

What Does the Public Really Want to Know About Public Finance?

It's Not Crystal Clear, but the Public Wants Profit!

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Throughout the world, freedom of information laws have been put into place to ensure citizens the opportunity to hold their government accountable. In practice, previous literature often finds that private gain or self-serving interests account for most national information requests, crowding out the original accountability-focused intentions of these laws. While there has been some national research around the demand for these information requests, research from a local level has been lacking. Here, data from public records requests to the City of Bellevue, Washington's Finance and Asset Management department from 2019 to 2023 are analyzed to determine what the public really wants to know about public finance. Local data mirrors the national research, with 71% of the total requests being for private gain; specifically, 47% of all public records requests are procurement-related commercial inquiries.

Keywords: Freedom of Information, Government Accountability, Public Records Request

The United States enacted the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, in 1967. The Supreme Court has explained that the goals of the law are to ensure an informed citizenry, check against corruption, and hold governors accountable to the governed. As such, this law allows the public to request records from any federal agency (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2024). The optimistic spirit enshrined in the original goals of this law inspired many other governments to follow suit. Besides FOIA, all 50 states and the District of Columbia also have some version of freedom of information law on the books (Watt, 2020). In Washington, this is the Public Records Act (PRA), enacted in 1972 via a voter-approved ballot initiative broadly promoted by citizen activists seeking improved government accountability (Watt, 2020). The Washington PRA governs state and local agencies in Washington, including towns and cities like the City of Bellevue (RCW 42.56). This governs the disclosure of public records, which it defines as “any writing containing information relating to the conduct of government or the performance of any

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governmental or proprietary function prepared, owned, used, or retained by any state or local agency regardless of physical form or characteristics” (RCW 42.56). As a local agency under the terms of this legislation, the City of Bellevue must comply with the requirement to disclose records requested by the public.

Even though FOIA is now long standing, little research has been developed about the demand for information from the government. This paper analyzed data from 458 public records requests made to the City of Bellevue Finance and Asset Management (FAM) Department between September 2019 and December 2023 to understand the types of requests made and the turnaround time for FAM’s response to the public. Understanding the public records requests from the finance department of a local city government will shed light on what the public really wants to know about public finance. It should be noted that one city’s FOI requests for one department are an extremely narrow case study. One main benefit of focusing on specifically the FAM department is that it allows for a very direct consideration of the research question: what does the public really want to know about public finance? While other departments will receive additional FOI requests, if it has to do with finance it is routed to FAM. Additional research could be developed by partnering with other local municipalities’ finance departments to aggregate a larger dataset of finance-focused FOI requests, but that was outside the scope of this work.

The City of Bellevue is centrally located between Microsoft’s headquarters in Redmond, the University of Washington, and downtown Seattle. The city is the state’s fifth largest, with an estimated 2024 population of 155,000, encompassing 33.5 square miles. It is a full-service city including police and fire protection, emergency medical services, construction and maintenance of streets and traditional municipal infrastructure, and park and recreational activities and cultural events. It is strategically positioned as one of the strongest economic centers in the Puget Sound region. The top three employers are Amazon, T-Mobile USA, and Meta. The median household income estimate from 2023 for the City of Bellevue was \$149,551, almost double the national estimate of \$75,149 (U.S. Census, 2023). Nationally, 34.3 percent of people 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree or higher, but that figure is 70.0 percent in Bellevue. Politically, Bellevue is predominantly Democratic and considered a very liberal city compared to the nation. However, it can be considered more conservative than regional neighbor Seattle, particularly around local hot-button issues such as support for businesses or police.

While it is beyond the scope of this research to compare other local jurisdictions’ FOI requests received, inferences can be made about the nature of who makes these types of requests. Survey results from the U.S. show that higher-educated individuals are more likely to be familiar with FOI laws and more likely to make FOI requests (Wagner, 2021). The same survey also found that people who believe that FOI laws improve government accountability are more likely to make requests. In a later study, four characteristics that strongly predicted a belief that FOI laws work were 1.) having an advanced education, 2.) being male, 3.) being liberal, and 4.) having a high perception of government efficacy (Wagner, 2023). The same study found that Black individuals were less likely to support FOI or believe that it works as designed. The author notes that these results suggest that “social and power dynamics may be driving factors in how the public perceives and uses FOI” (Wagner, 2023, p. 115). It would be a fair assumption that Bellevue’s relatively affluent, well-educated, liberal, and politically active community submits as many, if not more, FOI requests than the national average.

This paper is structured as follows: firstly, there is a discussion of literature around the objectives of FOI laws and the outcomes despite those objectives, along with an analytical

construct to navigate the tensions between the competing values and motivations in the demand for FOI requests. This is followed by a brief discussion of the data and methods used in the analysis. Next is a thorough investigation of the results, followed by a discussion section to contextualize the results, and lastly, a discussion of policy recommendations.

Literature Review

Countries with freedom of information (FOI) laws have exploded globally since the 1990s, including emergent and new democracies (Ackerman & Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2006). For the public, access to information (ATI), which is promoted through FOI laws, has become more widely recognized as an individual right (Riegner, 2017). Conducting the government openly is seen to overcome cynicism about the government's conduct, and to help people be confident that their government is operating in the public interest (Kierkegaard, 2009). The prevailing objective for FOI laws is a social compact for people to remain vigilant over their government through transparency which creates a stronger, more effective citizenry by allowing oversight into government function (Kimball, 2016). The public can participate more fully in democracy when there are laws that establish a right to know what their government is up to (Fink, 2019). Accountability brought by transparency is seen as a key to better governance (Wang & Guan, 2023). Public records laws were built with the understanding that people should be able to access government documents to monitor public officials (Fink, 2018).

