

Rights & Responsibilities: The Rights of Requesters and the Responsibilities of the Treasurer of Arlington County under the Virginia Freedom of Information Act

The Virginia Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), located in § 2.2-3700 et seq. of the Code of Virginia, guarantees citizens of the Commonwealth and representatives of the media access to public records held by public bodies, public officials, and public employees.

A public record is any writing or recording—regardless of whether it is a paper record, an electronic file, an audio or video recording, or any other format—that is prepared or owned by, or in the possession of a public body or its officers, employees, or agents in the transaction of public business. All public records are presumed to be open, and may only be withheld if a specific, statutory exemption applies.

The policy of FOIA states that the purpose of FOIA is to promote an increased awareness by all persons of governmental activities. In furthering this policy, FOIA requires that the law be interpreted liberally, in favor of access, and that any exemption allowing public records to be withheld must be interpreted narrowly.

Your FOIA rights

- You have the right to request to inspect or receive copies of public records, or both.
- You have the right to request that any charges for the requested records be estimated in advance. As of July 1, 2022, public bodies must notify the requester in writing that the public body may make reasonable charges not to exceed its actual cost incurred in accessing, duplicating, supplying, or searching for requested records and inquire of the requester whether he would like to request a cost estimate in advance of the supplying of the requested records.
- If you believe that your FOIA rights have been violated, you may file a petition in district or circuit court to compel compliance with FOIA. Alternatively, you may contact the Virginia Freedom of Information Advisory Council for a nonbinding advisory opinion.

Making a request for records from the Treasurer

- You may request records by U.S. Mail, fax, email, in person, or over the phone. FOIA does not require that your request be in writing, nor do you need to specifically state that you are requesting records under FOIA. From a practical perspective, it is extremely helpful to both you and the Treasurer to put your request in writing. This allows you to create a record of your request. It also gives us a clear statement of what records you are requesting, so that there is no

misunderstanding over a verbal request. However, we cannot refuse to respond to your FOIA request if you elect to not put it in writing.

- You are required to provide your name and legal address.
- Your request must identify the records you are seeking with “reasonable specificity.” This is a common-sense standard. It does not refer to or limit the volume or number of records that you are requesting; instead, it requires that you be specific enough so that we can identify and locate the records that you are seeking.
- Your request must ask for existing records or documents. FOIA gives you a right to inspect or copy records; it does not apply to a situation where you are asking general questions about the work of Treasurer, nor does it require the Treasurer to create a record that does not exist.
- You may choose to receive electronic records in any format used the Treasurer in the regular course of business.
- If we have questions about your request, please cooperate with staff’s efforts to clarify the type of records that you are seeking or to attempt to reach a reasonable agreement about a response to a large request. Making a FOIA request is not an adversarial process, but we may need to discuss your request with you to ensure that we understand what records you are seeking.

To request records from the Treasurer, you may direct your request to FOIA Officers Linda Braz or Christopher Sadowski. They can be reached at 2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 201, Arlington, Virginia, 22201, (703) 228-3255 or treasurer@arlingtonva.us. You may also contact her or him with questions you have concerning requesting records from the Treasurer.

In addition, the Freedom of Information Advisory Council is available to answer any questions you may have about how FOIA works. The Council was created in the legislative branch of state government to issue opinions on the operation and application of FOIA, to publish educational materials, and to provide training about FOIA. However, please be aware that the Council is not a records repository and does not process records requests on behalf of other public bodies, nor is the Council an investigative or enforcement agency. The Council may be contacted by email at foiacouncil@dls.virginia.gov, or by phone at (804) 698-1810 or toll-free at 1-866-448-4100.

The Treasurer’s responsibilities in responding to your request

- The Treasurer will respond to your request within five working days of receiving it.. "Day One" is considered the day after your request is received. The five-day period

does not include weekends, holidays or other days when the Treasurer is closed for business.

- The reason behind your request for public records from *[insert public body name]* is irrelevant, and you do not have to state why you want the records before we respond to your request. FOIA does, however, allow the Treasurer to require you to provide your name and legal address.
- FOIA requires that the Treasurer make one of the following responses to your request within the five-day time period:
 - 1) We provide you with the records that you have requested in their entirety.
 - 2) We withhold all of the records that you have requested, because all of the records are subject to a specific statutory exemption. If all of the records are being withheld, we must send you a response in writing. That writing must identify the volume and subject matter of the records being withheld, and state the specific section of the Code of Virginia that allows us to withhold the records.
 - 3) We provide some of the records that you have requested, but withhold other records. We cannot withhold an entire record if only a portion of it is subject to an exemption. In that instance, we may redact the portion of the record that may be withheld, and must provide you with the remainder of the record. We must provide you with a written response stating the specific section of the Code of Virginia that allows portions of the requested records to be withheld.
 - 4) We inform you in writing that the requested records cannot be found or do not exist (we do not have the records you requested). However, if we know that another public body has the requested records, we must include contact information for the other public body in our response to you.
 - 5) If it is practically impossible for the Treasurer to respond to your request within the five-day period, we must state this in writing, explaining the conditions that make the response impossible. This will allow us seven additional working days to respond to your request, giving us a total of 12 working days to respond to your request.
- If you make a request for a very large number of records, and we feel that we cannot provide the records to you within 12 working days without disrupting our other organizational responsibilities, we may petition the court for additional time to respond to your request. However, FOIA requires that we make a reasonable effort to reach an agreement with you concerning the production of the records before we go to court to ask for more time.

