

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE CITY OF ST. LOUIS
TWENTY-SECOND JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
STATE OF MISSOURI

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

and

JACOB BARKER,

Plaintiffs,

v.

ST. LOUIS METROPOLITAN POLICE
DEPARTMENT,

Serve: Chief Robert J. Tracy
St. Louis Metropolitan Police Dept.
1915 Olive Street
St. Louis, MO 63103

Case No. _____

and

BARBARA MANUEL-CROSSMAN, IN HER
OFFICIAL CAPACITY AS CUSTODIAN OF
RECORDS FOR THE ST. LOUIS
METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT,

Serve: Barbara Manuel-Crossman,
Custodian of Records
St. Louis Metropolitan Police Dept.
1915 Olive Street, Room 562
St. Louis, MO 63103

Defendants.

PETITION FOR DECLARATORY AND INJUNCTIVE RELIEF

INTRODUCTION

In this case Jacob Barker, a citizen of Missouri and a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, asked the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department (“the Department”) to produce both “incident reports” and “investigative reports” related to a fatal fall that occurred on May 30, 2020, in the 1500 block of Washington Avenue in the City of St. Louis. The Department, responding through its Custodian of Records, provided a redacted copy of an incident report but declined to provide any other “investigative reports” related to this event. Barker asked for a written explanation of the basis for withholding the investigative reports he had requested, including a request that the Department “cite the specific provision of law” it was relying on to deny him access to the investigative reports. The Department limited its response to Barker’s request for an “incident report,” claiming that unredacted copies of incident reports are “only available to involved parties.” The Department did not suggest that its investigation regarding this event was active, nor did it cite any provision of law that would allow them to withhold investigative reports once an investigation had become inactive. **The Department and its Custodian of Records violated the Sunshine Law by withholding information that constitutes “immediate facts and circumstances surrounding the initial report of a crime or incident” or “logs of reported crimes, accidents and complaints” that the Department maintained in relation to this May 2020 incident.** The Defendants also violated the Sunshine Law by withholding “investigative reports”—which are open public records once an

investigation becomes “inactive”—without identifying a provision of law that authorizes the Department to withhold the records. These violations were both knowing and purposeful within the meaning of § 610.027 because the Defendants were fully informed regarding (1) their obligation under the Sunshine Law to provide the Plaintiffs access to these public records, and (2) the penalties the Sunshine Law provides where a public governmental body chooses not to comply with its obligations.

THE SUNSHINE LAW

1. Chapter 610, RSMo.,¹ contains statutes requiring—with a few specified limitations—that the meetings, records, and votes of all public bodies must be open to the public; this set of statutes is commonly referred to as the “Sunshine Law.”
2. Section 610.010(4), in relevant part, defines “public governmental body” as “any legislative, administrative, or governmental entity created by the constitution or statutes of this state[.]”
3. Section 610.010(6) defines “public record” as “any record, whether written or electronically stored, retained by or of any public governmental body[.]”
4. Section 610.011 declares:
 1. It is the public policy of this state that meetings, records, votes, actions, and deliberations of public governmental bodies be open to

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all statutory citations refer to the version of the Missouri Revised Statutes in effect on the date the Plaintiffs initiated this litigation.

the public unless otherwise provided by law. *Sections 610.010 to 610.200 shall be liberally construed and their exceptions strictly construed to promote this public policy.* [emphasis added]

2. Except as otherwise provided by law, all public meetings of public governmental bodies shall be open to the public as set forth in section 610.020, all public records of public governmental bodies shall be open to the public for inspection and copying as set forth in sections 610.023 to 610.026, and all public votes of public governmental bodies shall be recorded as set forth in section 610.015.
5. Section 610.015 states that “public records shall be open to the public for inspection and duplication.”
6. This requirement applies “unless a statute prohibits their disclosure.” *ACLU of Mo. Foundation v. Mo. Dept. of Corrections*, 504 S.W.3d 150, 155 (Mo. App. W.D. 2016).
7. Put succinctly, transparency is the rule for public entities in Missouri. Courts are not at liberty to infer exceptions to this rule; the only permissible exceptions are those established by statute and courts are instructed to construe those exceptions strictly in order to preserve the rule of transparency.
8. Section 610.023.2 requires each public governmental body to make its public records available to the public for inspection and copying.
9. Section 610.023.4 requires a custodian of records for a public governmental body to provide “a written statement of the grounds” for denying a citizen access to public records if the citizen requests such a statement.

10. Section 610.023.4 requires the written statement to “cite the specific provision of law under which access is denied.”
11. Section 610.100.1(4) defines “incident report” as “a record of a law enforcement agency consisting of the date, time, specific location, name of the victim and immediate facts and circumstances surrounding the initial report of a crime or incident, including any logs of reported crimes, accidents and complaints maintained by that agency.”
12. Section 610.100.2 states “[a]ll incident reports and arrest reports shall be open records.”
13. Section 610.100.1(5) defines an “investigative report” as “a record, other than an arrest or incident report, prepared by personnel of a law enforcement agency, inquiring into a crime or suspected crime, either in response to an incident report or in response to evidence developed by law enforcement officers in the course of their duties.”
14. Section 610.100.1(3) states that an “inactive” investigation is one “in which no further action will be taken by a law enforcement agency or officer” because (1) the law enforcement agency has decided not to pursue the case, (2) the statute of limitations has expired or ten years have passed since the commission of the offense, or (3) there has been a final conviction of persons on the basis of information contained in the investigative report.

