

State of New Jersey Department of Community Affairs 101 South Broad Street PO Box 819 Trenton, NJ 08625-0819

JACQUELYN A. SUÁREZ Commissioner

FINAL DECISION

July 30, 2024 Government Records Council Meeting

Perrault Jean-Paul Complainant v. City of Jersey City (Hudson) Custodian of Record

PHILIP D. MURPHY

Governor

TAHESHA L. WAY

Lieutenant Governor

Complaint No. 2020-209

At the July 30, 2024 public meeting, the Government Records Council ("Council") considered the July 23, 2024 Supplemental 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 failed to appear or otherwise participate in the scheduled June 24, 2024 hearing, failed to contact the ALJ to explain why he was unable to appear or participate in the hearing, failed to follow up with discovery or otherwise communicate with the Custodian's Counsel, and thereafter failed to submit exceptions to the GRC in a timely manner, the Council should adopt the conclusion and order of the Honorable Irene Jones, ALJ, in her June 26, 2024 Initial Decision, which provided that because the Complainant was found to have "... abandoned his request for the hearing and has failed to cooperate ... this matter is dismissed."

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 30th Day of July 2024

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: August 1, 2024



STATE OF NEW JERSEY GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL

Supplemental Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director July 30, 2024 Council Meeting

Perrault Jean-Paul¹ Complainant

GRC Complaint No. 2020-209

v.

City of Jersey City (Hudson)² Custodial Agency

Records Relevant to Complaint: Copies via e-mail or via regular mail of:

- 1. "[A]ll building permit applications and building permit approvals for 25 Magnolia Ave, Jersey City, NJ from January 1, 2010 to [September 28, 2020]."
- 2. "[A]ll zoning permit applications and zoning permit approvals for 25 Magnolia Ave, Jersey City, NJ from January 1, 2010 to [September 28, 2020]."

Custodian of Record: Sean Gallagher Request Received by Custodian: September 28, 2020 Response Made by Custodian: October 2, 2020 and October 6, 2020 GRC Complaint Received: October 13, 2020

Background

May 31, 2022 Council Meeting:

At its May 31, 2022 public meeting, the Government Records Council ("Council") considered the May 24, 2022 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 based on the inadequate and conflicting evidence in this matter, the GRC is unable to determine whether or not the Custodian unlawfully denied access to the requested records. Therefore, this complaint should be referred to the Office of Administrative Law for a hearing to resolve the facts. See Semprevivo v. Pinelands Reg'l Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ. (Burlington), GRC Complaint No. 2007-135 (October 2008). Also, this complaint should be referred to the Office of Administrative Law for determination of whether the Custodian knowingly and willfully violated OPRA and unreasonably denied access under the totality of the circumstances.

¹ No legal representation listed on record.

² Represented by John McKinney, Esq. (City of Jersey City, NJ). Mr. McKinney was substituted for Sapana Shah, Esq. via letter to the OAL dated December 8, 2022.

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Procedural History:

On June 1, 2022, the Council distributed its May 31, 2022 Interim Order to all parties. On September 6, 2022, the complaint was transmitted to the Office of Administrative Law ("OAL"). On June 26, 2024, the Honorable Irene Jones, Administrative Law Judge³ ("ALJ"), issued an Initial Decision "**FIND**[**ING**] that [the Complainant] abandoned his request for [a June 24, 2024] hearing and has failed to cooperate." ALJ Jones "**CONCLUDE**[**D**] that this matter should be **DISMISSED.**" On June 27, 2024, the OAL transmitted their complete file to the GRC.⁴

