

IPIB Monthly Column

October 5, 2020

Q&A from the Iowa Public Information Board

By Margaret E. Johnson, Executive Director

Question: What is a public record? How do I ask for records?

Answer: Iowa Code section 22.1(3) provides a definition of ‘public records’ to include “ *all records, documents, tape, or other information, stored or preserved in any medium, of or belonging to this state or any county, city, township, school corporation, political subdivision, (certain non-profits)... or tax-supported district in this state, or any branch, department, board, bureau, commission, council, or committee of any of the foregoing.* ”

This definition includes documents, tapes, etc. that exist and are stored or preserved. It does not include information that may be known by an official or employee of the government body that has not been memorialized as a public record as defined by the statute. Therefore, when requesting a public record, it is important to request a ‘record’ and not just answers to questions.

Public officials and employees should assist the public seeking answers to questions about government activities. However, the public records laws set forth in Chapter 22 are limited to “*records, documents, tape, or other information, stored or preserved in any medium.*”

Rather than asking questions (“How much has the city paid for snow removal in the last five years?”), a record request should ask for copies of the actual record that should contain this information (“Please provide copies of all snow removal invoices and payments for the last five years.”).

The IPIB has a sample records request letter on its website that can be used when requesting public records. It is not required that a record request be made in writing, but using a written request helps to document the request.

Did You Know that the Iowa Public Information Board staff is available to assist you with questions or problems involving open meetings and public records in Iowa? During the month of September 2020, 41 contacts were made with the Iowa Public Information Board office.

Board Members

Joan Corbin • E. J. Giovannetti • Keith Luchtel • Monica McHugh
Frederick Morain • Julie Pottorff • Suzan Stewart • Stan Thompson

TYPE	September 2020
Formal complaints	11
Advisory opinions	0
Declaratory orders	0
Informal complaints	3
Informal requests	24
Miscellaneous	7
TOTAL:	41

Who can contact the IPIB and how long does it take? Any person can contact the IPIB for assistance by telephone (515-725-1781), by email, or on the IPIB website. In 2020, 585 identifiable people have contacted the IPIB. Of these, 273 were private citizens, 243 were government officials or employees, and 69 were members of the media. In 2020, 70% of the incoming contacts were resolved the first day, 12% were resolved in one to five days, and 18% were resolved in six or more days. Opinions, rulings, FAQs, reports, and training documents are available on the IPIB website – www.ipib.iowa.gov.