Charges

- A public body may make reasonable charges not to exceed its actual cost incurred in accessing, duplicating, supplying, or searching for the requested records. No public body shall impose any extraneous, intermediary, or surplus fees or expenses to recoup the general costs associated with creating or maintaining records or transacting the general business of the public body. Any duplicating fee charged by a public body shall not exceed the actual cost of duplication. Prior to conducting a search for records, the public body shall notify the requester in writing that the public body may make reasonable charges not to exceed its actual cost incurred in accessing, duplicating, supplying, or searching for requested records and inquire of the requester whether he would like to request a cost estimate in advance of the supplying of the requested records as set forth in subsection F of § 2.2-3704 of the Code of Virginia.
- The Treasurer charges \$25.00 dollars per hour for accessing or searching for requested records. The Treasurer does not charge for routine requests or requests that take less than one hour.
- You may have to pay for the records that you request from the Treasurer. FOIA allows us to charge for the actual costs of responding to FOIA requests. This would include items like staff time spent searching for the requested records, copying costs, or any other costs directly related to supplying the requested records. Any charges cannot include general overhead costs.
- If we estimate that it will cost more than \$200 to respond to your request, we may require you to pay a deposit, not to exceed the amount of the estimate, before proceeding with your request. The five days that we have to respond to your request does not include the time between when we ask for a deposit and when you respond.
- You may request that we estimate in advance the charges for supplying the records that you have requested. This will allow you to know about any costs upfront, or give you the opportunity to modify your request in an attempt to lower the estimated costs. The five days that we have to respond to your request does not include the time between when we send you the estimate and when you respond. If you do not respond within 30 days, then your request will be deemed to be withdrawn.
- If you owe us money from a previous FOIA request that has remained unpaid for more than 30 days, the Treasurer may require payment of the past due bill before it will respond to your new FOIA request.

Types of records

The following is a general description of the types of records held by the Treasurer:

- Records relating to Arlington County taxes:
 - Real property tax records are available at <https://propertysearch.arlingtonva.us/>.
 - Delinquent tax lists are available at <https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Programs/Taxes/Delinquent-Accounts>.
 - Information regarding tax sales is available at <https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Programs/Taxes/Upcoming-Tax-Sales> and real estate tax sales specifically at <https://taxva.com/real-estate-tax-sales/>.
- Please note: Virginia localities, including Arlington, DO NOT sell or auction tax liens. Accordingly, there are no records related to tax lien sales or auctions. Furthermore, the Treasurer typically does not maintain any “excess funds,” “surplus funds” or “overages” list. You may wish to contact CircuitCourtFOIAOfficer@arlingtonva.us.
- Records relating to unclaimed property, including uncashed checks, are maintained by the Virginia Department of Treasury and are available at <https://www.vamoneysearch.gov/>.
- Records relating to the investment of Arlington County funds are available at <https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Programs/Taxes/Investments>.

If you are unsure whether the Treasurer has the record(s) you seek, please contact Linda Braz or Christopher Sadowski. They can be reached at 2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 201, Arlington, Virginia, 22201, (703) 228-3255 or treasurer@arlingtonva.us.

Commonly used exemptions

The Code of Virginia allows any public body to withhold certain records from public disclosure. The Treasurer routinely withholds records subject to the following exemptions:

- State income, business, and estate tax returns, personal property tax returns, and confidential records held pursuant to § 58.1-3 of the Code of Virginia (§ 2.2-3705.7 (1))
- Information contained in the list of warrants (§ 58.1-3131)

- Personnel records (§ 2.2-3705.1(1))
- Records subject to attorney-client privilege (§ 2.2-3705.1(2)) or attorney work product (§ 2.2-3705.1(3))
- Vendor proprietary information (§ 2.2-3705.1(6))
- Records relating to the negotiation and award of a contract, prior to a contract being awarded (§ 2.2-3705.1(12))

Policy Regarding the Use of Exemptions

- The general policy of the Treasurer is to invoke the personnel records exemption in those instances where it applies in order to protect the privacy of employees and officials of the Treasurer.
- The general policy of the Treasurer is to invoke the contract negotiations exemption whenever it applies in order to protect the Treasurer's bargaining position and negotiating strategy.