Analysis

Administrative Law Judge's Initial Decision

"The reason for the rule is that the administrative law judge, as a finder of fact, has the greatest opportunity to observe the demeanor of the involved witnesses and, consequently, is better qualified to judge their credibility." In the Matter of the Tenure Hearing of Tyler, 236 N.J. Super. 478, 485 (App. Div. 1989) (*certif. denied* 121 N.J. 615 (1990)). Therein, the court found that "... the administrative law judge, as a finder of fact, has the greatest opportunity to observe the demeanor of the involved witnesses and, consequently, is better qualified to judge their credibility." The Appellate Division affirmed this principle, underscoring that, "under existing law, the [reviewing agency] must recognize and give due weight to the ALJ's unique position and ability to make demeanor-based judgments." Whasun Lee v. Bd. of Educ. of the Twp. of Holmdel, Docket No. A-5978-98T2 (App. Div. 2000), slip op. at 14. "When such a record, involving lay witnesses, can support more than one factual finding, it is the ALJ's credibility findings that control, unless they are arbitrary or not based on sufficient credible evidence in the record as a whole." <u>Cavalieri v. Bd. of Tr. of Pub. Employees Ret. Sys.</u>, 368 N.J. Super. 527, 537 (App. Div. 2004).

The ultimate determination of the agency and the ALJ's recommendations must be accompanied by basic findings of fact sufficient to support them. <u>State, Dep't of Health v.</u> <u>Tegnazian</u>, 194 <u>N.J. Super</u>. 435, 442-43 (App. Div. 1984). The purpose of such findings "is to enable a reviewing court to conduct an intelligent review of the administrative decision and determine if the facts upon which the order is grounded afford a reasonable basis therefor." *Id.* at 443. Additionally, the sufficiency of evidence "must take into account whatever in the record fairly detracts from its weight"; the test is not for the courts to read only one side of the case and, if they find any evidence there, the action is to be sustained and the record to the contrary is to be ignored (citation omitted). <u>St. Vincent's Hospital v. Finley</u>, 154 <u>N.J. Super</u>. 24, 31 (App. Div. 1977).

On June 26, 2024, the Honorable Irene Jones, ALJ, issued an Initial Decision in this matter. ALJ Jones' June 26, 2024 Initial Decision, set forth in full as "Exhibit A," found that:

Perrault Jean-Paul v. City of Jersey City (Hudson), 2020-209 - Supplemental Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director

³ Retired, on recall.

⁴ The GRC notes that throughout his Denial of Access Complaint and supporting correspondence the Complainant identified himself as Perrault Jean-Paul. The Council's order therefore reflects the Complainant's name as such in the caption. However, when at the OAL the caption on the transmittal was whited-out and reprinted as "Jean-Paul Perrault," and the Complainant's name appears as such throughout the Initial Decision.

On June 3, 2024, a notice of hearing was emailed and mailed to the parties setting forth a June 24, 2024, hearing date.

Petitioner, Jean-Paul Perrault, failed to appear or otherwise participate in the June 24, 2024 hearing. Further, petitioner failed to contact the [ALJ] to explain why he was unable to do so. Additionally, the respondent asserts that petitioner has failed to follow up with discovery or otherwise communicate any issues with the documents that were sent to him by Jersey City. Thus, the respondent moves to dismiss this matter based on the petitioner's failure to cooperate. See Mason v. City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51 (2008).

I **FIND** that petitioner abandoned his request for the hearing and has failed to cooperate. I **CONCLUDE** that the matter should be **DISMISSED**.

Based on the foregoing, it is **ORDERED** that this matter is **DISMISSED**.

[<u>Id.</u> at 2.]

Here, ALJ Jones found that this complaint was scheduled for a hearing on June 24, 2024, and that the Complainant failed to appear or otherwise participate in the June 24, 2024 hearing. ALJ Jones also found that the Complainant failed to contact her to explain why he was unable to appear or participate in the hearing. The ALJ acknowledged the assertion of the Custodian's Counsel that petitioner failed to follow up with discovery or otherwise communicate any issues with the documents that were sent to him. The ALJ further acknowledged Counsel's motion to dismiss the complaint based on the Complainant's failure to cooperate. ALJ Jones' conclusion is aligned and consistent with the submitted facts. As such, the GRC is satisfied that it can ascertain which facts ALJ Jones accepted and finds that those facts provide a reasonable basis for the ALJ's conclusion.