There are clear benefits to FOI laws; for example, greater transparency consistently improves the quality of financial management (Cucciniello, Porumbescu, & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017). There are also benefits to the government: FOI laws institutionalize transparency, which can benefit political actors by ensuring they are not shut out of government information should they lose power (Berliner, 2014). Political actors may also be more willing to “constrain themselves” through FOI laws when political competition is high because these laws will equally constrain their opponents (Berliner, 2014). Some researchers think that ATI is better understood as an indicator of democratic quality rather than a cause or consequence of a strong democracy (Riegner, 2017), perhaps because of relationships like the ones Berliner uncovered.

It cannot be denied that information has the potential to spur civic engagement and government accountability. The public can only participate in the democratic process when they have information about that process via understanding the activities and policies of their government. A global survey found that FOI laws improved how many national governments record information (Banisar, 2006). Even in places with weak ATI institutions like China, activists were able to use the 2008 Open Government Information reform to fuel campaigns to inspire the government to pursue policy change in other areas (Distelhorst, 2016). While the objective of FOI laws centers on public accountability, there is also documented evidence that this is just a small number of the overall requests made through these processes.

FOI Outcomes (Despite Objectives)

Despite the long-standing expectation that FOI laws can improve the quality of government, the effects are much less pronounced than conventional wisdom suggests (Cucciniello et al., 2017). There is a disconnect between FOI laws intended to yield outcomes that serve the citizenry and the actual outcomes driven by the motivations of those making these information requests. There

is observed confusion over what transparency can do, which drives the debate over the role of FOI laws in public administration (Cucciniello et al., 2017).

FOI laws do provide the opportunity for individuals to have the right to access information to hold the government accountable. However, they also give businesses, nuisance actors, and bots opportunities to flood government offices with request work. While FOIA's original objective may have been for journalists and activists to be primary users of the law, many researchers have noted that these are just the tip-of-the-iceberg with the majority of requests coming from more selfish motivations than public accountability (Berliner, Bagozzi, & Palmer-Rubin, 2018). While the literature may present these uses as valid in limited instances, most are seen as undermining the laws' objectives (Rizzardi, 2015).

Federal agencies categorize requesters as commercial, defined as people or organizations requesting out of profit motive; noncommercial, defined as researchers and journalists; and others (Fink, 2018). Many requests are for commercial information, such as details on contracts that have been awarded (Ackerman & Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2006; Kwoka, 2016). At the federal level in the U.S., this volume of commercial requests hinders FOIA offices' ability to respond to other requests that may be more in line with the law's original objectives (Kwoka, 2016). One challenge is that top users of FOI laws are often corporations searching for information that is of private commercial interest to them, which researchers note is not part of the laws' original goal of ensuring an informed citizenry (Ackerman & Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2006). A small industry in the United States has developed in which companies use FOI to request information on procurement, regulatory processes, and competitors (Michener & Worthy, 2018).

Another common concern in the business landscape is how trade secrets, which may harm businesses and give advantages to their competitors, may be revealed through FOI requests. Delaney (2017) notes that trade secrets information should be withheld from public disclosure. Public records request laws should streamline and clarify these protections so businesses understand what is protected and what is not. Similarly, some federal agencies in the U.S. receive a high volume of FOIA requests for individual records, such as medical records, immigration records, or military service records. These requests cause similar problems for FOIA officers in that fulfilling them takes officers' time away from other requests, potentially undermining FOIA's efficacy in promoting government transparency (Kwoka, 2018). This contributes to an added problem: FOIA is not an efficient route for individuals seeking their records.

One survey of public records requesters found that public-interest requesters, such as journalists and activists, had different experiences with FOI laws in the U.S. than for-profit requesters (Wagner & Cuillier, 2024). This seems to support the analyses above that point toward public resources being diverted from requests that align with FOIA's intent. Notably, this included a lower likelihood of receiving records in response to their requests. Public responsiveness was also analyzed in all public information requests filed with the Mexican government from 2003 to 2015, with responsiveness or non-responsiveness highly indicative of politically sensitive inquiries (Bagozzi, Berliner, & Almquist, 2021). Furthermore, misuse of public records requests can encourage public servants to avoid documentation to decrease the burden of responding to these requests (Rizzardi, 2015). Snell (2002) sees committed public servants as necessary to fulfill the goals and mission of FOI laws and worries that abuse of requests by "spin doctors" could impact the quality of that commitment. Kimball (2016) raises a similar concern, stating that nuisance requests (broad, vague, inept, or with an inappropriate use intent) create a more adversarial relationship between requesters and public servants.

Table 1. Public Records Requests: Values and Motivations Matrix

		Motivation for PRR	
		Public Accountability	Private Gain
Social Values for PRR	Rights to Information	Quadrant 1: Keeping Government Accountable; Investigating Budgets	Quadrant 2: Commercial Requesters Refining Proposals to Better Serve the City; Individual Citizens Pulling Information for Legal Defense
	Efficiency Concerns	Quadrant 3: Public Interest “Fluff” News Stories; Vague and Intensive Historic Research	Quadrant 4: Nuisance Requests, Commercial Bots

In general, FOI laws and transparency initiatives can limit limited staff's ability to respond to requests under a deadline on top of their primary responsibilities (Fink, 2019). On occasion, accessing information takes so long that the information is no longer useful to the requester (Fink, 2018). Delayed responses are due partly to an overwhelming number of business requests, which can crowd out public interest requests (Fink, 2018). The theories of transparency on which FOI laws rest are oversimplified: they assume that the government can perfectly control information, while practically, bureaucracy and government are too complex for this to be true (Fenster, 2015).

