



State of New Jersey
GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL
101 SOUTH BROAD STREET
PO BOX 819
TRENTON, NJ 08625-0819

CHRIS CHRISTIE
Governor

KIM GUADAGNO
Lt. Governor

LORI GRIFA
Commissioner

FINAL DECISION

October 25, 2011 Government Records Council Meeting

Jesse Wolosky
Complainant

Complaint No. 2010-190

v.

Borough of Morris Plains (Morris)
Custodian of Record

At the October 25, 2011 public meeting, the Government Records Council (“Council”) considered the October 18, 2011 Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director and all related documentation submitted by the parties. The Council voted unanimously to adopt the entirety of said findings and recommendations. The Council, therefore, finds that:

1. The Complainant’s request is invalid under OPRA because as it fails to specifically name identifiable individual senders and recipients and because the request requires research beyond the scope of a custodian’s duties pursuant to MAG Entertainment, LLC v. Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J. Super. 534 (App. Div. 2005); Bent v. Stafford Police Department, 381 N.J. Super. 30 (App. Div. 2005); New Jersey Builders Association v. New Jersey Council on Affordable Housing, 390 N.J. Super. 166, 180 (App. Div. 2007); Schuler v. Borough of Bloomsbury, GRC Complaint No. 2007-151 (February 2009). *See also* Elcavage v. West Milford Twp., GRC Complaint Nos. 2009-07 and 2009-08 (March 2010)..
2. Pursuant to Teeters v. DYFS, 387 N.J. Super. 423 (App. Div. 2006), the Complainant has not achieved “the desired result because the complaint brought about a change (voluntary or otherwise) in the custodian’s conduct.” *Id.* at 432. Additionally, pursuant to Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51, 73-76 (2008), no factual causal nexus exists between the Complainant’s filing of a Denial of Access Complaint and the relief ultimately achieved. Therefore, the Complainant is not a prevailing party entitled to an award of a reasonable attorney’s fee pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6, Teeters v. DYFS, 387 N.J. Super. 423 (App. Div. 2006) and Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51, 73-76 (2008).

This is the final administrative determination in this matter. Any further review should be pursued in the Appellate Division of the Superior Court of New Jersey within forty-five (45) days. Information about the appeals process can be obtained from the Appellate Division Clerk’s Office, Hughes Justice Complex, 25 W. Market St., PO Box 006, Trenton, NJ 08625-0006.



Proper service of submissions pursuant to any appeal is to be made to the Council in care of the Executive Director at the State of New Jersey Government Records Council, 101 South Broad Street, PO Box 819, Trenton, NJ 08625-0819.

Final Decision Rendered by the
Government Records Council
On The 25th Day of October, 2011

Robin Berg Tabakin, Chair
Government Records Council

I attest the foregoing is a true and accurate record of the Government Records Council.

Denise Parkinson Vetti, Secretary
Government Records Council

Decision Distribution Date: October 28, 2011

**STATE OF NEW JERSEY
GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL**

**Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director
October 25, 2011 Council Meeting**

**Jesse Wolosky¹
Complainant**

GRC Complaint No. 2010-190

v.

**Borough of Morris Plains (Morris)²
Custodian of Records**

Records Relevant to Complaint:

Copies of each and every e-mail sent or received by the Municipal Clerk's office to or from each and every other Municipal Clerk in Morris County regarding Jesse Wolosky and/or his OPRA request from June 29, 2010 to July 22, 2010.

Request Made: July 22, 2010

Response Made: July 29, 2010

Custodian: June R. Uhrin

GRC Complaint Filed: August 2, 2010³

Background

July 22, 2010

Complainant's Open Public Records Act ("OPRA") request. The Complainant requests the records relevant to this complaint listed above on an official OPRA request form.

July 29, 2010

Custodian's response to the OPRA request. The Custodian attaches a PDF file comprised of e-mails responsive to the Complainant's OPRA request.⁴ The Custodian responds via e-mail on the fifth (5th) business day following receipt of such request.