Therefore, because the Complainant failed to appear or otherwise participate in the scheduled June 24, 2024 hearing, failed to contact the ALJ to explain why he was unable to appear or participate in the hearing, failed to follow up with discovery or otherwise communicate with the Custodian's Counsel, and thereafter failed to submit exceptions to the GRC in a timely manner, the Council should adopt the conclusion and order of the Honorable Irene Jones, ALJ, in her June 26, 2024 Initial Decision, which provided that because the Complainant was found to have "... abandoned his request for the hearing and has failed to cooperate ... this matter is dismissed."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Executive Director respectfully recommends that because the Complainant failed to appear or otherwise participate in the scheduled June 24, 2024 hearing, failed to contact the ALJ to explain why he was unable to appear or participate in the hearing, failed to follow up with discovery or otherwise communicate with the Custodian's Counsel, and thereafter failed to submit exceptions to the GRC in a timely manner, the Council should adopt the conclusion and order of the Honorable Irene Jones, ALJ, in her June 26, 2024 Initial Decision, which provided that because

the Complainant was found to have "... abandoned his request for the hearing and has failed to cooperate ... this matter is dismissed."

Prepared By: John E. Stewart

July 23, 2024

EXHIBIT A

Perrault Jean-Paul v. City of Jersey City (Hudson), 2020-209



State of New Jersey OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE LAW

INITIAL DECISION

DISMISSAL OAL DKT. NO. GRC 07814-22 AGENCY DKT NO. 2020-209

JEAN-PAUL PERRAULT,

Petitioner,

V.

CITY OF JERSEY CITY (HUDSON),

Respondent.

Jean-Paul Perrault, petitioner, pro se

John McKinney, Supervisory Assistant Corporation Counsel, for respondent City of Jersey City (Hudson) (Brittany Murray, Acting Corporation Counsel)

Record Closed: June 24, 2024

Decided: June 26, 2024

BEFORE IRENE JONES, ALJ (Ret., on recall):

On October 13, 2020, petitioner, Jean-Paul Perrault, filed a Denial of Access Complaint against respondent, City of Jersey City (Hudson), pursuant to the New Jersey Open Public Records Act (OPRA), N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq. On September 12, 2022, the Government Records Council (GRC) transmitted this case to the Office of Administrative Law (OAL), where it was filed as a contested case under N.J.S.A. 52:14B-1 to -15; N.J.S.A. 52:14F-1 to -13. A prehearing conference was held on December 20, 2022,

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before the undersigned wherein a discovery schedule was established. Thereafter, status update conference calls were held, and the parties agreed that the matter would likely settle. On June 3, 2024, a notice of hearing was emailed and mailed to the parties setting forth a June 24, 2024, hearing date.

Petitioner, Jean-Paul Perrault, failed to appear or otherwise participate in the June 24, 2024, hearing. Further, petitioner failed to contact the undersigned to explain why he was unable to do so. Additionally, the respondent asserts that petitioner has failed to follow up with discovery or otherwise communicate any issues with the documents that were sent to him by Jersey City. Thus, the respondent moves to dismiss this matter based on the petitioner's failure to cooperate. <u>See Mason v. City of Hoboken</u> 196 N.J. 51 (2008).

I FIND that petitioner abandoned his request for the hearing and has failed to cooperate. I CONCLUDE that this matter should be DISMISSED.

ORDER

Based on the foregoing, it is **ORDERED** that this matter is **DISMISSED**.

I hereby **FILE** my initial decision with the **GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL** for consideration.

This recommended decision may be adopted, modified or rejected by the **GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL**, who by law is authorized to make a final decision in this matter. If the Government Records Council does not adopt, modify or reject this decision within forty-five days and unless such time limit is otherwise extended, this recommended decision shall become a final decision in accordance with N.J.S.A. 52:14B-10.

