

SALARIES, MEETING MINUTES TO BE OPEN

Caymanian Compass

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Minutes of government-appointed board meetings and, to a certain extent, salaries of government employees will likely be open public records when the Freedom of Information Law takes effect in the Cayman Islands next year.

However, the attorney organising civil service preparations for the new law said there will probably be restrictions placed on both areas.

FOI Unit Coordinator Carole Excell said some boards will discuss certain matters which are not "in the public interest" to review, such as personnel issues or matters relating to security, which may not be released under the law.

"But is there a way that they can format their minutes so that they can release the rest of the discussions?" Ms Excell said. "That's something we have to sit down and work out with those public authorities."

The National Archives Law requires all discussions of public agency board meetings to be recorded, so public authorities should be keeping records of all decisions, Ms Excell said.

"The issue is, how can we get them to a stage where you can publish at least some of the information that was discussed," she said. "It's going to be hard to change the culture of thinking that the board minutes can actually go out. But we know from other country's experiences that people always request board minutes."

In fact, recent focus groups conducted by Government Information Services with the press and community members indicated that both groups intended to request minutes of board meetings once the FOI Law takes effect in January.

Ms Excell also pointed out that many government agencies around the world are simply releasing records of meetings on the internet, even local police departments in some cases.

"To see that police in England are releasing (minutes of) meetings on line is amazing," she said. "Can that happen here?"

The FOI coordination unit advised information managers from about 75 different Cayman Islands government agencies to begin considering whether they are ready to take such steps.

Salaries of public servants are also likely to be considered public information, although the extent to which they are open to review is still unclear.

“Currently what we’re looking at is a recommendation that senior government officials, their salaries should be available,” Ms Excell said. “For people who are not senior, we don’t think their salaries should be made available.”

Exactly what is meant by “senior government officials” has yet to be defined. Corresponding regulations to the FOI Law are being drafted and are expected to be complete soon.

Those regulations would have to be approved by the Cayman Islands Cabinet before taking effect.

Ms Excell said the majority of government departments, agencies and statutory authorities have named information managers, the people who will respond to requests under the FOI Law.

However, she said there are still approximately 12 positions that need to be filled. Most agencies are not hiring new people to handle those information requests, but are using existing staff.

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