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Achieving Financial Transparency

June 30, 2025 | 1 CPE Credit

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Speakers



Public Finance Journal Authors

- Cathy Landry
- Kip Murray

Pinellas County, Florida

- Ken Burke
- Daniel Coughenour
- Chandra Peddu

Agenda



Public Finance Journal research - Importance of transparency in government finance



Financial Transparency at Pinellas County, Florida

Importance of Financial Transparency

Kip Murray
Cathy Landry

Public Finance Journal Publication



- Public Finance Journal is publishing peer-reviewed research that examines and analyzes contemporary issues in public budgeting and finance.
- <https://www.gfoa.org/publicfinancejournal>
- Our paper is the product of winning the inaugural GovFi prize which provides funding for answering long-standing public finance questions.
- <https://www.gfoa.org/govfi-prize>



PUBLIC FINANCE
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Public Finance Journal Publication



Our research question:

- What does the public really want to know about public finance?

Research strategy:

- Analyze data from the FOIA public records requests for the Finance department of the City of Bellevue



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FOIA Literature Review



- The USA enacted the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 1967.
- All 50 states and DC have some version of FOIA on the books
- Per the Supreme Court, the goals of the law are to:
 - ensure an informed citizenry
 - check against corruption
 - hold governors accountable to the governed.



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FOIA Literature Review



- Who makes FOIA requests?
 - Individuals with advanced education;
 - Typically, white males;
 - Politically liberal;
 - Having a high perception of government efficacy
- Social and power dynamics might be drive how the public perceives and uses FOIA.



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FOIA Literature Review



- Benefits of FOI:
 - Greater transparency improves quality of financial management.
 - Transparency can benefit political actors, ensuring that loss of power ≠ loss of government info.
- FOI Outcomes (Despite Objectives)
 - Effects of FOI on quality improvements of government are less pronounced than expected.
 - FOI laws give businesses, nuisance actors, and bots the opportunity to flood government with work



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Private Gain FOIA Requests



- Federal agencies categorize requesters as:
 - **Commercial:** people or organizations requesting out of profit motive.
 - **Noncommercial:** researchers, journalists, others not acting out of profit motive.
- FOIA requesting industry has developed in the US in which companies request information on procurement, processes, and competitors.



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Private Gain FOIA Requests



Tensions between

- Social Values for FOIA:
 - Private Right to Information vs.
 - Government Efficiency
- Motivations of those who use FOIA:
 - Public Accountability vs.
 - Private gain



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Private Gain FOIA Requests



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	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

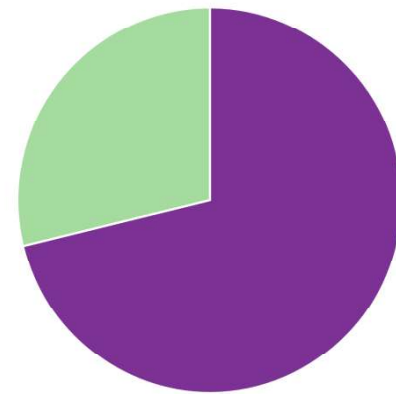


Results of Bellevue FOIA Research



- In the City of Bellevue, about 71% of the total FOI requests were likely for private gain motivations.
- Consistent with literature: public accountability requests are only a small proportion of FOI outcomes.

Bellevue FAM Public Records
Count of Requests



■ Private Gain ■ Public Accountability

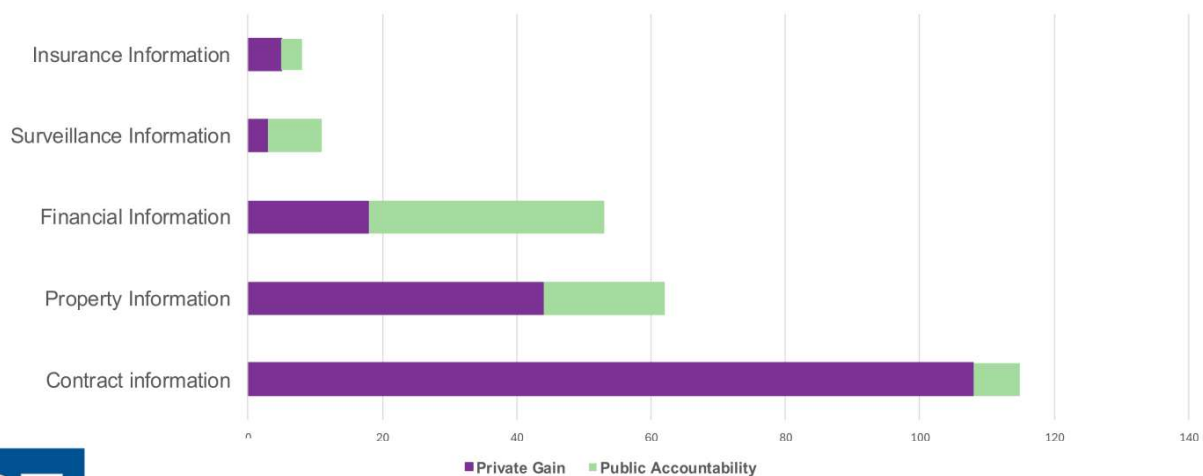


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Results of Bellevue FOIA Research



Shared Types of Requests



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What do the people of Bellevue want to know about public finance?



- Please provide any and all records that show or explain how the “Impact Fees” value for the 2021-2022 budget were determined.
- What is the percentage of reserve funds? Are the rates the same across departments/funds? Is there a City-wide policy or policy by department?



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What do the people of Bellevue want to know about public finance?



- How much did the City of Bellevue spend on legal fees during the Puget Sound Energy lawsuit against East Bellevue Community Council?
- 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?



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What do the people of Bellevue want to know about public finance?



- Who paid for the installation, etc. of electric vehicle chargers?
- Please disclose any and all information of Bellevue School District, Bellevue Police Department, or City of Bellevue investments in private prison stocks and private prison industries of any kind from January 2002 to present (requested in February 2021).



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Results of Bellevue FOIA Research



- RCW 39.04.105 on competitive bidding provides two full business days following bid opening to request copies of the bids received for the project.
- After that, a FOIA request is necessary to access this information.
- The City of Bellevue fully embraces proactive transparency:
 - Open Data Portal linked to the Public Records Center page;
 - Deflectors in place for when publicly available information is requested via FOIA;
 - Digital Budget Book which is easily searchable for specific information.



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