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Within thirteen days from the date on which this recommended decision was mailed to the parties, any party may file written exceptions with the **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL, 101 South Broad Street, PO Box 819, Trenton, New Jersey 08625-0819,** marked "Attention: Exceptions." A copy of any exceptions must be sent to the judge and to the other parties.

drene Jo

June 26, 2024 DATE

Date Received at Agency:

IRENE JONES, ALJ (Ret., on recall)

June 26, 2024

Date Mailed to Parties: lsr June 26, 2024



State of New Jersey Department of Community Affairs

101 South Broad Street PO Box 819 Trenton, NJ 08625-0819

LT. GOVERNOR SHEILA Y. OLIVER Commissioner

INTERIM ORDER

May 31, 2022 Government Records Council Meeting

Perrault Jean-Paul Complainant v. City of Jersey City (Hudson) Custodian of Record

PHILIP D. MURPHY

Governor

Complaint No. 2020-209

At the May 31, 2022 public meeting, the Government Records Council ("Council") considered the May 24, 2022 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 based on the inadequate and conflicting evidence in this matter, the GRC is unable to determine whether or not the Custodian unlawfully denied access to the requested records. Therefore, this complaint should be referred to the Office of Administrative Law for a hearing to resolve the facts. See Semprevivo v. Pinelands Reg'l Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ. (Burlington), GRC Complaint No. 2007-135 (October 2008). Also, this complaint should be referred to the Office of Administrative Law for determination of whether the Custodian knowingly and willfully violated OPRA and unreasonably denied access under the totality of the circumstances.

Interim Order Rendered by the Government Records Council On The 31st Day of May 2022

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 1, 2022



STATE OF NEW JERSEY GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL

Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director May 31, 2022 Council Meeting

Perrault Jean-Paul¹ Complainant

GRC Complaint No. 2020-209

v.

City of Jersey City (Hudson)² Custodial Agency

Records Relevant to Complaint: Copies via e-mail or via regular mail of:

- 1. "[A]ll building permit applications and building permit approvals for 25 Magnolia Ave, Jersey City, NJ from January 1, 2010 to [September 28, 2020]."
- 2. "[A]ll zoning permit applications and zoning permit approvals for 25 Magnolia Ave, Jersey City, NJ from January 1, 2010 to [September 28, 2020]."

Custodian of Record: Sean Gallagher Request Received by Custodian: September 28, 2020 Response Made by Custodian: October 2, 2020 and October 6, 2020 GRC Complaint Received: October 13, 2020

Background³

Request and Response:

On September 28, 2020, the Complainant submitted an Open Public Records Act ("OPRA") request to the Custodian seeking the above-mentioned records.⁴ On October 2, 2020, the fourth (4th) business day following receipt of said request, the Custodian responded in writing providing the Complainant with a link to log on to the Jersey City OPRA Center to retrieve the records responsive to his request (Jersey City number R002697-092820). On October 6, 2020, the sixth (6th) business day following receipt of said request, the Custodian again responded in writing providing the Complainant with a link to log on to the Jersey City OPRA Center to retrieve the sixth (6th) business day following receipt of said request, the Custodian again responded in writing providing the Complainant with a link to log on to the Jersey City OPRA Center to retrieve the records responsive to his second request (Jersey City number R002696-092820).

¹ No legal representation listed on record.

² Represented by Sapana Shah, Esq. (City of Jersey City, NJ).

³ The parties may have submitted additional correspondence or made additional statements/assertions in the submissions identified herein. However, the Council includes in the Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director the submissions necessary and relevant for the adjudication of this complaint.

⁴ The OPRA request is a letter request invoking OPRA. The request was addressed to the Custodian, but the salutation was to the "City of Bayonne Custodian of Records."

