

Policy Resolution: Enhancement of Compliance with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in the City of Richmond

WHEREAS, reports from local citizens have underscored a concerning trend of delays and non-responses to FOIA requests, reflecting broader issues of transparency within the city;¹

WHEREAS, the Richmond City Democratic Committee strongly supports the adherence to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) laws by local governments at all levels, ensuring transparency and accountability in public administration.

WHEREAS, recent analyses by local advocates and citizens have highlighted a persistent issue with the timeliness and responsiveness of FOIA requests in Richmond, indicating a systematic problem with transparency;¹

WHEREAS, reports suggest that despite efforts and announcements to improve FOIA processes, citizens continue to face delays and non-responses, undermining public trust and the rights guaranteed under the FOIA;¹

WHEREAS, a whistleblower lawsuit filed by former Richmond city employee, Connie Clay, alleges significant non-compliance with the state's Freedom of Information Act, highlighting a systemic failure to adhere to transparency laws;²

WHEREAS, Connie Clay, in her capacity as the city's former Freedom of Information Act officer and public information manager, reported chaotic and mismanaged processes for handling public record requests, indicating a routine violation of FOIA obligations since her start in the summer of 2023;²

WHEREAS, despite efforts to rectify these issues, Ms. Clay was reportedly silenced and subsequently terminated by her immediate supervisor, Petula Burks, Director of the Office of Strategic Communications and Civic Engagement, for refusing to withhold information illegally from reporters and for reporting these violations;²

WHEREAS, this termination not only contradicts the principles of transparency and accountability but also potentially violates whistleblower protection laws;

Be it resolved, the Richmond City Democratic Committee (RCDC) urgently calls for an immediate and thorough investigation into the allegations of FOIA non-compliance and whistleblower retaliation within the city's administration;

Be it further resolved, the RCDC demands the establishment of clear, transparent, and efficient procedures for handling FOIA requests to ensure compliance with state laws and to foster an environment of openness and accountability;

Be it further resolved, the RCDC advocates for the implementation of training programs for all city employees on FOIA compliance, emphasizing the legal and ethical obligations of public servants to provide access to public records;

Be it further resolved, the RCDC supports measures to protect employees who, acting in good faith, report violations of law, ensuring they are not subjected to retaliation or adverse employment actions;

Be it finally resolved, the RCDC calls upon Mayor Levar Stoney's office and all relevant city officials to address these allegations with the seriousness they warrant and to take decisive action to restore trust in Richmond's commitment to transparency and the rule of law.

Citations:

1. <https://www.wtvr.com/news/local-news/why-richmonders-say-city-not-complying-government-transparency-law-april-3-2024>
2. <https://www.wtvr.com/news/local-news/connie-clay-richmond-foia-mar-4-2024>
3. https://richmond.com/news/local/government-politics/richmond-freedom-of-information-act-foia-levar-stoney-virginia-sunshine-week-foia-open-records-government-city-hall/article_8c297b86-dc9e-11ee-bc43-d340c7a3cb4e.html