

CHRIS CHRISTIE

Governor

KIM GUADAGNO

Lt. Governor

RICHARD E. CONSTABLE, III

Commissioner

FINAL DECISION

May 28, 2013 Government Records Council Meeting

Larry A. Kohn Complainant Complaint No. 2011-343

v.

Township of Livingston (Essex)
Custodian of Record

At the May 28, 2013 public meeting, the Government Records Council ("Council") considered the May 21, 2013 Reconsideration Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director and all related documentation submitted by the parties. The Council, by a majority vote, adopted the entirety of said findings and recommendations. The Council, therefore, finds that the Complainant has failed to establish in his request for reconsideration of the Council's February 26, 2013 Final Decision that 1) the Council's decision is based upon a "palpably incorrect or irrational basis" or 2) it is obvious that the Council did not consider the significance of probative, competent evidence, and has failed to show that the GRC acted arbitrarily, capriciously or unreasonably. The Complainant failed to submit any evidence to contradict the Council's decision holding that this complaint was unripe for adjudication. Further, the Complainant failed to present any evidence that was not available at the time of the Council's adjudication that would change the substance of the Council's decision. Thus, the Complainant's request for reconsideration should be denied. Cummings v. Bahr, 295 N.J. Super. 374 (App. Div. 1996); D'Atria v. D'Atria, 242 N.J. Super. 392 (Ch. Div. 1990); In The Matter Of The Petition Of Comcast Cablevision Of South Jersey, Inc. For A Renewal Certificate Of Approval To Continue To Construct, Operate And Maintain A Cable Television System In The City Of Atlantic City, County Of Atlantic, State Of New Jersey, 2003 N.J. PUC LEXIS 438, 5-6 (N.J. PUC 2003).

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 28th Day of May, 2013

Robin Berg Tabakin, Esq., Chair Government Records Council



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

Steven Ritardi, Esq., Secretary Government Records Council

Decision Distribution Date: June 4, 2013

STATE OF NEW JERSEY GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL

Reconsideration Supplemental Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director May 28, 2013 Council Meeting

Larry A. Kohn¹ Complainant

GRC Complaint No. 2011-343

v.

Township of Livingston (Essex)² Custodian of Records

Records Relevant to Complaint: E-mail copies of the following:

- 1. Closed session minutes for September 26, 2011.
- 2. Closed session minutes for October 10, 2011.
- 3. Pages 153 through 163 and 226 through 227 of the 2010 Audit report.
- 4. Correspondence of "periodic updates" to monitoring of in-trust rates and issuance of tax free bonds referenced by Mayor Fernandez at the October 17, 2011 open session meeting.³

Request Made: October 19, 2011 **Response Made:** November 10, 2011

GRC Complaint Filed: November 1, 2011⁴

Background

February 26, 2013 Council Meeting:

At its February 26, 2013 public meeting, the Council considered the January 22, 2013 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, found that:

"[B]ecause the Complainant's cause of action was not ripe at the time of the filing of this Denial of Access Complaint; to wit, the Custodian had not denied access to any records responsive to the Complainant's October 19, 2011 OPRA request,

¹ No legal representation listed on record.

² Glenn Turtletaub, Custodian of Records. Represented by Sharon L. Weiner, Esq., of Johnson, Murphy, Hubner (Riverdale, NJ).

³ The Complainant notes that the correspondence should exist within the last ten (10) months since approval of the "Long Term Financial Plan" and would have originated from "Meade/Nadolny."

⁴ The GRC received the Denial of Access Complaint on said date.

because the Custodian did not receive the Complainant's request until October 20, 2011. Thus, the statutorily mandated seven (7) business day time frame for the Custodian to respond had not expired; the instant complaint is materially defective and therefore should be dismissed. *See* Sallie v. NJ Department of Banking and Insurance, GRC Complaint No. 2007-226 (April 2009). *See also* Herron v. Borough of Red Bank (Monmouth), GRC Complaint No. 2012-113 (April 2012)."

Procedural History:

On February 27, 2013, the Council distributed its Final Decision to all parties. On March 7, 2013, the Complainant e-mailed the GRC requesting additional time to review the Council's Final Decision. On March 12, 2013, the GRC responded granting an extension of time until March 15, 2013.

Complainant's Reconsideration:

On March 11, 2013, the Complainant requested that the Council reconsider its February 26, 2013 Final Decision.