Tension between Values and Motivations in FOI

When considering FOI, society must balance what it values: the private right to information or government efficiency. The right to information has been touted as an objective of FOI laws, but it has had the side effect of overwhelming government staff with requests that are not in line with those objectives and create inefficiencies.

It is also necessary to balance dueling motivations from those who request public records: public accountability or private gain. Motivations for information-gathering are defined as public if the request could advance public interest and private if the primary objective is the self-regarding interest of an individual or business (Michener & Worthy, 2018). Demand for what type of information the public requested was explored via an analysis of one million information requests in Mexico (Berliner, Bagozzi, & Palmer-Rubin, 2018). Researchers delineated requests for information useful to political accountability when citizens demand information necessary to evaluate government performance from private users whose primary objective was commercial or otherwise self-interested. The public accountability information requests follow the optimistic spirit of the original FOIA laws. The information sought for private gain, or other motives are considered a more pessimistic tip-of-the-iceberg model, wherein the public accountability information requests are just a small portion of the greater whole, which is predominantly selfish in nature (Berliner et al., 2018).

Combining these two dichotomies develops four quadrants for public records requests (PRR): two public accountability (public rights, public efficiency) and two private gains (private

Table 2. Topics of Requests

Topic of Request	Count of Requests
Contract information	115
Property information	62
Proposal information	59
Financial information	53
Bid information	29
Employee names and pay information	28
Payment and performance bonds	20
Unclaimed property	19
Commercial contact information	12
Police information	12
Surveillance information	11
Union information	9
Insurance information	8
Mailing equipment agreement inquiry	6
Procedure information	6
Company specific information	3
Misc. request	3
Soliciting: IT, Landscaping, etc.	3

rights, private efficiency). Table 1 displays the framework for this analysis with examples of where typical requests may fall in the quadrants.

The analysis developed in later portions of this paper focuses on possible motivations for the public records requests: public accountability (Quadrant 1 and 3) or private gain (Quadrant 2 and 4).

Research Gaps

The major gap in the research is the lack of information specific to local jurisdictions such as cities, states, and counties. This includes how local governments implement and enforce laws and how the public utilizes them. It is hoped that this research contributes to closing that gap by elevating the voices of records requests from Bellevue.

Data and Methodology

Data

The dataset this study uses is a document Bellevue staff call the Public Records Request Tracking Master document, which tracked a summary of public records requests sent to the

Finance and Asset Management (FAM) department of the City of Bellevue from September 5, 2019, to December 31, 2023. This is similar to the FOIA log discussed in academic research (Fink, 2018; Kwoka, 2018; Michener & Worthy, 2018) but contains additional variables specific to FAM. The data was edited to focus on the scope of the research question, “What does the public want to know about public finance?” To this end, some of the original variables were removed or adjusted to be able to aggregate over the years. A variable was introduced to measure the turnaround time between the date the request was received by FAM and the date it was marked closed. Some duplicate requests were treated as one request in the final data. The names of individual people were deleted out of respect for their privacy, but the names of city leaders were allowed to remain as these were always central to the request. The names of companies were allowed to remain where mentioned. Where requests and requestors were unclear, these were removed. The dataset dropped from 480 requests to 458 requests via this preparation process. Finally, the requests were individually read and filed into 18 topics of request categories with 151 sub-category notes and an estimate of whether the request falls into the public accountability model or private gain model categories (Berliner et al., 2018; Michener & Worthy, 2018). Table 2 shows the 18 topics of request that this analysis focuses on.

A limitation of the dataset is that the requestor and their motivations are not explicitly stated. Generally, a decent inference can be gleaned from the request's body, which this analysis is based on. A future research opportunity could develop more accurate insights by surveying requestors directly. Also, it must be noted that only observed information requests can be analyzed, and there is a broader pool of individuals who may want to know things about public finance but do not pursue a public records requests route to acquiring that information for whatever reason.

Methodology

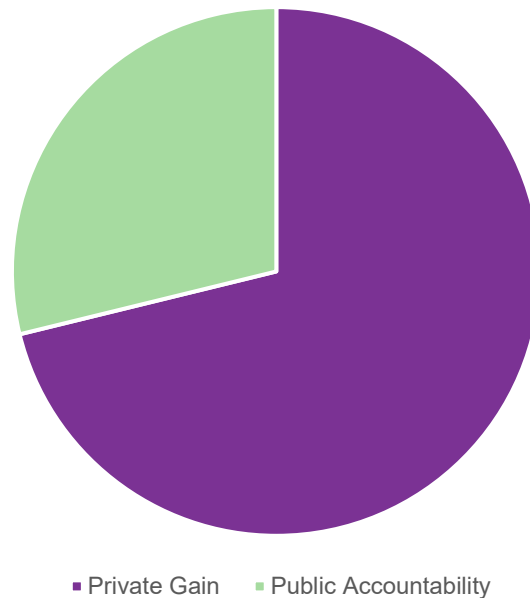
Government transparency was explored in detail in the Coalition of Journalists for Open Government (2006) finding that commercial uses of government information outpace requests by journalists and all others. A similar study, with similar results, was run by Kwoka (2016) with a simple analysis using the FOIA logs from various government agencies, breaking down the requesters at each of the studied agencies. Following Kwoka (2016, 2018) and the Coalition of Journalists (2006), an analysis is developed around the number of requests, the proportions of the request type out of the total, and an exploration of outlier requests.