August 2, 2010

Denial of Access Complaint filed with the Government Records Council ("GRC") with the following attachments:

- Complainant's OPRA request dated July 22, 2010
- Custodian's response to the Complainant's OPRA request dated July 29, 2010

¹ Represented by Walter Luers, Esq., of the Law Offices of Walter H. Luers, LLC (Clinton, NJ).

² Represented by Gail H. Fraser, Esq., of Gail H. Fraser, LLC (Randolph, NJ).

³ The GRC received the Denial of Access Complaint on said date.

⁴ The PDF provided by the Custodian encompasses 47 pages.

- Copies of e-mails responsive to the Complainant's OPRA request
- Copies of e-mails disclosed by Chester Township's Custodian⁵

The Complainant's Counsel states that the Complainant has acquired evidence that there are at least seven (7) additional e-mails that exist that were omitted from the Custodian's response to the Complainant's request for "a copy of each and every e-mail sent or received by the Municipal Clerk's office to or from each and every other Municipal Clerk in Morris County regarding Jesse Wolosky and/or his OPRA request from June 29, 2010 to July 22, 2010." Counsel states that a review of the e-mails submitted by the Custodian shows that the following e-mails were not disclosed:

- E-mail from Marge Verga to June Uhrin, time stamped June 29, 2010 at 2:11 p.m.
- E-mail from Linda DeSantis to June Uhrin, time stamped June 29, 2010 at 4:35 p.m.
- E-mail from Joseph Giorgio to June Uhrin, June 29, 2010 at 5:09 p.m.
- E-mail from Valerie Egan to June Uhrin, June 30, 2010 at 9:46 a.m.
- E-mail from Judy Silver to June Uhrin, June 30, 2010 at 10:27 a.m.
- E-mail from Lydia Magnotti to June Uhrin, June 30, 2010 at 11:22 a.m.
- E-mail from Ann Carlson to June Uhrin, June 30, 2010 at 11:26 a.m.

Counsel maintains that the Complainant also requested e-mails regarding the same subject matter and the same time period from Chester Township. Counsel asserts that the seven (7) e-mails listed above are included in the Chester Township Clerk's OPRA response, but not in the response from the Custodian herein. Counsel asserts that GRC should order the Custodian to disclose all of the requested e-mails and find that the Complainant is the prevailing party entitled to an award of reasonable attorneys' fees pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6.

The Complainant does not agree to mediate this complaint.

August 5, 2010

Request for the Statement of Information ("SOI") sent to the Custodian.

August 12, 2010

Custodian's SOI with the following attachments:

- Complainant's OPRA request dated July 22, 2010
- Custodian's response to the Complainant's OPRA request dated July 29, 2010
- Copies of e-mails responsive to the Complainant's OPRA request

The Custodian certifies that she has never received any other e-mails responsive to the request other than those e-mails which she provided to the Complainant. The

⁵ Complainant's Counsel states the attached e-mails are "contemporaneous" with the requested e-mails. The attached e-mails consist of over one hundred (100) e-mails obtained pursuant to separate OPRA requests and were submitted as evidence that the Custodian of the Borough of Morris Plains is in possession of all 100 e-mails, but has submitted fewer than all of the responsive e-mails that exist. Jesse Wolosky v. Borough of Morris Plains (Morris), 2010-190 – Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director

Custodian certifies that she has experienced on-going computer problems and routinely receives e-mail messages that her mailbox exceeds its limits and that she may not be able to send or receive e-mails. The Custodian certifies that these computer problems may account for the discrepancy between those e-mails which the Complainant asserts the Custodian received and those e-mails which she actually received. The Custodian certifies that she has provided to the Complainant all records responsive to the Complainant's OPRA request.⁶

The Custodian's Counsel argues that the Custodian has certified that all records responsive to the Complainant's OPRA request were provided to the Complainant within the time period mandated by the statute. The Custodian's Counsel asserts that the Complainant has failed to provide any probative evidence to contradict the Custodian's certification; therefore, there was no unlawful denial of access pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A- 5.g.

