

FOI request obstructed: watchdog

By Farrah Tomazin
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THE State Ombudsman has found that Victoria's biggest government department tried to obstruct the release of sensitive information about ministerial "media opportunities".

In a move that has prompted further questions about the Government's mantra of openness and accountability, Ombudsman George Brouwer has found that the Human Services Department created "unreasonable delays" and used questionable tactics while processing a freedom-of-information request by the Opposition.

In an attempt to find out how much money was being spent on public relations, Liberal MP Richard Dalla-Riva had applied under FOI laws for documents showing "public servants seeking media opportunities, media attention, and/or the development of media images" for cabinet ministers.

An Ombudsman's investigation into the way the request was handled revealed a series of measures that prevented the information from being released.

In one instance, the department's media unit repeatedly claimed that a search for the information Mr Dalla-Riva wanted would be too "voluminous", even though it had found a document titled "Media Opportunities" that listed all potential opportunities for cabinet ministers.

FOI officers had also relied heavily on the directions of the media unit rather than conducting proper information searches, and the director of the department's policy and strategic projects unit had slowed the process down by telling bureaucrats not to discuss by phone the applicant's request.

"In my opinion, the department's handling of Mr Dalla-Riva's request was inadequate," Mr Brouwer said in his scathing report, obtained by *The Age*.

"The department provided incorrect advice to the applicant in its first response, as it had not identified all documents within the scope of the request.

"The department also unreasonably delayed responding to the request ... Also, (it) failed to consult with the applicant at an early stage to clarify his request, and failed to provide assistance to the applicant."

The Opposition's request was sparked in 2004, when a document was leaked showing that public servants had been asked to generate media opportunities and positive announcements for the Government's youngest minister, Jacinta Allan.

The documents showed Education Department bureaucrats had been asked for help in preparing a "comprehensive plan" of media events for Ms Allan, the Education Services Minister.

Mr Dalla-Riva said: "It's a sad state of affairs when the Bracks Government is doing everything possible to limit FOI applications and stymie any opportunity to get to the bottom of what money the Government is spending, especially when it comes to spin and media opportunities."

Human Services Department spokesman Bram Alexander said it had since made changes that were recommended by the Ombudsman, such as consulting FOI applicants as early as possible and assisting them with requests.

Mr Brouwer also recommended that Mr Dalla-Riva resubmit his request.