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Denial of Access Complaint:

On October 13, 2020, the Complainant filed a Denial of Access Complaint with the Government Records Council ("GRC"). The Complainant asserted that he submitted an OPRA request to the Custodian on September 28, 2020, for zoning and planning applications filed for 19 Magnolia Avenue and 21 Magnolia Avenue from January 1, 2010 to the date of request.⁵ The Complainant stated that as of October 10, 2020 (the date he verified the complaint), the Custodian failed to respond to his request. The Complainant stated that there has been a "deemed" denial of his request pursuant to <u>N.J.S.A.</u> 47:1A-5(i). The Complainant attached a copy of the OPRA request dated September 28, 2020 to the complaint.

Additional Submissions:

On October 21, 2020, the GRC e-mailed the Complainant to inform him that the GRC was preparing to transmit the Statement of Information ("SOI") request to the Custodian; however, the GRC noticed several discrepancies in the complaint that required his attention. The GRC informed the Complainant that he stated in the complaint that the request was submitted to the Township of Commercial but that the salutation in the request was to the custodian for the City of Bayonne. The GRC informed the Complainant that the GRC required clarification of the discrepancies prior to sending the SOI request to the Custodian.

On October 21, 2020, the Complainant responded to the GRC apologizing for the confusion and stated that he may have used an old document. The Complainant confirmed that the request was submitted to the City of Jersey City. The Complainant referred the GRC to the OPRA request that was attached to the complaint.

Statement of Information:

On November 6, 2020, the Custodian filed a SOI. The Custodian certified that he received the Complainant's two (2) OPRA requests via *GovQA* on September 28, 2020. The Custodian certified that the request numbered by Jersey City as R002696-092820 sought all building permit applications filed for 19 Magnolia Avenue and 21 Magnolia Avenue from January 1, 2010 to the date of request. The Custodian certified that the request numbered by Jersey City as R002697-092820 sought all zoning and planning applications filed for 19 Magnolia Avenue and 21 Magnolia Avenue and 21 Magnolia Avenue and 21 Magnolia Avenue from January 1, 2010 to the date of request.

The Custodian certified that he responded on October 2, 2020, to the request numbered by Jersey City as R002697-092820. The Custodian further certified that he responded on October 6, 2020, to the request numbered by Jersey City as R002696-092820. The Custodian certified that all of the requested records in possession of Jersey City were disclosed to the Complainant via a link sent to him. The Custodian further certified that only one (1) redaction was made to the responsive records, which was deletion of an individual bank account number on a zoning application. The

⁵ These were not the records requested in the Complainant's OPRA request. Moreover, in the complaint narrative, the Complainant stated that the request was submitted to the Township of Commercial; however, he went on to state in that same narrative that the City of Jersey City was the agency that denied him access to the records.

Perrault Jean-Paul v. City of Jersey City (Hudson), 2020-209 - Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director

Custodian certified that the Complainant did not contact him to claim that any of the requested records were missing from the disclosure prior to filing the complaint.

In support of his certification, the Custodian attached to the SOI certifications from Construction Code Technical Assistant Melanie Avila, Division of Zoning Clerical Assistant Raquel Santiago, and Records Support Technician Emare Herrera. The employees each certified that records responsive to the Complainant's request were searched for, and that all responsive records that were located were made available to the Complainant.

Additional Submissions:

On November 6, 2020, the Complainant submitted to the GRC a certification in response to the Custodian's SOI. The Complainant certified that on September 8, 2020, he filed the requests described and identified by the Custodian as R002696-092820 and R002696-092820.⁶ The Complainant certified that "[t]he assertions in the certifications made by the Jersey City officials is (sic) not correct as they do not correctly state the content of the requests." The Complainant certified that not all requested building permit applications and planning and zoning related documents were disclosed to him.

On April 21, 2022, the GRC e-mailed the Complainant, referenced his November 6, 2020 certification, and asked if the Custodian had since responded to the certification. On the same date, the Complainant sent a reply e-mail to the GRC, informing the GRC that he had not received all of the records he requested.