The Complainant asserts that the GRC should reconsider its holding that this complaint was unripe for adjudication at the time of its filing. The Complainant notes that although the Custodian certified in the Statement of Information ("SOI") that he received the OPRA request on October 20, 2011, the OPRA request attached therein contained no date stamp recording the time the Custodian received same. The Complainant contends that he delivered his OPRA request to the Township drop box on October 19, 2011, so that the Custodian would receive same first thing in the morning on October 20, 2011. The Complainant contends that for this reason, he believes that October 31, 2011 was the eighth (8th) business day.

The Complainant further argues that the Custodian noted in the SOI that the Complainant "braved the elements" to deliver this Denial of Access Complaint to the Township on October 31, 2011. The Complainant contends that this would have occurred late in the afternoon because the Complainant works until 4:00 pm. The Complainant further contends that the Custodian did not argue in the SOI that he had prepared a response; rather, the Custodian was too consumed with activities associated with the recent storm to respond to the Complainant's OPRA request.

Analysis

Reconsideration

Parties may file a request for a reconsideration of any decision rendered by the Council within ten (10) business days following receipt of a Council decision. N.J.A.C. 5:105-2.10. Requests must be in writing, delivered to the Council and served on all parties. Parties must file any objection to the request for reconsideration within ten (10) business days following receipt of the request. The Council will provide all parties with written notification of its determination regarding the request for reconsideration. N.J.A.C. 5:105-2.10(a) – (e).

Applicable case law holds that:

"[a] party should not seek reconsideration merely based upon dissatisfaction with a decision." D'Atria v. D'Atria, 242 N.J. Super. 392, 401 (Ch. Div. 1990). Rather, reconsideration is reserved for those cases where (1) the decision is based upon a "palpably incorrect or irrational basis;" or (2) it is obvious that the finder of fact did not consider, or failed to appreciate, the significance of probative, competent evidence. E.g., Cummings v. Bahr, 295 N.J. Super. 374, 384 (App. Div. 1996). The moving party must show that the court acted in an arbitrary, capricious or unreasonable manner. D'Atria, supra, 242 N.J. Super. at 401. 'Although it is an overstatement to say that a decision is not arbitrary, capricious, or unreasonable whenever a court can review the reasons stated for the decision without a loud guffaw or involuntary gasp, it is not much of an overstatement.' Ibid." In The Matter Of The Petition Of Comcast Cablevision Of South Jersey, Inc. For A Renewal Certificate Of Approval To Continue To Construct, Operate And Maintain A Cable Television System In The City Of Atlantic City, County Of Atlantic, State Of New Jersey, 2003 N.J. PUC LEXIS 438, 5-6 (N.J. PUC 2003).

Here, the Complainant filed the request for reconsideration of the Council's February 26, 2013 Final Decision on March 11, 2013, three (3) days prior to the expiration of the extension of time granted by the GRC.

In support of his request for reconsideration, the Complainant asserted that the Council should reconsider its Final Decision because the Complainant believes he submitted this complaint on the eighth (8th) business day after the Custodian's receipt of the OPRA request. The Complainant contended that he dropped his OPRA request in the Township's drop box on the night of October 19, 2011, so that the Custodian would receive said request first thing in the morning on October 20, 2011. The Complainant argued that the Custodian did not provide evidence of the time he received the Complainant's OPRA request on October 20, 2011. The Complainant asserted that for this reason, he believed he timely filed this complaint.

The Complainant further argued that according to the Custodian's statements, he could not have delivered this complaint to the Custodian until after 4:00pm on October 31, 2011. The Complainant contended that at that time the Custodian had no prepared response; rather, the Custodian asserted in the SOI that he was too consumed with the activities associated with a recent storm to respond.