July 21, 2011

E-mail from the GRC to Complainant's Counsel. The GRC requests that Counsel re-submit to the GRC a properly designated exhibit of each set of e-mails, clearly delineating those that were obtained from Chester Township from those that were provided by Morris Plains.

Additionally, the GRC requires a legal certification from the Complainant as to the assertion that specific e-mails obtained from Chester Township were not included in the e-mails provided by Morris Plains, including the factual basis for this assertion.

July 29, 2011

E-mail from Complainant's Counsel to the GRC. Counsel requests a five (5) business day extension to provide the requested submissions.

July 29, 2011

E-mail from the GRC to Complainant's Counsel. The GRC grants Counsel's request for a five (5) business day extension to provide the requested submissions and states that the new due date for such submissions is August 5, 2011.

August 4, 2011

E-mail from the Complainant's Counsel to the GRC.⁷ Counsel certifies that the following e-mails were not disclosed by the Borough of Morris Plains:

- E-mail from Marge Verga to June Uhrin dated June 29, 2010 at 2:11 p.m.
- E-mail from Linda DeSantis to June Uhrin dated June 29, 2010 at 4:35 p.m.
- E-mail from Joseph Giorgio to June Uhrin dated June 29, 2010 at 5:09 p.m.
- E-mail from Valerie Egan to June Uhrin dated June 30, 2010 at 9:46 a.m.
- E-mail from Judy Silver to June Uhrin dated June 30, 2010 at 10:27 a.m.

⁶ The Custodian did not answer Item 9 of the SOI requesting information regarding the search undertaken to find the requested records and the DARM schedule of the relevant records.

⁷ Attaching previously submitted documentation and documentation not relevant to the adjudication of this complaint.

- E-mail from Lydia Magnotti to June Uhrin dated June 30, 2010 at 11:22 a.m.
- E-mail from Ann Carlson to June Uhrin dated June 30, 2010 at 11:26 a.m.

Counsel certifies that the Custodian has admitted that the seven (7) e-mails identified above were not disclosed. Counsel argues that the Custodian’s statement asserting that computer problems may have prevented her from receiving certain e-mails is without factual basis. Counsel asserts that the Clerk has not explained whether the e-mails may be located elsewhere on the Borough’s e-mail server. Counsel certifies that throughout the time he has been requesting e-mails from Clerks across Morris County, he has never encountered a situation where a Custodian states that an e-mail was returned as unsent. Counsel maintains that because the Custodian’s name was on the e-mail distribution list, she must have gotten the undisclosed e-mails.

Analysis

Whether the Complainant’s records request is valid under OPRA?

OPRA provides that:

“...government records shall be readily accessible for inspection, copying, or examination by the citizens of this State, *with certain exceptions...*” (Emphasis added.) N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.

Additionally, OPRA defines a government record as:

“... any paper, written or printed book, document, drawing, map, plan, photograph, microfilm, data processed or image processed document, information stored or maintained electronically or by sound-recording or in a similar device, or any copy thereof, that has been *made, maintained or kept on file ... or that has been received* in the course of his or its official business ...” (Emphasis added.) N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1.

OPRA places the onus on the Custodian to prove that a denial of access is lawful. Specifically, OPRA states:

“...[t]he public agency shall have the burden of proving that the denial of access is authorized by law...” N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6.

OPRA provides that government records made, maintained, kept on file, or received by a public agency in the course of its official business are subject to public access unless otherwise exempt. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1. A custodian must release all records responsive to an OPRA request “with certain exceptions.” N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1. Additionally, OPRA places the burden on a custodian to prove that a denial of access to records is lawful pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6.

In the instant complaint, of issue is whether the Complainant’s request for a “copy of each and every e-mail sent or received by the Municipal Clerk’s office to or from each

and every other Municipal Clerk in Morris County regarding Jesse Wolosky and/or his OPRA request from June 29, 2010 through July 22, 2010” is a valid request under OPRA. Here, the Complainant’s request is invalid under OPRA because it requires the Custodian to perform research to locate and identify responsive records.