Bagozzi et al. (2021) found longer delays and nonresponse on politically sensitive information requests. To consider this possibility, an analysis was run on the turnaround time to respond to each request. Once the unclear requests were removed, there was a 100% completion rate.

Results

After analyzing the 458 requests from September 2019 to December 2023, it was found that 326 requests, or 71% of the total, were likely for private gain motivations (Figure 1). This result demonstrates clear support for the tip-of-the-iceberg hypothesis that public accountability information requests only represent a small proportion of the outcomes of FOI (Ackerman &

Figure 1. Count of Private Gain vs. Public Accountability Requests



Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2006; Berliner et al., 2018; Cucciniello et al., 2017; Kwoka, 2016; Michener & Worthy, 2018).

The remaining 132 requests, 29% of the total, seemed to be for public accountability reasons. These were requests by individuals seeking information from their local government. While the reasons for their requests are not clearly stated, it is not obviously for private gain motive. This reveals that public accountability results from FOI laws within Bellevue. However, in line with prior studies, it is not as large of an outcome proportion as the objectives of FOI would lead one to believe (Cucciniello et al., 2017; Fink, 2019; Kimball, 2016).

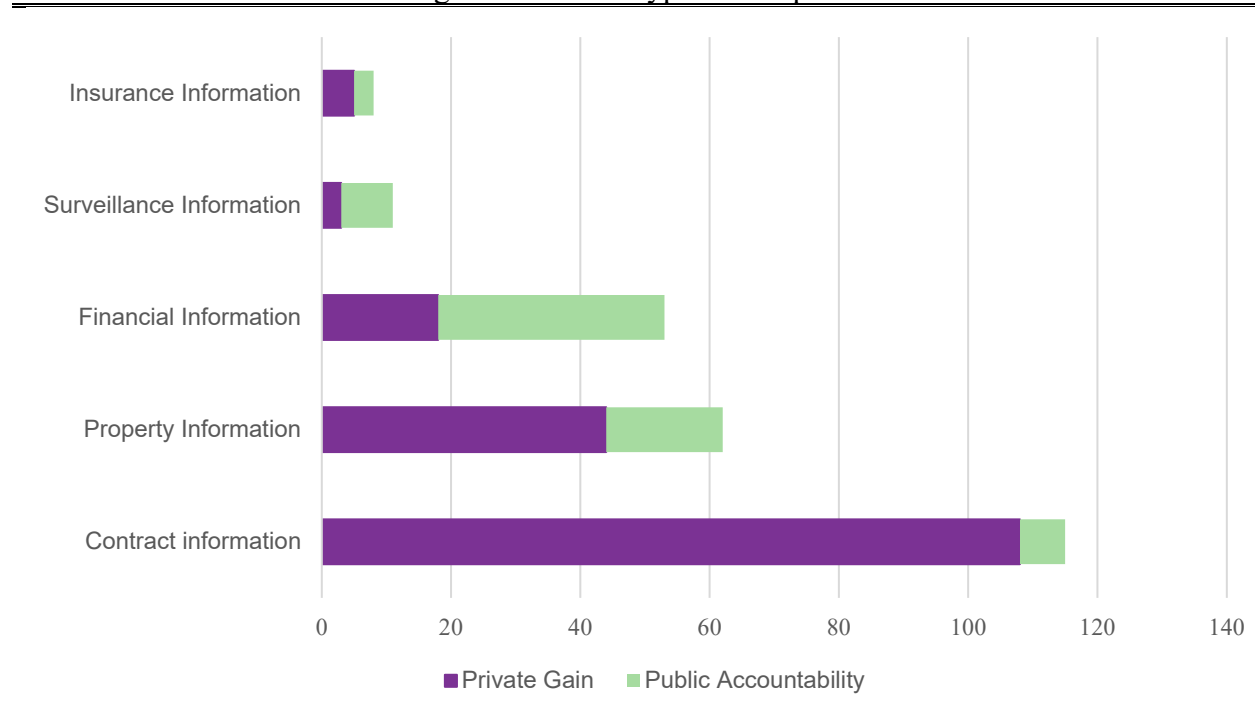
Shared Request Categories

Several categories of request topics are shared between public accountability and private gain requesters (Figure 2). These findings are of particular interest because the overlap indicates a gap in the information provided by Bellevue that would benefit both the city's residents and the businesses serving those residents. This is important in understanding where the city can most efficiently serve information requesters with either motivation type.

These public accountability contract information requests contain three requests for business license information, two requests for information on the Interagency Agreement for the “Energize Eastside” project, one request for information on the interlocal agreement between the Bellevue School District and the City of Bellevue for the School Resource Officer Program, and one request for information on cell-site simulators and related nondisclosure agreements. The private gain requests were requests for bid information from the lowest bidder, statements of work, or current contracts for various services provided to the city.

