to a request to customize a records request response, the
23 costs of the customization may be included in the fees charged by the agency.

24 ~~(6)(7) — (a) The secretary of state is authorized to charge fees under this section. The fees must be set~~
25 ~~and deposited in accordance with 2-15-405. The fees must be collected in advance.~~

26 ~~(b) — The secretary of state may not charge a fee to a member of the legislature or public officer for~~
27 ~~any search relative to matters pertaining to the duties of the member's office or for a certified copy of any law or~~
28 ~~resolution passed by the legislature relative to the member's official duties.~~

1 (2) Upon receiving a request for public information, a public agency that is not an executive branch
2 agency shall respond in a timely manner to the requesting person by:

3 (a) making the public information maintained by the public agency available for inspection and
4 copying by the requesting person; or

5 (b) providing the requesting person with an estimate of the time it will take to fulfill the request if the
6 public information cannot be readily identified and gathered and any fees that may be charged pursuant to
7 subsection (1)(c).

8 (3) (a) An executive branch agency shall respond to a public information request by
9 acknowledging receipt of the request within 5 business days of the agency's designated contact person
10 receiving the request. Except for confidential, privileged, or otherwise protected information that is not subject to
11 public disclosure under applicable law and information withheld from public scrutiny as provided in 2-6-1003,
12 the executive branch agency shall respond by:

13 (i) making the public information maintained by the executive branch agency available in a timely
14 manner for inspection and copying by the requesting person;

15 (ii) providing a specified public record to the requesting person within 5 working days of the
16 executive branch agency's acknowledgment of receipt of the request if the request is for a single, specific,
17 clearly identifiable, and readily available public record. This subsection (3)(a)(ii) does not apply to requests
18 pertaining only to a specified person or property, including requests for applications, vital records, licenses,
19 permits, or registrations; or

20 (iii) responding as provided in subsection (3)(b).

21 (b) If a request seeks public information that cannot be readily identified and gathered, the agency
22 shall provide the requesting person an estimate of the time it will take to fulfill the request and any fees that may
23 be charged pursuant to subsection (1)(c) and shall provide the public information to the requesting person in a
24 timely manner, which may be:

25 (i) within 90 days of the public agency's acknowledgment of the request; or

26 (ii) within 6 months of the public agency's acknowledgment of the request if the agency determines
27 90 days is not feasible for a response and the agency provides the requesting person written notice explaining
28 why the agency is unable to provide a response within 90 days.

1 (c) An executive branch agency may request additional information or clarification from a
2 requesting person for the purpose of expediting the agency's response to the request. If the agency has
3 requested additional information or clarification, the agency's obligation to respond to the request is suspended
4 until the requesting person provides the requested information or clarification or until the requesting person
5 denies the agency's request for additional information or clarification. If a person requesting public information
6 fails to respond within 30 days to an agency's request for additional information or clarification, the agency may
7 close the request after notifying the requesting person.

8 (d) Each executive branch agency must have a designated contact for public information requests
9 posted on its website.

10 (e) One month after this section becomes applicable, an executive branch agency shall:

11 (i) establish a public information request process describing the steps for submitting a request and
12 the process the agency will follow when responding to a request for public information, which must be published
13 on a state website;

14 (ii) provide statistics about public information requests received by the designated contact of the
15 agency, including the number of requests and the agency's response time to fulfill or otherwise resolve the
16 requests; and

17 (iii) retain and publish on a state website the public information requests the agency has received
18 and the agency's response. The agency is not required to publish requests or responses if the request:

19 (A) was not submitted according to the agency's posted process;

20 (B) pertains only to a specific person or property, including requests for applications, vital records,
21 licenses, permits, registrations, and related supporting documents; or

22 (C) was for information accessible on a state website or other publication available at the time the
23 request was made.

24 (4) (a) The secretary of state is authorized to charge fees under this section. The fees must be set
25 and deposited in accordance with 2-15-405. The fees must be collected in advance.

26 (b) The secretary of state may not charge a fee to a member of the legislature or public officer for
27 any search relative to matters pertaining to the duties of the member's office or for a certified copy of any law or
28 resolution passed by the legislature relative to the member's official duties."

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Section 2. Section 2-6-1009, MCA, is amended to read:

"2-6-1009. Written notice of denial -- failure to meet response deadline -- civil action -- costs to prevailing party in certain actions to enforce constitutional or statutory rights. (1) A public agency that denies an information request to release information or records shall provide a written explanation for the denial.

(2) If a person who makes an information request receives a denial from a public agency and believes that the denial violates the provisions of this chapter, the person may file a complaint pursuant to the Montana Rules of Civil Procedure in district court.

(3) If a person who makes an information request to an executive branch agency does not receive a response from the agency as required in ~~2-6-1006(3)(a) and (3)(b)~~2-6-1006(3), the person may file a complaint in district court.

~~(3)~~(4) A person alleging a deprivation of rights who prevails in an action brought in district court to enforce the person's rights under Article II, section 9, of the Montana constitution or under the provisions of Title 2, chapter 6, parts 10 through 12, may be awarded costs and reasonable attorney fees."

NEW SECTION. **Section 3. Severability.** If a part of [this act] is invalid, all valid parts that are severable from the invalid part remain in effect. If a part of [this act] is invalid in one or more of its applications, the part remains in effect in all valid applications that are severable from the invalid applications.

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