The New Jersey Superior Court has held that “[w]hile OPRA provides an alternative means of access to government documents not otherwise exempted from its reach, *it is not intended as a research tool litigants may use to force government officials to identify and siphon useful information. Rather, OPRA simply operates to make identifiable government records ‘readily accessible for inspection, copying, or examination.’ N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.*” (Emphasis added.) MAG Entertainment, LLC v. Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J. Super. 534, 546 (App. Div. 2005). As the court noted in invalidating MAG’s request under OPRA:

“Most significantly, the request failed to identify with any specificity or particularity the governmental records sought. MAG provided neither names nor any identifiers other than a broad generic description of a brand or type of case prosecuted by the agency in the past. Such an open-ended demand required the Division's records custodian to manually search through all of the agency's files, analyze, compile and collate the information contained therein, and identify for MAG the cases relative to its selective enforcement defense in the OAL litigation. Further, once the cases were identified, the records custodian would then be required to evaluate, sort out, and determine the documents to be produced and those otherwise exempted.” *Id.* at 549.

The Court further held that “[u]nder OPRA, *agencies are required to disclose only ‘identifiable’ government records* not otherwise exempt ... In short, OPRA does not countenance open-ended searches of an agency's files.” (Emphasis added.) *Id.*

Further, in Bent v. Stafford Police Department, 381 N.J. Super. 30, 37 (App. Div. 2005),⁸ the Superior Court references MAG in that the Court held that a requestor must specifically describe the document sought because OPRA operates to make identifiable government records “accessible.” “As such, a proper request under OPRA must identify with reasonable clarity those documents that are desired, and a party cannot satisfy this requirement by simply requesting all of an agency's documents.”⁹

Additionally, in New Jersey Builders Association v. New Jersey Council on Affordable Housing, 390 N.J. Super. 166, 180 (App. Div. 2007), the court enumerated the responsibilities of a custodian and a requestor as follows:

“OPRA identifies the responsibilities of the requestor and the agency relevant to the prompt access the law is designed to provide. The custodian, who is the person designated by the director of the agency,

⁸ Affirmed on appeal regarding Bent v. Stafford Police Department, GRC Case No. 2004-78 (October 2004).

⁹ As stated in Bent, *supra*.

N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1, must adopt forms for requests, locate and redact documents, isolate exempt documents, assess fees and means of production, identify requests that require "extraordinary expenditure of time and effort" and warrant assessment of a "service charge," and, when unable to comply with a request, "indicate the specific basis." N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(a)-(j). The requestor must pay the costs of reproduction and submit the request with information that is essential to permit the custodian to comply with its obligations. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(f), (g), (i). *Research is not among the custodian's responsibilities.*" (Emphasis added), NJ Builders, 390 N.J. Super. at 177.

Moreover, the court cited MAG by stating that "...when a request is 'complex' because it fails to specifically identify the documents sought, then that request is not 'encompassed' by OPRA..." The court also quoted N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5.g in that "[i]f a request for access to a government record would substantially disrupt agency operations, the custodian may deny access to the record after attempting to reach a reasonable solution with the requestor that accommodates the interests of the requestor and the agency." The court further stated that "...the Legislature would not expect or want courts to require more persuasive proof of the substantiality of a disruption to agency operations than the agency's need to...generate new records..."

Furthermore, in Schuler v. Borough of Bloomsbury, GRC Complaint No. 2007-151 (February 2009), the Council held that "[b]ecause the Complainant's OPRA requests # 2-5 are not requests for identifiable government records, the requests are invalid and the Custodian has not unlawfully denied access to the requested records pursuant to MAG Entertainment, LLC v. Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J. Super. 534 (App. Div. 2005) and Bent v. Stafford Police Department, 381 N.J. Super. 30 (App. Div. 2005)."

