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**STATEMENT OF BRIDGEPORT CITY ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
REGARDING THE CITY'S FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (FOI) POLICIES & PROCEDURES**

Issued by: Mark T. Anastasi, Bridgeport City Attorney

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The City of Bridgeport has always been, and remains, committed to complying with all its legal obligations pursuant to the CT Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. These obligations include balancing the responsibilities of providing access to public records in a reasonably timely manner, while ensuring the privacy of confidential records.

Years ago, the City experienced various instances wherein certain of its departments inappropriately released confidential records (including personnel and competitive purchasing records) in response to FOI requests. To prevent future such occurrences by ensuring proper legal review and redaction of material that is exempt from disclosure, prior City Administrations authorized the Office of the City Attorney to institute a practice of reviewing FOI document disclosures prior to release of requested records to the public. Naturally, those types of records that are routinely available "over the counter" (e.g. police MV accident reports, land use applications and board and commission agendas and minutes) were exceptions to this procedure.

Thereafter, in 2017 in response to the Ganim Administration's commitment to openness and transparency, the City Attorney's Office introduced a web-based electronic portal to receive and respond to FOI requests from the public. While the City continued to accept written FOI requests by mail and in-person as well, the result of this innovation was a dramatic increase in the number of FOI request submissions. From 2017 to 2022, the annual total of newly received FOI requests has increased by nearly a factor of four (from approx. 544 to approx. 1916).

Understandably this increased volume of requests to be serviced significantly increased the workload in the City Attorney's Office. Consequently, a full-time Associate City Attorney has been assigned to FOIA responses, hearings, and related matters for years. Moreover, the City Attorney's Office reallocated funding from a vacant position and hired an additional paralegal effective October 3, 2022, whose primary function is to provide support services for handling FOI requests and complaints. The current staffing for the Office of the City Attorney dedicated to its role in processing FOI requests is one full-time associate city attorney and one full-time paralegal, with various other attorneys and staff providing back-up assistance and substantive legal expertise as warranted and dependent on the office schedule and workload. In addition, various City departments have assigned at least one dedicated FOI liaison, whose responsibilities include searching for responsive public records within said department.

While FOI requests are not the exclusive tasks that the assigned attorney and paralegal are responsible for, due to the tremendously high FOI request/FOIC matter caseload, the vast majority of the work performed by the FOI team in the Office of the City Attorney concerns day-to-day processing of requests and reviewing of responsive records. Again, the increase in requests is largely directly attributable to implementation of the FOIA Portal. Ironically, introduction of this user-friendly public portal, established to streamline the processing of requests and standardize responses to requests, has had the unintended consequence of creating an ever increasing volume of FOI requests, with commensurate increases in service demands initiated thereby. Furthermore, the workload burden on City staff in connection with responding to FOI complaints is exacerbated by the FOIC operating only from one central location in Hartford. This is unlike various other state agencies that maintain satellite offices scattered throughout the state and/or which permit remote participation (thereby minimizing travel time). This requires City staff to travel in between 2-3 hours round trip to attend each FOI hearing, meeting, or other required engagement.

The City continuously evaluates its FOIA procedures in furtherance of its commitment to maximizing responsiveness to the general public. Facilitating the process through which members of the public can obtain routine records more quickly and directly from the relevant department remains a priority concern for the City. As a result, the City Attorney's Office has developed over the past six months a plan to conduct further targeted training of appropriate departmental personnel and is planning to introduce additional process enhancements this fiscal year. These initiatives will include empowering properly trained representatives of other City departments that possess the records being requested to respond directly to the vast majority of FOI requests, without the requirement of prior legal review of requested records by the Office of the City Attorney so as to reduce and/or eliminate any bottlenecks/middleman delay. City Attorney staff will remain available to both provide legal support when needed/requested to the various department liaisons and to directly handle the more complex FOI requests.

The City Attorney's Office (as well as the City as a whole) remains fully committed to providing proper response to FOIA requests in as timely a manner as is reasonable considering all applicable circumstances, including the exponential increase in the volume of such requests received in recent years. Despite the burgeoning costs of compliance with unfunded state mandates, the City also remains committed to keeping municipal costs to a minimum and taxes low. As a consequence, the City is taking a balanced approach to shorten its FOI response time by expanding its use of existing staff in all involved departments. Finally and fortuitously, the overarching operational burdens imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have now passed.