The Council should reject the Complainant's request for reconsideration. The Council calculates the beginning of the seven (7) business day time frame from the first (1st) business day after receipt of the request notwithstanding the time of receipt. *See* "Custodian's Handbook" (5th Edition – January 2011) at pg. 16. The Custodian certified in the SOI that he received the request on October 20, 2011, which is supported by the Complainant's explanation in his request for reconsideration. The Custodian further certified in the SOI that the Complainant hand-delivered this complaint on October 31, 2011, the seventh (7th) business day after the Custodian received the OPRA request, which is also corroborated by the Complainant in his request for

reconsideration. Thus, the Council's holding that this complaint was unripe for adjudication warranting dismissal was appropriate.⁵

As the moving party, the Complainant was required to establish either of the necessary criteria set forth above; namely 1) that the Council's decision is based upon a "palpably incorrect or irrational basis" or 2) it is obvious that the Council did not consider the significance of probative, competent evidence. *See* Cummings, *supra*. The Complainant failed to do so. The Complainant has also failed to show that the Council acted arbitrarily, capriciously or unreasonably. *See* D'Atria, *supra*. The Complainant failed to submit any evidence to contradict the Council's decision holding that this complaint was unripe for adjudication. Further, the Complainant failed to present any evidence that was not available at the time of the Council's adjudication that would change the substance of the Council's decision. Thus, the Complainant's request for reconsideration should be denied. Cummings, *supra*; D'Atria, *supra*; Comcast, *supra*.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Executive Director respectfully recommends the Council find that the Complainant has failed to establish in his request for reconsideration of the Council's February 26, 2013 Final Decision that 1) the Council's decision is based upon a "palpably incorrect or irrational basis" or 2) it is obvious that the Council did not consider the significance of probative, competent evidence, and has failed to show that the GRC acted arbitrarily, capriciously or unreasonably. The Complainant failed to submit any evidence to contradict the Council's decision holding that this complaint was unripe for adjudication. Further, the Complainant failed to present any evidence that was not available at the time of the Council's adjudication that would change the substance of the Council's decision. Thus, the Complainant's request for reconsideration should be denied. Cummings v. Bahr, 295 N.J. Super. 374 (App. Div. 1996); D'Atria v. D'Atria, 242 N.J. Super. 392 (Ch. Div. 1990); In The Matter Of The Petition Of Comcast Cablevision Of South Jersey, Inc. For A Renewal Certificate Of Approval To Continue To Construct, Operate And Maintain A Cable Television System In The City Of Atlantic City, County Of Atlantic, State Of New Jersey, 2003 N.J. PUC LEXIS 438, 5-6 (N.J. PUC 2003).

Prepared By: Frank F. Caruso

Senior Case Manager

Approved By: Brandon D. Minde, Esq.

Executive Director

May 21, 2013

⁵ The GRC notes that although it received the Complainant's Denial of Access Complaint on November 1, 2011, said complaint was signed and dated October 31, 2011, the seventh (7th) business day after the Custodian received the Complainant's OPRA request.



CHRIS CHRISTIE

Governor

KIM GUADAGNO

Lt. Governor

PO Box 819
Trenton, NJ 08625-0819
RICHARD E. CONSTABLE, III

Commissioner

FINAL DECISION

February 26, 2013 Government Records Council Meeting

Larry A. Kohn
Complainant
v.
Township of Livingston (Essex)
Custodian of Record

Complaint No. 2011-343

At the February 26, 2013 public meeting, the Government Records Council ("Council") considered the January 22, 2013 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 because the Complainant's cause of action was not ripe at the time of the filing of this Denial of Access Complaint; to wit, the Custodian had not denied access to any records responsive to the Complainant's October 19, 2011 OPRA request, because the Custodian did not receive the Complainant's request until October 20, 2011. Thus, the statutorily mandated seven (7) business day time frame for the Custodian to respond had not expired; the instant complaint is materially defective and therefore should be dismissed. *See* Sallie v. NJ Department of Banking and Insurance, GRC Complaint No. 2007- 226 (April 2009). *See also* Herron v. Borough of Red Bank (Monmouth), GRC Complaint No. 2012-113 (April 2012).

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 26th Day of February, 2013



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

Robin Berg Tabakin, Esq., Chair Government Records Council

Decision Distribution Date: February 27, 2013

STATE OF NEW JERSEY GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL

Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director February 26, 2013 Council Meeting

Larry A. Kohn¹
Complainant

GRC Complaint No. 2011-343

v.

Township of Livingston (Essex)²
Custodian of Records

Records Relevant to Complaint: E-mail copies of the following:

- 1. Closed session minutes for September 26, 2011.
- 2. Closed session minutes for October 10, 2011.
- 3. Pages 153 through 163 and 226 through 227 of the 2010 Audit report.
- 4. Correspondence of "periodic updates" to monitoring of in-trust rates and issuance of tax free bonds referenced by Mayor Fernandez at the October 17, 2011 open session meeting.³

Request Made: October 19, 2011 **Response Made:** November 10, 2011

Custodian: Glenn Turtletaub

GRC Complaint Filed: November 1, 2011⁴

Background

November 1, 2011

Denial of Access Complaint filed with the Government Records Council ("GRC") attaching the Complainant's OPRA request dated October 19, 2011.

