

TCEQ fine tunes open record processes

May 23, 2018 - New tip sheet, internal improvements speed up responses

By Andrew Keese, TCEQ External Relations

The TCEQ strives to make its records as easily accessible to the public as possible.




Contract worker Yukio Nemoto walks along the rolling stack shelving in the TCEQ's Central File Room. The stacks allow for more files to be stored in a smaller space.



Michael Chamberlain, TCEQ Records Management Team, retrieves a folder in the Central File Room. The file room stores the TCEQ's critical files and has viewing space available for the public. For more information, visit [the file room webpage](#).

With that in mind, the agency has been diligent in providing public access to its databases and other files via its website. The TCEQ also provides access to its [Central File Room](#) for public inspection of its files.

To improve the timeliness of public information requests, the TCEQ unveiled a revamped [online request form](#) and a brand new [tip sheet](#)  last week.

"It's all about making sure that the TCEQ is accountable to the public that it serves. It's an obligation that the agency welcomes and takes seriously," says Tammy Mitchell, special counsel in the TCEQ's Office of Legal Services, who also served as the agency's first public information attorney from the beginning of 2015 through March of this year.

The Texas Public Information Act, which was revised in 2017, allows state agencies to refer requestors to the agency's website if the requested information is available there. The TCEQ has been posting more and more of its records online, prioritizing the most frequently requested records to make them available to the public for free and at their convenience.

Of course, not all of the TCEQ's materials are available on its website. Those other records can be obtained via the [open records process](#). In addition to the online request form, public information requests can be submitted to the TCEQ via mail, fax, and email.

The request form and tip sheet are just the latest in a series of improvements the agency has been making since an internal audit of the public information process was completed in April 2015. The audit focused on processes within the agency and resulted in numerous internal changes to improve how PIRs were handled.

TCEQ Online Data and Databases

The TCEQ seeks to make its information as easily accessible to the public as possible. As part of that effort, the agency provides numerous databases and webpages to better serve the public interest. A sampling of what is available includes:

[Commissioners' Integrated Database](#)

[Track Status of Complaints](#)

[Track Impending Enforcement Actions](#)

[Texas Drinking Water Watch](#)

[Water Quality Permits and Registration](#)

[Air Emissions Event Report](#)

[New Source Review Air Permits](#)

[Central Records Online](#)

[Utility Districts](#)

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Improving the request form, plus tip sheet

A usability study, which lasted from July to October 2015, looked at how the public information process was experienced by a person requesting information and resulted in the improved request form—with accompanying tip sheet—that can be entered directly via the agency's website.

The revamped online form helps guide people to submit requests to the TCEQ in a way that can be processed as efficiently as possible without detours that can add time to a request.

For example, many builders and consultants seeking Phase I environmental site assessments—which are a review of the environmental history of a piece of property, including if there have been any past issues of environmental concern—use GPS coordinates in their public information requests.

The TCEQ does not file information about sites that way, ultimately using up more staff time to process a PIR and causing delays for those making requests.

To avoid wasting time, the online form now states that “The TCEQ cannot search by latitude/longitude, plot/tract numbers, appraisal district, parcel, or maps without a specific address. If you can, please provide complete name(s) of the site/facility and its address.”

The new tip sheet, which is linked to the online form, helps requestors find and view public records on the web at no charge. It also includes tips on how to tailor public information requests so that TCEQ staff can locate information more efficiently and return it to the requestor quickly.

“It’s a useful tool that enables members of the public to obtain the information they seek more quickly at little or no cost,” says Lena Roberts, the TCEQ’s public information attorney.

Also, the tip sheet includes instructions on how to find a site’s regulated entity number and how to use that RN to find information on the agency’s website. The tip sheet includes a hyperlink to a TCEQ webpage with links to various databases where a requestor can search for and obtain copies of reports, permits, registrations, technical data, and more.

“This information helps staff locate responsive information more quickly, significantly reducing the amount of time it takes to get the information to the requestor,” Roberts says.

Processing confidential information can add 60 days, or more, to an information request. To help requesters get information faster, the tip sheet suggests requesting and reviewing non-confidential information first and then asking for confidential information if what was received does not contain what was sought.

By getting and reviewing non-confidential information first, Roberts says, “It helps the requester determine whether confidential information is ultimately necessary.”

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Behind-the-scenes changes



Records Management team member Marie Boren reviews a public information request via the TCEQ's internal software program called the Public Information Request Collaboration System, also known as PIRCS. Changes to the software program that automatizes some of the PIR process became active last September.

But perhaps even more than the online request form or tip sheet, changes that the TCEQ has made behind the scenes have greatly improved its processes to avoid getting bogged down with a heavy volume of requests.

Internal software enhancements, which were implemented in September, helped streamline the process by automating the way requests are tracked and handled, Roberts says.

In the past, because staff in different areas all provided cost estimates, it took a lot of time to itemize and consolidate costs into a single estimate. Now, the software prompts TCEQ employees to input a standard set of data, and itemized cost estimates are then generated automatically.

Roberts notes that the TCEQ is handling more requests now but is taking far less time to respond.

See also:

[Texas Government Code on Public Information](#)

[Texas Attorney General's Handbook to Public Information Act](#) 

In fiscal year 2014, the agency received 3,343 public information requests, and spent an average of 7.2 hours on each request. In fiscal year 2017, the agency received

6,025 PIRs, and the average time spent per PIR was down to 3.43 hours. The recent software improvements have reduced the average time even more.

So, even with increased demand for information from the public, the TCEQ is better prepared than it has ever been to handle public information requests.

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All photos TCEQ.