The 18 private gain requests for financial information were almost entirely purchase order and invoice information, including many requests that read as automated from a company called SmartProcure, which claims to be the nation's leading information database of government

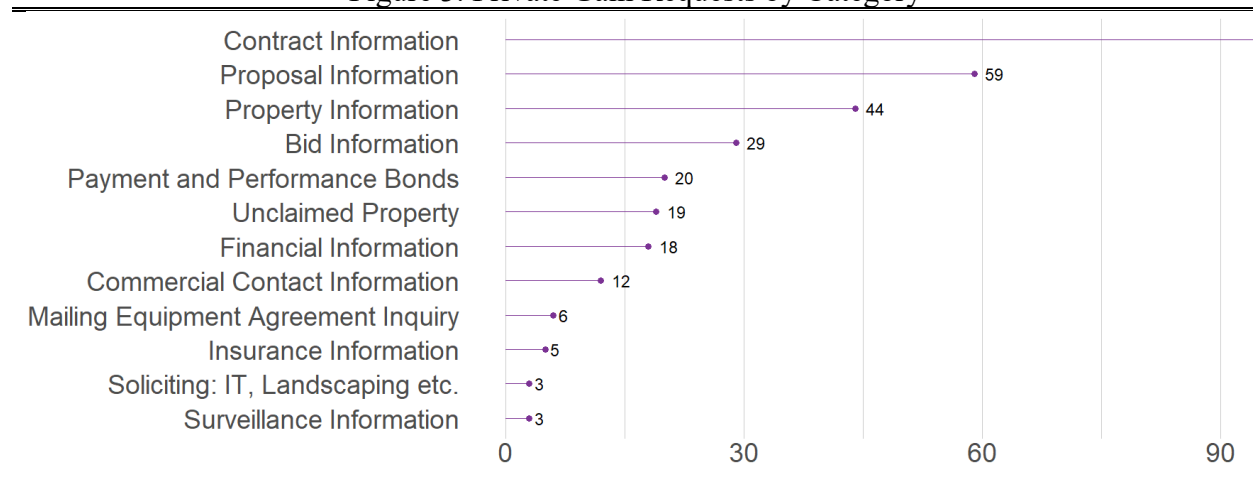
Figure 2. Shared Types of Requests



purchase orders. The automated SmartProcure requests are an excellent example of Quadrant 4 in Figure 1 (private gain, efficiency concerns), where private gain meets efficiency concerns in a way that seems to waste government resources instead of providing accountability. The public accountability financial information requests seemed to fit best into the public accountability model out of all other requests Quadrant 1 in Figure 1 (public accountability, right to information). Here are a sample of what the people of Bellevue want to know about public finance in the City of Bellevue (edited for brevity):

- Please provide all records showing or explaining how the “Impact Fees” value for the 2021-2022 budget was determined.
- What is the percentage of reserve funds? (Note: Reserve funds help organizations cover costs that may arise from emergencies, typically set between 15-30% of general fund expenditures.) Are the rates the same across departments/funds? Is there a city-wide policy or policy by department?
- How much did the City of Bellevue spend on legal fees during the Puget Sound Energy lawsuit against East Bellevue Community Council?
- Who paid for the installation, etc., of electric vehicle chargers?
- Where does the revenue from traffic fines issued in Bellevue go? Does the city retain those funds, and if so, what is the annual revenue? Or do they go to the state, and if so, is it returned to the city? If so, by what formula?
- Please disclose any information of Bellevue School District, Bellevue Police Department, or the City of Bellevue's investments in private prison stocks and industries from January 2002 to the present (requested in February 2021).

Figure 3. Private Gain Requests by Category



Requests for insurance information were fewer than the previously discussed shared categories. There were only five private gain requests for insurance information, with four requesting insurance coverage certificates and one requesting ownership history of a vehicle sold by the city. One of the public accountability requests for insurance information was for city vehicle records. However, the other two inquired about surety bonds covering the Bellevue City Manager and the Mayor. Surety bonds on public officials protect against conduct or omissions made by public officials that constitute a breach of their office duties and ensure they account for all money that comes into their hands by their office. These are required by Washington state law (RCW 42.08).

Private Gain Requests

Previous literature suggests that many public records requests are for private gain information, such as details on contracts that have been awarded (Ackerman & Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2006; Kwoka, 2016). The City of Bellevue's public records requests follow a similar pattern to those found by Kwoka (2016) and others, with private gain requests at 71%. The count of requests per each private gain category can be found in Figure 3. These results show that most of the public records requests at Bellevue are for private gain. While not inherently wrong, it can be seen as undermining the objectives of FOI laws (Ackerman & Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2006; Kwoka, 2016; Rizzardi, 2015).

The largest private gain request category outside the previously discussed contract or property information category is proposal information. These are requests for proposals or quotations about various projects around the city. It should be noted that these requests are very similar to the next largest private gain request category, bid information. These were requests for winning bids, scoring sheet summaries, and other inquiries about the bidding process. These are similar to the next largest payment and performance bonds category. A performance bond is the contractor's assurance that the work will be performed to the terms of the construction contract, and a payment bond is the contractor's assurance that labor and materials bills incurred in connection with the construction contract will be paid.

