



TRANSPARENCY

FOIA Friday: Richmond unveils FOIA Reading Room to boost transparency

What Virginia officials withheld or disclosed March 8-April 4

BY: **STAFF REPORT** - APRIL 4, 2025 5:15 AM



(Photo by Getty Images)

In this feature, we aim to highlight the frequency with which officials around Virginia are resisting public access to records on issues large and small – and note instances when the release of information under FOIA gave the public insight into how government bodies are operating. This week: More transparency in Richmond, a Prince William prosecutor must pay up for FOIA violations, and Virginia’s connection to the Epstein files.

After water crisis, Richmond launches FOIA reading room to bolster transparency

In a move aimed at restoring public trust and delivering on campaign promises, Richmond Mayor Danny Avula on Wednesday announced the launch of [a new FOIA Reading Room](#), a public-facing online archive that will provide access to government records tied to the city's January water crisis.

The effort comes less than three months after a major water emergency tested Avula's leadership during his first days in office – and sparked dozens of records requests from residents, journalists and advocacy groups seeking answers.

“I said throughout my campaign and many times over the course of these first three months in office: Transparency is one of my core values,” Avula said in a statement. “The city's FOIA team has worked incredibly hard over the last several months, and now I'm asking them to do a little bit more.”

The pilot FOIA Reading Room will serve as a central resource for documents of broad public interest that have already been released through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). According to the city, inclusion in the Reading Room is based on the judgment of subject matter experts, the city's FOIA manager and other officials who determine which records are most likely to be requested again.

“Not every record released through a FOIA request will make its way into the Reading Room, but I hope residents and reporters alike will see this as a good-faith effort towards greater transparency,” Avula said.

The new transparency measure also includes mandatory annual FOIA training for all city directors and deputy directors – a direct response to concerns over delays and inconsistencies in how departments handle records requests.

Since the January water crisis, Richmond has received 61 separate FOIA requests related to the incident – many of them containing multiple sub-requests – from 22 different individuals.

About 55 staff members have been involved in fulfilling those requests, with the city taking the standard seven-day extension on 46 of them. Five were returned after the legal deadline, and the city has collected about \$1,440 in total fees across all water-related requests.

Julia Holmes, the city's FOIA manager, said the new reading room is designed to benefit both residents and city staff.

"We wanted to pilot a FOIA Reading Room to promote transparency and accountability, save Richmond residents time and money, and reduce the administrative burden to staff," Holmes said. "My job, making sure the public has access to public records, is so important, and I'm excited for this new tool that will hopefully make it easier for folks to do that."

The city said the FOIA Reading Room is still in its pilot phase but plans to expand it if the model proves successful.

Also on Wednesday, the city released the final [after-action report](#) from HNTB, the independent firm tasked with investigating the water crisis.

The assessment builds on preliminary and draft findings published in February and March, offering a deeper look into the root causes of the Jan. 6 outage and the city's response. According to the final report, the crisis began with a complete loss of power at the city's water treatment plant during a winter storm.

Two critical failures contributed to the prolonged outage: the facility was operating in "winter mode," which relied on a single key component rather than the more resilient, redundant "summer mode." At the same time, an automatic switch designed to transfer power to a backup source – known as a "bus tie" – failed to activate.

Together, these breakdowns resulted in an 80-minute loss of power that caused water to flood the plant's basement, damaging essential electrical equipment and triggering a widespread service disruption.

The report also points to broader issues in the city's emergency preparedness, including inadequate staffing and training, a lack of standardized operating procedures, and poor communication during the crisis. Several short- and long-term recommendations have already been implemented, officials said, with more concrete steps outlined in the final assessment to strengthen the city's resilience against future disruptions.

Prince William prosecutor ordered to pay \$22K over FOIA violations

A Virginia judge has ordered Prince William County Commonwealth's Attorney Amy Ashworth to pay \$22,250 after her office violated the state's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) multiple times in response to a records request, [InsideNoVa reported](#).

The ruling stems from a lawsuit filed in 2023 by Valeria Juarez, a Fairfax County resident who requested 172 emails tied to the prosecution of Kevin Miles Lydon, a man convicted of multiple sexual assault charges between 2016 and 2018. Juarez claimed Ashworth's office failed to produce the records in a timely manner and over-redacted them once released.

Chief Judge Angela Lemmon Horan of Prince William County Circuit Court found six FOIA violations in total, including a failure to provide records within the required 60-day period and insufficient explanations for withheld information.

“(Ashworth’s office) violated FOIA when they failed to ‘identify with reasonable particularity the subject matter of withheld portions,’” the court order states.

“There is no doubt that [the office] violated the FOIA statute numerous times and in numerous ways over more than a one-year period,” Horan added, pointing to delays and continued noncompliance over an 18-month span.

Ashworth's office has filed a motion for reconsideration, asking the court to vacate the attorney's fees award. In an email to InsideNoVa, Ashworth said her office “disagrees with the judge's ruling.”

The motion argues Juarez did not “substantially prevail” in the case, citing a 2022 court ruling and claiming she received the requested documents before the lawsuit began. It also contends the fee award would be “unjust,” citing the volume of materials provided and delays allegedly caused by Juarez herself.

Judge Horan has paused enforcement of the ruling, pending a hearing on the motion, which has not yet been scheduled.

Virginia FBI facility at center of Epstein document scramble

The FBI has mobilized hundreds of agents and

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FOIA analysts at its massive Central Records Complex in Winchester to process thousands of pages of Jeffrey Epstein records – a high-stakes scramble that’s delayed other public records work and intensified pressure on the bureau.

[Coalition for Open Government](#), a nonprofit alliance dedicated to expanding access to government records, meetings and other state and local proceedings.

Epstein, previously a financier, died by suicide in prison while awaiting trial for alleged sex trafficking crimes. The internal shift comes after U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi claimed that the FBI’s New York field office withheld Epstein files, [Bloomberg News reported last week](#).

In a Feb. 27 letter to FBI Director Kiran Patel, Bondi demanded the full release of the records, citing a tip from an unnamed source, according to the report. She also ordered an investigation and requested a report on potential “personnel action” within 14 days. The FBI has not said whether that report was completed and declined to comment.

Soon after, FBI employees received a directive – reportedly via text message – to begin working uninterrupted on the Epstein files. Many forwarded the messages to their official accounts to comply with federal recordkeeping laws.

Two people familiar with the matter told Bloomberg News that special agents from Washington, D.C., and New York, as well as FOIA analysts and vetting staff, were pulled into the operation. Some employees reportedly logged more than 100 hours over two weeks and even slept on desks during a recent weekend session.

The FBI has already released thousands of Epstein-related documents, mostly from its Miami office, through its public FOIA reading room. But Bondi, during a White House event with far-right influencers like Jack Posobiec, handed out binders labeled “The Epstein Files,” suggesting major revelations – only to be mocked online when the files turned out to be previously released.

Meanwhile, conspiracy theories about Epstein’s connections and death continue to swirl, amplified by figures on the far right who accuse federal agencies of shielding the powerful. Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tn., has pressed for more transparency, and FBI

Director Patel has pledged to ensure the public “knows the full weight of what happened.”

But for now, as political pressure mounts, the bureau’s FOIA system remains bogged down, with its resources consumed by one of the country’s most infamous scandals.

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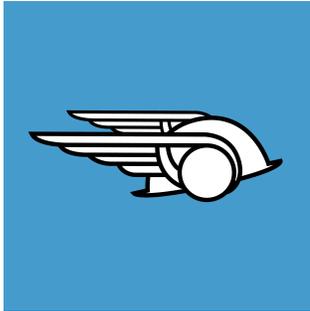
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