Analysis

Unlawful Denial of Access

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. <u>N.J.S.A.</u> 47:1A-1.1. A custodian must release all records responsive to an OPRA request "with certain exceptions." <u>N.J.S.A.</u> 47:1A-1. Additionally, OPRA places the burden on a custodian to prove that a denial of access to records is lawful pursuant to <u>N.J.S.A.</u> 47:1A-6.

In the complaint before the Council, the Complainant's request sought building permit applications, building permit approvals, zoning permit applications and zoning permit approvals for **25** *Magnolia Avenue* in the City of Jersey City. The Complainant alleged that the Custodian did not respond to his request in a timely manner, which therefore resulted in a "deemed" denial of his request. The Complainant cited <u>N.J.S.A.</u> 47:1A-5(i) as the statutory provision alleged to have been violated by the Custodian. The GRC noted some discrepancies in the Complainant's submission and asked the Complainant for clarification. The Complainant stated that his request was directed to the City of Jersey City and referred the GRC to the request that he attached to the complaint.

⁶ Per the evidence of record, it is undisputed that the OPRA request was filed on September 28, 2020; therefore, the September 8, 2020 date may have been a typographical error.

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The SOI submitted by the Custodian addressed two (2) separate requests filed by the Complainant on September 28, 2020, wherein building permit applications, and zoning and planning applications filed for **19 Magnolia Avenue** and **21 Magnolia Avenue** were requested. There was no mention of building permit approvals, zoning permit applications, or zoning permit approvals in the Complainant's requests that the Custodian certified he received from the Complainant. Moreover, the Custodian certified that he responded to the requests in a timely manner.

The GRC was initially of the belief that the Custodian's SOI mistakenly addressed two other requests filed by the Complainant which were not requests that formed the basis of the instant complaint. However, the Complainant submitted a certification in opposition to the SOI in which he addressed the same two requests: R002696-092820 and R002696-092820. Moreover, the Complainant did not reassert the timeliness issue he alleged as the cause of action in his complaint, or otherwise dispute the Custodian's assertion that the response was made within the statutorily mandated time frame.

In <u>Semprevivo v. Pinelands Reg'l Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ. (Burlington)</u>, GRC Complaint No. 2007-135 (October 2008), the GRC requested that the custodian provide information to the GRC which was missing from the custodian's SOI. In reply, the custodian forwarded to the GRC three Board policies that the custodian said would provide the legal basis for the custodian to deny the complainant access to requested Board records. The GRC found that because there was inadequate evidence for the Council to render a meaningful decision in the matter, the complaint should be referred to the Office of Administrative Law ("OAL") for a hearing to resolve the facts

Therefore, based on the inadequate and conflicting evidence in this matter, the GRC is unable to determine whether or not the Custodian unlawfully denied access to the requested records. Therefore, this complaint should be referred to the OAL for a hearing to resolve the facts. See Semprevivo, GRC 2007-135. Also, this complaint should be referred to the OAL for determination of whether the Custodian knowingly and willfully violated OPRA and unreasonably denied access under the totality of the circumstances.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Executive Director respectfully recommends the Council find that based on the inadequate and conflicting evidence in this matter, the GRC is unable to determine whether or not the Custodian unlawfully denied access to the requested records. Therefore, this complaint should be referred to the Office of Administrative Law for a hearing to resolve the facts. <u>See Semprevivo v. Pinelands Reg'l Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ. (Burlington)</u>, GRC Complaint No. 2007-135 (October 2008). Also, this complaint should be referred to the Office of Administrative Law for determination of whether the Custodian knowingly and willfully violated OPRA and unreasonably denied access under the totality of the circumstances.

Prepared By: John E. Stewart Staff Attorney

May 24, 2022

Perrault Jean-Paul v. City of Jersey City (Hudson), 2020-209 - Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director