The Complainant states that he submitted an OPRA request to the Township of Livingston ("Township") on October 19, 2011. The Complainant states that he never received a response.

The Complainant does not agree to mediate this complaint.

December 1, 2011

Custodian's Statement of Information ("SOI") with the following attachments:

¹ No legal representation listed on record.

² Represented by Sharon L. Weiner, Esq., of Johnson, Murphy, Hubner (Riverdale, NJ).

³ The Complainant notes that the correspondence should exist within the last ten (10) months since approval of the "Long Term Financial Plan" and would have originated from "Meade/Nadolny."

⁴ The GRC received the Denial of Access Complaint on said date.

- Complainant's OPRA request dated October 19, 2011 with the Custodian's notes thereon.
- E-mail from the Custodian to the Complainant dated November 10, 2011 (with attachments).

The Custodian certifies that his search for the requested records included obtaining the responsive minutes and referring same to the Custodian's Counsel for review and advice. The Custodian certifies that he sent the OPRA request to the Chief Financial Officer, who identified additional records.

The Custodian also certifies that no records responsive to the request were destroyed in accordance with the Records Destruction Schedule established and approved by Records Management Services.

The Custodian certifies that he received the Complainant's OPRA request on October 20, 2011. The Custodian certifies that upon receipt of Counsel's advice, the Custodian made the appropriate redactions to the minutes and sent all responsive records to the Complainant on November 10, 2011.⁵

The Custodian certifies that the seventh (7th) business day to respond was October 31, 2011. The Custodian certifies that the weekend before, the area was impacted by an unprecedented snowstorm. The Custodian certifies that on October 31, 2011, the Complainant braved the elements to deliver the instant complaint to the Township during business hours and prior to the expiration of the seven (7) business days. The Custodian certifies that during the weeks that followed, the Township was engaged in dealing with significant issues and power outages that forced the Township to rely on generators to conduct business. The Custodian certifies that no computers or nonessential electricity was used during that time.

The Custodian certifies that the Complainant received all records on November 10, 2011 along with a request that the Complainant withdraw this complaint. The Custodian contends that there was no unlawful denial of access and all records were provided to the Complainant consistent with OPRA. The Custodian contends that he did not knowingly and willfully violate OPRA under the totality of the circumstances.

December 12, 2011

Letter from the Complainant to the GRC. The Complainant states that he recently filed multiple complaints against the Custodian. The Complainant asserts that all complaints taken as a group show a clear pattern of noncompliance with OPRA. The Complainant contends that although the Custodian is a lawyer by training, has long worked as the Township's custodian of record, and has testified that he is fully knowledgeable as to the requirements of OPRA, the Custodian has frequently violated same.

The Complainant acknowledges that the Township suffered from a storm; however, many of the OPRA-related issues found within have been consistent since

⁵ The Custodian notes that the responsive minutes were approved at the Council's October 17, 2011 meeting.

before the storm and have continued since. The Complainant thus requests that the GRC group all 10 complaints together and, under the totality of the circumstances, determine that the Custodian knowingly and willfully violated OPRA.

Analysis

Whether the Complainant's Denial of Access Complaint should be dismissed as not ripe for adjudication?

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 present complaint, the Custodian argued in the SOI that the Complainant filed the instant complaint prior to the expiration of the statutorily mandated seven (7) business day time frame. Therefore, the GRC must address whether the complaint was ripe for adjudication at time of the Complainant's filing of same.

As one means of challenging denials of access to a government record, OPRA provides for the filing of a complaint with the GRC. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6. In order for such a complaint to be ripe, a complainant must have been denied access to a government record. In the instant matter, however, the Complainant filed a complaint with the GRC prior to being denied access to any records responsive to his request and before the statutorily mandated seven (7) business day time frame for the Custodian to respond

expired. Specifically, the Complainant delivered this complaint to the Custodian on the seventh (7th) business day and sent same to the GRC.