The requests for contract, proposal, bid, payment, and performance bond information are all related to the procurement industry. These requests are similar enough to be aggregated into a super-category of 216 requests surrounding the City of Bellevue's procurement and contracting practices. Out of the total requests for information analyzed, this shows that 47% of all public records requests are commercial inquiries from companies hoping to succeed in winning a government contract from the City of Bellevue. This reveals that almost half of what people want to know about public finance in the City of Bellevue is simply clarity on procurement, falling solidly into Quadrant 2 (private gain, rights to information) of Figure 1. Knowing this can provide Bellevue with fodder to better provide relevant open data and improve efficiency in FOI requests such that more effort can be spent on public accountability requests.

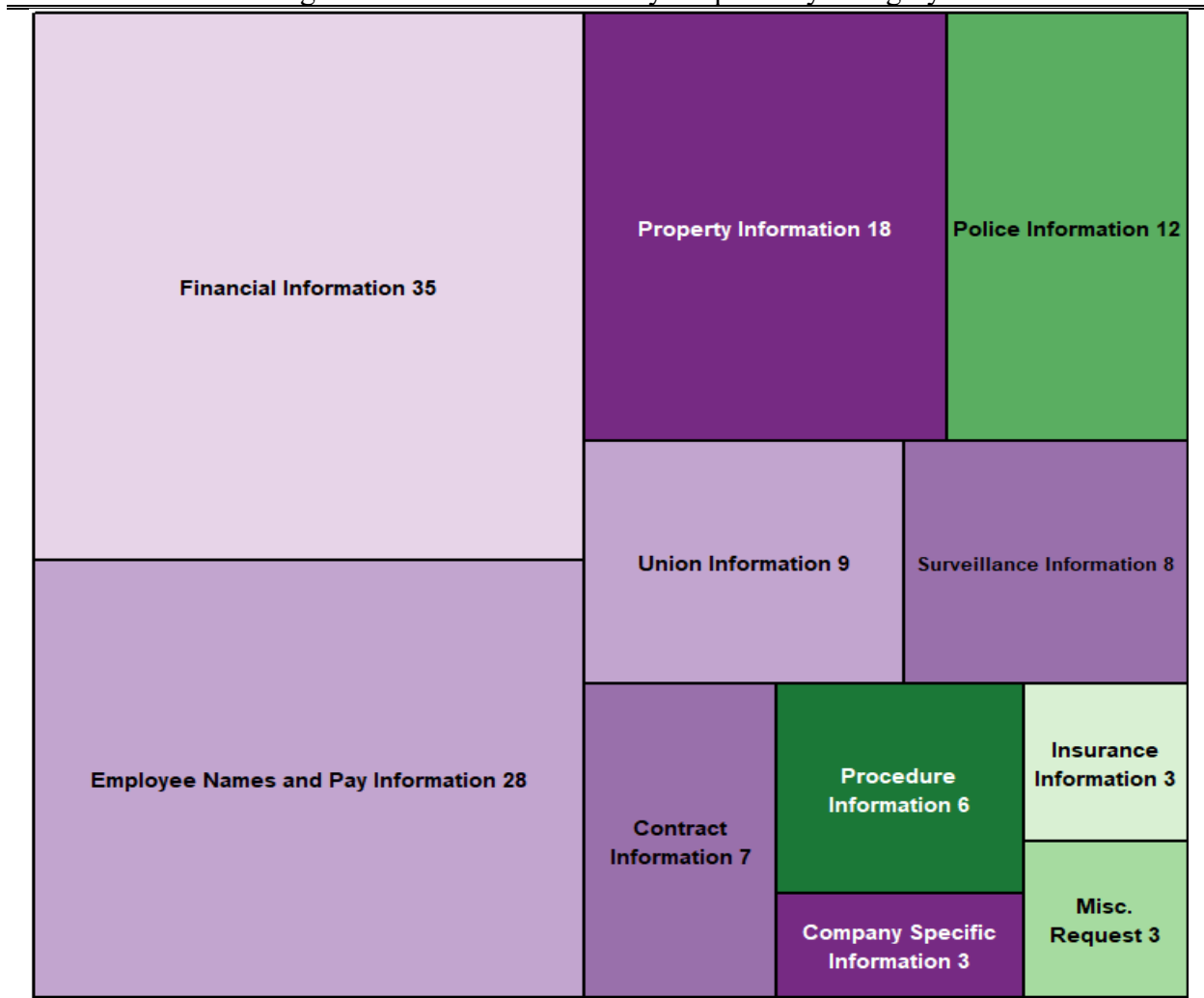
Public Accountability Requests

In this research, public accountability requests are not self-interested or commercial requests. However, it should be acknowledged that this analysis only infers request topics from the text of the request. Without explicit data on the motivation for the request, it was deemed reasonable to assume that many of these requests follow a public accountability model, with individuals desiring to hold their government accountable. However, individuals also have their motivations in requesting data, and not all these motivations will be for the higher public good. Someone putting in a public records request for union or employee information may be an attempt to improve negotiation footing. Someone inquiring about contract or procedure information may be trying to fuel a litigious situation for Bellevue. A research opportunity in the future would involve surveying requestors to ascertain the explicit motivations for their public records requests.

Aside from the previously discussed shared categories, the largest category of public accountability requests was employee names and pay information (Figure 4). Of the 28 requests for employee names and wage information, nine inquired specifically about the Bellevue Police Department (BPD), two inquired specifically about the Bellevue Fire Department, and one requested information on both. Two requests asked about the IT Department's salary and benefits. Two requests were for council members' salary information and their time off. One request came from a city employee requesting copies of their time sheets. One request asked about the city's total salary paid to school resource officers compared to the total paid by Bellevue School District. One asked about the car allowance and annual pay of all executive leadership. The others requested all employee names and salary. These requests fall largely into Quadrant 1 of Figure 1 (public accountability, rights to information). However, efficiency concerns arise when employees request their timesheets when there is a portal for self-service and a dedicated department to address Human Resources concerns.