The test under MAG then, is whether a requested record is a *specifically identifiable* government record. If so, the record is disclosable, barring any exemptions to disclosure contained in OPRA. The GRC established the criteria deemed necessary to specifically identify an e-mail communication in Sandoval v. NJ State Parole Board, GRC Complaint No. 2006-167 (October 2008). In Sandoval, the Complainant requested "e-mail...between [two individuals] from April 1, 2005 through June 23, 2006 [using seventeen (17) different keywords]." The Custodian denied the request, claiming that it was overly broad. The Council determined:

"The Complainant in the complaint now before the GRC requested specific e-mails *by recipient, by date range and by content*. Based on that information, the Custodian has identified [numerous] e-mails which fit the specific recipient and date range criteria Complainant requested." (Emphasis added.) *Id.*

In Elcavage v. West Milford Twp., GRC Complaint Nos. 2009-07 and 2009-08 (March 2010), the Council examined what constitutes a valid request for e-mails under OPRA. The Council determined that:

“In accord with MAG, supra, and its progeny, in order to specifically identify an e-mail, OPRA requests must contain (1) the content and/or subject of the e-mail, (2) the specific date or range of dates during which the e-mail was transmitted or the e-mails were transmitted, and (3) a valid e-mail request must identify the sender and/or the recipient thereof.” (Emphasis in original). *Id.*

In the instant matter, although the Complainant’s request provided a specific range of dates in which the requested e-mails were transmitted, the request failed to name a specific identifiable sender and recipient: the request seeks e-mails from and to a specific *class* of employee (specifically, Morris County Municipal Clerks) and not individually named senders and recipients. See Elcavage, supra. In order for the Custodian to respond to this request, the Custodian would be required to evaluate all e-mails and letters in their database which contained the particular key words sought by the Complainant in order to determine whether the named recipients of such communications were Morris County Municipal Clerks. Such a request is not feasible, as Morris County itself has thirty-nine (39) municipalities and no specific employees were named in the Complainant’s request. Pursuant to Elcavage and MAG, it is not the Custodian’s duty to discern which e-mails in their database have been received by or sent to a Morris County Municipal Clerk. A search for the individual employees’ names and related e-mail addresses would constitute *research* that is not the statutory duty of a Custodian. Such a request is not in accordance with the requirements of MAG. Accordingly, the Complainant’s request is invalid.

Therefore, the Complainant’s request is invalid under OPRA because it fails to specifically name identifiable individual senders and recipients and because the request requires research beyond the scope of a custodian’s duties pursuant to MAG Entertainment, LLC v. Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J. Super. 534 (App. Div. 2005); Bent v. Stafford Police Department, 381 N.J. Super. 30 (App. Div. 2005); New Jersey Builders Association v. New Jersey Council on Affordable Housing, 390 N.J. Super. 166, 180 (App. Div. 2007); Schuler v. Borough of Bloomsbury, GRC Complaint No. 2007-151 (February 2009). See also Elcavage v. West Milford Twp., GRC Complaint Nos. 2009-07 and 2009-08 (March 2010).

Whether the Complainant is a “prevailing party” pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6 and entitled to reasonable attorney’s fees when the Complainant is an attorney?

OPRA provides that:

“[a] person who is denied access to a government record by the custodian of the record, at the option of the requestor, may:
institute a proceeding to challenge the custodian's decision by filing an action in Superior Court...; or
in lieu of filing an action in Superior Court, file a complaint with the Government Records Council...

A requestor who prevails in any proceeding shall be entitled to a reasonable attorney's fee." N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6.

In Teeters v. DYFS, 387 N.J. Super. 423 (App. Div. 2006), the court held that a complainant is a "prevailing party" if he/she achieves the desired result because the complaint brought about a change (voluntary or otherwise) in the custodian's conduct. Additionally, the court held that attorney's fees may be awarded when the requestor is successful (or partially successful) via a judicial decree, a quasi-judicial determination, or a settlement of the parties that indicates access was improperly denied and the requested records are disclosed. *Id.*