OPRA mandates that a custodian must either grant or deny access to requested records within seven (7) business days from receipt of said request. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(i). As also prescribed under N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(i), a custodian's failure to respond within the required seven (7) business days results in a "deemed" denial. Further, a custodian's response, either granting or denying access, must be in writing pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(g). Thus, a custodian's failure to respond in writing to a complainant's OPRA request either granting access, denying access, seeking clarification or requesting an extension of time within the statutorily mandated seven (7) business days results in a "deemed" denial of the complainant's OPRA request pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(g), N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(i), and Kelley v. Township of Rockaway, GRC Complaint No. 2007-11 (October 2007).

The Custodian herein certified in the SOI that he received the Complainant's OPRA request on October 20, 2011. The Custodian also certifies that on October 31, 2011, the Complainant hand-delivered a copy of this complaint to the Township. Furthermore, the Custodian's certification is supported by the Denial of Access Complaint form, which the Complainant signed and dated October 31, 2011, or the seventh (7th) business day after the Custodian received said OPRA request.

In <u>Sallie v. NJ Department of Banking and Insurance</u>, GRC Complaint No. 2007-226 (April 2009), the complainant forwarded a complaint to the GRC asserting that he had not received a response from the custodian and seven (7) business days would have passed by the time the GRC received the Denial of Access Complaint. The custodian argued in the SOI that the complainant filed the complaint prior to the expiration of the statutorily mandated seven (7) business day time frame set forth in <u>N.J.S.A.</u> 47:1A-5(i). The Council held that:

"...because the Complainant's cause of action was not ripe at the time he verified his Denial of Access Complaint; to wit, the Custodian had not at that time denied the Complainant access to a government record, the complaint is materially defective and therefore should be dismissed."

In the matter currently before the Council, the Complainant acted in a similar manner to the complainant in <u>Sallie</u>, *supra*, by filing a Denial of Access Complaint with the GRC prior to a denial of access to the requested records by the Custodian. Additionally, as in <u>Sallie</u>, *supra*, the Complainant caused his complaint to be filed with the GRC prior to the expiration of the statutorily mandated seven (7) business day time frame set forth in <u>N.J.S.A.</u> 47:1A-5.i.

Therefore, because the Complainant's cause of action was not ripe at the time of the filing of this Denial of Access Complaint; to wit, the Custodian had not denied access to any records responsive to the Complainant's October 19, 2011 OPRA request, because the Custodian did not receive the Complainant's request until October 20, 2011. Thus, the statutorily mandated seven (7) business day time frame for the Custodian to respond had not expired; the instant complaint is materially defective and therefore should be

dismissed. *See* Sallie, *supra*. *See also* Herron v. Borough of Red Bank (Monmouth), GRC Complaint No. 2012-113 (April 2012).

The GRC acknowledges that a "deemed" denial took place following the filing of this complaint; however, it will not address this issue because the complaint is not properly before the Council. Additionally, the GRC acknowledges that the Custodian disclosed the responsive records via e-mail on November 10, 2011.

Finally, the Complainant submitted a letter to the GRC on December 12, 2011 requesting that the GRC combine a number of complaints filed against the Custodian and determine that, under the totality of the circumstances, the Custodian knowingly and willfully violated OPRA. The consolidation of complaints is solely at the discretion of GRC. In this instance and upon review of all complaints submitted by the Complainant, same will not be consolidated based on the number of complaints and the complexity of the issues therein.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Executive Director respectfully recommends the Council find that because the Complainant's cause of action was not ripe at the time of the filing of this Denial of Access Complaint; to wit, the Custodian had not denied access to any records responsive to the Complainant's October 19, 2011 OPRA request, because the Custodian did not receive the Complainant's request until October 20, 2011. Thus, the statutorily mandated seven (7) business day time frame for the Custodian to respond had not expired; the instant complaint is materially defective and therefore should be dismissed. *See* Sallie v. NJ Department of Banking and Insurance, GRC Complaint No. 2007- 226 (April 2009). *See also* Herron v. Borough of Red Bank (Monmouth), GRC Complaint No. 2012-113 (April 2012).

Prepared By: Frank F. Caruso

Senior Case Manager

Approved By: Karyn Gordon, Esq.

Acting Executive Director

January 22, 2013⁶

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⁶ This complaint was originally prepared for the Council's January 29, 2013 meeting; however, the complaint could not be adjudicated due to lack of quorum.