Most public records requests concerning BPD should be routed there rather than FAM and would not be included in this dataset. However, there were 22 requests concerning police information routed to the FAM department. Ten of these requests were discussed in the prior paragraph and were regarding salary, and 12 fell into the police information category. Two requests specifically requested information about who from BPD and the City of Bellevue went to the January 6th, 2021, insurrection. These requests were routed to all city departments to ensure a thorough response. Other requests were unique and included requests for insurance information for BPD, police and fire truck scanner frequencies, and police training information, among others. Out of 132 public accountability requests, inquiries about the police specifically

Figure 4. Public Accountability Requests by Category



account for 17%. This is the largest coherent group of public accountability public records requests, and it cannot be ignored that these requests from late 2019 through 2023 overlap a time when the Seattle Police Department came under increased scrutiny after the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest in 2020 and the U.S. Department of Justice’s consent decree termination in 2023. Due to Bellevue’s proximity to Seattle, this upheaval in the neighboring city likely inspired inquiries about Bellevue’s police. With a longer timeline of records requests, it would be possible to determine if those current events inspired more police-related records requests than usual, but unfortunately, that data is unavailable. Further research could take a more longitudinal view and explore whether certain categories of requests become more common around specific events, such as elections, natural disasters, or other major moments.

Turnaround Time

The average turnaround time for private gain and public accountability requests was 8 days. The rapid turnaround time combined with the 100% completion rate is a tribute to the excellent

efforts by staff at the City of Bellevue's FAM department to ensure public confidence via transparency. Though other literature has suggested that a high volume of private gain requests might burden government staff heavily enough to divert their attention from public accountability requests, the short turnaround and full completion rate may indicate that FAM staff do not experience the same problems. Further investigation into the time burden of responding staff would be required, especially considering the time diverted from non-records work responsibilities.

The requests with longer average turnaround times mostly fell within private gain requests. Commercial contact information as a category had an average 17-day turnaround, solicitors promoting their services received a response on average within 16 days, and requests for unclaimed property information averaged 10 days' response time. It should be noted that all these categories have many requests, which seem like automated bot requests for commercial interests.

Public accountability requests that had longer average turnaround times were often very niche. Miscellaneous requests as a bucket averaged 13 days of turnaround time due to the time-intensive nature of requests, such as pulling receipts for outside counsel attorney work from cases when Bellevue was the plaintiff in the 1990s, which took 21 days to track down. The financial information request bucket had an average of 10 days of turnaround time. These requests were also often very broad. For example, one request asked for all documents and records related to Bellevue contributions for the East Link Project from 2011, which took 67 days to complete. Requests for historical data such as these take longer for several reasons, including employee turnover, records retention, and coordination with outside stakeholders. All these requests are excellent examples of Quadrant 3 in Figure 1 (public accountability, efficiency concerns), where efficiency concerns begin to outweigh the possible public benefit of the information requested.

Discussion

The Results section showed that 29 percent of public records requests in the City of Bellevue were in line with the public accountability objectives of FOI laws. This demonstrates that the people of Bellevue are actively producing accountability in government finance by closely examining Bellevue records. This serves a meaningful democratic purpose, encouraging an engaged citizenry and ensuring that city resources are not lost due to error or oversight. Serving the people of Bellevue and building confidence through transparency is an excellent use of taxpayer resources.

Private gain motivations are not necessarily a waste of taxpayer resources. The City of Bellevue prides itself on being a business-friendly city. An interesting future research opportunity would be to explore the outcomes of FOI requests for the requesters themselves. When considering companies seeking information to improve their odds in the procurement process, which falls to Quadrant 2 of Figure 1 (private gain, right to information), what percentage of requesters subsequently won contracts? How do those bids compare against those where participants did not make public records requests? Anecdotally, staff in the public records office know of some companies who submitted PRR for procurement documents and used the information to improve their bids enough to win later contracts. Requesters may add value to the

city with better-informed and refined proposals. Unfortunately, the data does not exist currently to say for sure.

An additional nuance to the discussion around private gain requesters is that RCW 39.04.105 on competitive bidding provides two full business days following the bid opening to request copies of the bids received for the project. All bidding and competitively procured items or services are posted on public purchase, and additionally, all public work bids are posted on the builder's exchange. Both public works and builder's exchange are online platforms for listings of government procurement opportunities. However, after the two-day window is closed, they must submit a public records request to access this information. It is a short time frame, and most vendors miss the two-day window and must go through Bellevue's PRR process instead. This would explain why there is such a disproportionate number of these types of requests.

Technology innovations could reduce the burden on city staff to provide information from FOI requests. Sunshine laws have grown substantially in recent decades, with transparency spreading worldwide as governments influence one another toward more open government practices (Larrick, 2017). Proactive transparency can be achieved through Open Data Portals and other websites acting as self-service FOI portals. There is even the opportunity for local government open data programs to display a reactive feedback mechanism, such as suggesting a dataset or website (Larrick, 2017). Open Data can foster economic growth, innovation, and efficiency and inspire more citizen participation and self-empowerment, hopefully building the next generation of civil servants (Jelenic, 2019).