In Teeters, the complainant appealed from a final decision of the Government Records Council which denied an award for attorney's fees incurred in seeking access to certain public records via two complaints she filed under the Open Public Records Act (OPRA), N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6 and N.J.S.A. 47:1A-7.f., against the Division of Youth and Family Services ("DYFS"). The records sought involved an adoption agency having falsely advertised that it was licensed in New Jersey. DYFS eventually determined that the adoption agency violated the licensing rules and reported the results of its investigation to the complainant. The complainant received the records she requested upon entering into a settlement with DYFS. The court found that the complainant engaged in reasonable efforts to pursue her access rights to the records in question and sought attorney assistance only after her self-filed complaints and personal efforts were unavailing. *Id.* at 432. With that assistance, she achieved a favorable result that reflected an alteration of position and behavior on DYFS's part. *Id.* As a result, the complainant was a prevailing party entitled to an award of a reasonable attorney's fee. Accordingly, the Court remanded the determination of reasonable attorney's fees to the GRC for adjudication.

Additionally, the New Jersey Supreme Court has ruled on the issue of "prevailing party" attorney's fees. In Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51 (2008), the court discussed the catalyst theory, "which posits that a plaintiff is a 'prevailing party' if it achieves the desired result because the lawsuit brought about a voluntary change in the defendant's conduct." Mason, *supra*, at 71, (quoting Buckhannon Board & Care Home v. West Virginia Department of Health & Human Resources, 532 U.S. 598, 131 S. Ct. 1835, 149 L. Ed. 2d 855 (2001)). In Buckhannon, the Supreme Court stated that the phrase "prevailing party" is a legal term of art that refers to a "party in whose favor a judgment is rendered." (quoting Black's Law Dictionary 1145 (7th ed. 1999)). The Supreme Court rejected the catalyst theory as a basis for prevailing party attorney fees, in part because "[i]t allows an award where there is no judicially sanctioned change in the legal relationship of the parties." *Id.* at 605, 121 S. Ct. at 1840, 149 L. Ed. 2d at 863, but also over concern that the catalyst theory would spawn extra litigation over attorney's fees. *Id.* at 609, 121 S. Ct. at 1843, 149 L. Ed. 2d at 866.

As the New Jersey Supreme Court noted in Mason, Buckhannon is binding only when counsel fee provisions under federal statutes are at issue. 196 N.J. at 72, *citing* Teeters, *supra*, 387 N.J. Super. at 429; *see, e.g.,* Baer v. Klagholz, 346 N.J. Super. 79 (App. Div. 2001) (applying Buckhannon to the federal Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act), certif. denied, 174 N.J. 193 (2002). “But in interpreting New Jersey law, we look to state law precedent and the specific state statute before us. When appropriate, we depart from the reasoning of federal cases that interpret comparable federal statutes.” 196 N.J. at 73 (citations omitted).

The Mason Court then examined the catalyst theory within the context of New Jersey law, stating that:

“New Jersey law has long recognized the catalyst theory. In 1984, this Court considered the term "prevailing party" within the meaning of the federal Civil Rights Attorney's Fees Awards Act of 1976, 42 U.S.C.A. § 1988. Singer v. State, 95 N.J. 487, 495, cert. denied, New Jersey v. Singer, 469 U.S. 832, 105 S. Ct. 121, 83 L. Ed. 2d 64 (1984). The Court adopted a two-part test espousing the catalyst theory, consistent with federal law at the time: (1) there must be "a factual causal nexus between plaintiff's litigation and the relief ultimately achieved;" in other words, plaintiff's efforts must be a "necessary and important factor in obtaining the relief," *Id.* at 494-95, 472 A.2d 138 (internal quotations and citations omitted); and (2) "it must be shown that the relief ultimately secured by plaintiffs had a basis in law," *Id.* at 495. See also North Bergen Rex Transport v. TLC, 158 N.J. 561, 570-71 (1999) (applying Singer fee-shifting test to commercial contract).