The City of Bellevue fully embraces proactive transparency. The Open Data Portal is linked to the city's Public Records Center page, where people submit records requests. Staff can and do put up deflectors so that when publicly available information is requested through various keywords, the person is automatically rerouted to the correct place in Open Data. This allows them to guide information requesters directly to the right place.

The results developed in this study show that almost half of the public records requests for the City of Bellevue FAM department are probable commercial requestors seeking information on how better to win government contracts for projects in the city. This information can be proactively posted on FAM's website: Bid Opportunities, RFPs, and RFQs. Even for the requests in the public accountability model of ATI requests, many of the answers could be found in the city's Budget Book or Annual Comprehensive Financial Report. However, these large documents do not allow users to easily pull the data from the published tables, which may be why people use public records requests instead. Additionally, some FAM data will not be allowed in Open Data for legal reasons, but city staff are as proactively transparent as legally possible. One recent innovation is that the preliminary budget for 2025-2026 was developed into an interactive digital budget book, allowing people to drill down to specifically the expenditures or revenues they are curious about.

Educating requestors could go far in expediting and fulfilling their information request. Requesters should keep in mind the advice from the survey and interviews of FOI access professionals, do preliminary research and know the terminology, and be as specific as possible in the request (Kimball, 2016). Active pointers like the deflectors that redirect people to Open Data or the opportunity to explore their curiosities through the interactive digital budget book are a great start to alleviating the inefficiencies that public records requests can sometimes create. However, some constituents will be reluctant or unable to embrace digital systems.

Some agencies manage the flow of requests by charging fees for commercial requests (Fink, 2019). These cost-recovery FOI policies can counter the burden that public records

requests can impose on staff. The City of Bellevue has adopted the state's copy pay schedule, which means that the city cannot charge for processing, only for copies (RCW 42.56.19). Almost 99 percent of the city's requests are electronic and there are only rarely requests for print. Unless the individual requests large, printed binders, Bellevue does not impose cost recovery. The only exception is a mandated fee for police body-worn cameras, with 10% of the fee paid upon request and the remaining paid before the records are released.

Policy Recommendations

As previously discussed, research from a national level (Coalition of Journalists for Open Government, 2006; Kwoka, 2016) found similar issues as this analysis: public records requests have large proportions of commercial requests. Researchers have posed several possible solutions to this issue. Regarding commercial requests, the U.S. government could create an affirmative disclosure solution, freeing agency resources to serve requests from citizens and journalists (Kwoka, 2016). Agencies could also design processes to meet individual needs for personal records and alleviate the need to use FOIA (Kwoka, 2018). This call for proactivity is a common theme. Rizzardi (2015) notes that the government can reduce the burden on itself to respond to FOI requests by proactively providing information that the public needs. Kimball (2016) suggests that the officers who implement these laws and public servants responsible for documentation should be included in any conversations about improving the processes. Broadly, the literature calls for returning FOI laws and their implementation resources to the intended beneficiaries to meet their goals of improving government transparency and citizen access to information.

The Association of Washington Cities recommended in 2013 that to strengthen open government, it was necessary to curb requesters' abuse of public records laws (Kimball, 2016; Rizzardi, 2015). They suggested several solutions, including charging more for commercial entities asking for records and blocking financially motivated requests (Kimball, 2016). In some states, requesters are required to clarify if they are using the information for commercial purposes. These requests can then be put on a slower timeline, allowing public interest requests to have the priority of officials' attention (Fink, 2018). It could be that an overwhelming number of requests creates an obstacle to compliance with FOI law (Kimball, 2016). However, the results of this study show that in the FAM department of the City of Bellevue there was a 100 percent completion rate, so they are not overwhelmed enough to create compliance issues with Washington's PRA. Having requesters provide explicitly their use or motivation for the information could be interesting data to gather. It could act as a foundation for possibly adjusting timelines or blocking requests that cause efficiency concerns if it comes to that in the future.

In a study of those who carry out federal FOI laws, public records officers indicated that more funding might increase their effectiveness (Kimball, 2016). However, many staff, not just those who carry out FOI laws, believe increased funding would increase their effectiveness. Budgets are always contentious, but the additional staff, improved records management processes, and overall morale boost that additional funding could bring could alleviate the burdens of these requests on staff already juggling their full-time duties (Kimball, 2016).

Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Virginia all have FOI laws that limit the right to request information from residents of their state. However, it is not universally enforced (Fink, 2018). This could be an

interesting option for the City of Bellevue to explore, and it would limit Category 4 of Table 1 (private gain-efficiency concerns) nuisance or bot requests quite a bit as those tend to be operating nationally or internationally rather than locally.

Conclusion

This paper explored the public records requests made to the City of Bellevue Finance and Asset Management department and found that 71% of the requests were likely private gain requests. Almost half of the requests were commercial interest in procurement contracts with the city. This is in keeping with past literature, suggesting that public accountability motivations are only the tip of the iceberg compared to the number of requests with which the government is inundated. This finding at the local government level suggests that smaller governments like cities see similar issues as the federal government. The fact that the outcomes of FOI laws deviate so much from the objectives of FOI laws speaks to opportunities to improve legislation in the future to balance better the societal values underpinning FOI with the motivations of information requesters using FOI, as well as opportunities for governments to improve the availability of procurement information outside of the FOI process to free up resources to respond to requests rooted in holding governments accountable.

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