Also prior to Buckhannon, the Appellate Division applied the catalyst doctrine in the context of the Law Against Discrimination, N.J.S.A. 10:5-1 to -49, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C.A. §§ 12101-12213. Warrington v. Vill. Supermarket, Inc., 328 N.J. Super. 410 (App. Div. 2000). The Appellate Division explained that "[a] plaintiff is considered a prevailing party 'when actual relief on the merits of [the] claim materially alters the relationship between the parties by modifying the defendant's behavior in a way that directly benefits the plaintiff.'" *Id.* at 420 (quoting Farrar v. Hobby, 506 U.S. 103, 111-12, 113 S. Ct. 566, 573, 121 L. Ed. 2d 494, 503 (1992)); see also Szczepanski v. Newcomb Med. Ctr., 141 N.J. 346, 355 (1995) (noting that Hensley v. Eckerhart "generously" defines "a prevailing party [a]s one who succeeds 'on any significant issue in litigation [that] achieves some of the benefit the parties sought in bringing suit'" (quoting Hensley v. Eckerhart, 461 U.S. 424, 433, 103 S. Ct. 1933, 1938, 76 L. Ed. 2d 40, 50 (1983))). The panel noted that the "form of the judgment is not entitled to conclusive weight"; rather, courts must look to whether a plaintiff's lawsuit acted as a catalyst that prompted defendant to take action and correct an unlawful practice. Warrington, *supra*, 328 N.J. Super. at 421. A settlement that confers the relief sought may still entitle plaintiff to attorney's fees in fee-shifting matters. *Id.* at 422.

This Court affirmed the catalyst theory again in 2001 when it applied the test to an attorney misconduct matter. Packard-Bamberger, *supra*, 167 N.J. at 444. In an OPRA matter several years later, New Jerseyans for a Death

Penalty Moratorium v. New Jersey Department of Corrections, 185 N.J. 137, 143-44 (2005)(NJDPM), this Court directed the Department of Corrections to disclose records beyond those it had produced voluntarily. In ordering attorney's fees, the Court acknowledged the rationale underlying various fee-shifting statutes: to insure that plaintiffs are able to find lawyers to represent them; to attract competent counsel to seek redress of statutory rights; and to "even the fight" when citizens challenge a public entity. *Id.* at 153.

After Buckhannon, and after the trial court's decision in this case, the Appellate Division decided Teeters. The plaintiff in Teeters requested records from the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS), which DYFS declined to release. 387 N.J. Super. at 424. After the GRC preliminarily found in plaintiff's favor, the parties reached a settlement agreement leaving open whether plaintiff was a "prevailing party" under OPRA. *Id.* at 426-27.

The Appellate Division declined to follow Buckhannon and held that plaintiff was a "prevailing party" entitled to reasonable attorney's fees; in line with the catalyst theory, plaintiff's complaint brought about an alteration in DYFS's position, and she received a favorable result through the settlement reached. *Id.* at 431-34. In rejecting Buckhannon, the panel noted that "New Jersey statutes have a different tone and flavor" than federal fee-shifting laws. *Id.* at 430. "Both the language of our statutes and the terms of court decisions in this State dealing with the issue of counsel fee entitlements support a more indulgent view of petitioner's claim for an attorney's fee award than was allowed by the majority in Buckhannon" *Id.* at 431, 904 A.2d 747. As support for this proposition, the panel surveyed OPRA, Packard-Bamberger, Warrington, and other cases.

OPRA itself contains broader language on attorney's fees than the former RTKL did. OPRA provides that "[a] requestor who prevails in any proceeding shall be entitled to a reasonable attorney's fee." N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6. Under the prior RTKL, "[a] plaintiff in whose favor such an order [requiring access to public records] issues . . . may be awarded a reasonable attorney's fee not to exceed \$ 500.00." N.J.S.A. 47:1A-4 (repealed 2002). The Legislature's revisions therefore: (1) mandate, rather than permit, an award of attorney's fees to a prevailing party; and (2) eliminate the \$500 cap on fees and permit a reasonable, and quite likely higher, fee award.¹⁰ Those changes expand counsel fee awards under

¹⁰ The significance of awarding fees to "requestors" and not "plaintiffs" is less clear because OPRA's fee-shifting provision refers both to individuals filing suit in Superior Court and those choosing the GRC's more information mediation route; the phrase "requestors" may simply have been used to encompass both groups. Likewise, one cannot obtain an "order" from the GRC, so the absence of that language in OPRA is not necessarily revealing.

OPRA.” Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51, 73-76 (2008).

The court in Mason, *supra*, at 76, held that “requestors are entitled to attorney’s fees under OPRA, absent a judgment or an enforceable consent decree, when they can demonstrate (1) ‘a factual causal nexus between plaintiff’s litigation and the relief ultimately achieved’; and (2) ‘that the relief ultimately secured by plaintiffs had a basis in law.’ Singer v. State, 95 N.J. 487, 495, cert denied (1984).”

In Mason, the plaintiff submitted an OPRA request on February 9, 2004. Hoboken responded on February 20, eight business days later, or one day beyond the statutory limit. *Id.* at 79. As a result, the Court shifted the burden to Hoboken to prove that the plaintiff’s lawsuit, filed on March 4, was not the catalyst behind the City’s voluntary disclosure. *Id.* Because Hoboken’s February 20 response included a copy of a memo dated February 19 -- the seventh business day -- which advised that one of the requested records should be available on February 27 and the other one week later, the Court determined that the plaintiff’s lawsuit was not the catalyst for the release of the records and found that she was not entitled to an award of prevailing party attorney fees. *Id.* at 80.

In the instant matter, as in Mason, the Complainant’s Denial of Access Complaint was not the catalyst for the release of the requested records, because the Complainant’s request is invalid under OPRA as it fails to specify identifiable individual senders and recipients and requires the Custodian to perform research beyond the scope of a custodian’s duties pursuant to MAG Entertainment, LLC v. Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J. Super. 534 (App. Div. 2005); Bent v. Stafford Police Department, 381 N.J. Super. 30 (App. Div. 2005); New Jersey Builders Association v. New Jersey Council on Affordable Housing, 390 N.J. Super. 166, 180 (App. Div. 2007); Schuler v. Borough of Bloomsbury, GRC Complaint No. 2007-151 (February 2009). *See also* Elcavage v. West Milford Twp., GRC Complaint Nos. 2009-07 and 2009-08 (March 2010).

Thus, pursuant to Teeters, *supra*, the Complainant has not achieved “the desired result because the complaint brought about a change (voluntary or otherwise) in the custodian’s conduct.” *Id.* at 432. Additionally, pursuant to Mason, *supra*, no factual causal nexus exists between the Complainant’s filing of a Denial of Access Complaint and the relief ultimately achieved because no relief was ordered by the Council. Therefore, the Complainant is not a prevailing party entitled to an award of a reasonable attorney’s fee pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6, Teeters, *supra*, and Mason, *supra*.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Executive Director respectfully recommends the Council find that:

1. The Complainant's request is invalid under OPRA because as it fails to specifically name identifiable individual senders and recipients and because the request requires research beyond the scope of a custodian's duties pursuant to MAG Entertainment, LLC v. Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J. Super. 534 (App. Div. 2005); Bent v. Stafford Police Department, 381 N.J. Super. 30 (App. Div. 2005); New Jersey Builders Association v. New Jersey Council on Affordable Housing, 390 N.J. Super. 166, 180 (App. Div. 2007); Schuler v. Borough of Bloomsbury, GRC Complaint No. 2007-151 (February 2009). *See also* Elcavage v. West Milford Twp., GRC Complaint Nos. 2009-07 and 2009-08 (March 2010)..

2. Pursuant to Teeters v. DYFS, 387 N.J. Super. 423 (App. Div. 2006), the Complainant has not achieved "the desired result because the complaint brought about a change (voluntary or otherwise) in the custodian's conduct." *Id.* at 432. Additionally, pursuant to Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51, 73-76 (2008), no factual causal nexus exists between the Complainant's filing of a Denial of Access Complaint and the relief ultimately achieved. Therefore, the Complainant is not a prevailing party entitled to an award of a reasonable attorney's fee pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6, Teeters v. DYFS, 387 N.J. Super. 423 (App. Div. 2006) and Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51, 73-76 (2008).

Prepared By: Darryl C. Rhone
Case Manager

Approved By: Catherine Starghill, Esq.
Executive Director

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