15. Although § 610.100.2(2) states that investigative reports of law enforcement agencies “are closed records until the investigation becomes inactive,” this closure *ends* when the relevant investigation “becomes inactive.” *See Farber v. Metro. Police Dept. of St. Louis*, 558 S.W.3d 70, 74 (Mo. App. E.D. 2018).
16. Thus, unless some other provision of law allows for their closure or otherwise prohibits their disclosure, “investigative reports” related to an inactive investigation are open public records that public governmental bodies must make available to those who ask to review them.
17. Section 610.027.1 states that “[a]ny aggrieved person, taxpayer to, or citizen of, this state . . . may seek judicial enforcement of the requirements of sections 610.010 to 610.026.”
18. Section 610.027.2 states that once a party bringing suit under the Sunshine Law has demonstrated to the court “that the body in question is subject to the requirements of sections 610.010 to 610.026 and has held a closed meeting, record, or vote, *the burden of persuasion will be on the body and its members to demonstrate compliance*” with the Sunshine Law. [emphasis added]
19. Section 610.027.3 states:

Upon a finding by a preponderance of the evidence that a public governmental body or a member of a public governmental body has knowingly violated sections 610.010 to 610.026, the public governmental body or the member shall be subject to a civil penalty in an amount of up to one thousand dollars. If the court finds that there is a knowing violation of sections 610.010 to 610.026, the court may order the payment by such body or member of all costs and reasonable

attorney fees to any party successfully establishing a violation. The court shall determine the amount of the penalty by taking into account the size of the jurisdiction, the seriousness of the offense, and whether the public governmental body or member of a public governmental body has violated sections 610.010 to 610.026 previously.

PARTIES

20. Plaintiff St. Louis Post-Dispatch is a corporate taxpayer to and resident of the State of Missouri. Founded by Joseph Pulitzer in 1878, the Post-Dispatch has for decades been the largest newspaper in the St. Louis region and among the largest in the nation. In that time, the newspaper has continually adhered to the mission statement established by its founder (the “Pulitzer Platform”), which calls for the Post-Dispatch to be steadfastly unbiased in its news coverage, to “remain devoted to the public welfare,” and to “never be afraid to attack wrong.” The Post-Dispatch has won 19 Pulitzer Prizes, considered the single highest honor in journalism. It is an “aggrieved person” within the meaning of § 610.027.1 because the Defendants’ violations of the Sunshine Law have prevented one of its employees from inspecting open public records that the Post-Dispatch believes would allow it to provide readers with information of interest and importance.
21. Plaintiff Jacob Barker is a taxpayer to and resident of the State of Missouri and a journalist for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch who, pursuant to § 610.023, asked the Defendants to provide him copies of “investigative records” regarding an inactive investigation. He is an “aggrieved person” within the meaning of §

610.027.1 because the Defendants have without proper statutory justification withheld public records responsive to his request.

22. Defendant St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department is a governmental entity created under the authority Chapter 84 of the Missouri Revised Statutes and it is also a department or division of the City of St. Louis, a municipal government and political subdivision of the state; as such, the Department is a public governmental body subject to the requirements of the Sunshine Law. § 610.010(4).
23. Defendant Barbara Manuel-Crossman is the Custodian of Records for the Department. As such she is responsible for receiving public records requests directed to the Department and (if a citizen requests it) providing a timely written statement of the grounds upon which the Department has denied a request for access to public records. § 610.023.

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

24. Mr. Barker brings this action pursuant to Chapter 610 of the Missouri Revised Statutes.
25. Mr. Barker is authorized to bring this action pursuant to § 610.027 because he requested copies of records retained by the Defendants and the Defendants have not complied with the Sunshine Law in responding to Barker's requests.
26. Venue for this action is proper in St. Louis City Circuit Court pursuant to § 610.027 because the Defendants' principal place of business is in St. Louis City.

27. This Court has authority to issue injunctions to enforce the provisions of the Sunshine Law pursuant to § 610.030.

FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS

28. As part of his work as a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Mr. Barker wanted to learn more about the death of Antoine Compton, who fell from a building on Washington Avenue on May 30, 2020.

29. In response to a request made pursuant to § 610.023.1, a Department employee identified Ms. Manuel-Crossman as the Department's Custodian of Records.

30. On or about January 19, 2024, Mr. Barker submitted a request for records under the Sunshine Law directed to the Department's Custodian of Records.

31. Specifically, Barker requested (1) incident reports related to a fatal fall that occurred in the 1500 block of Washington Avenue on May 30, 2020, and (2) investigative reports "related to a May 30, 2020 fatal fall from a building in the 1500 block of Washington Avenue." A true and accurate copy of this request is attached as Plaintiff's Exhibit 1.

32. Ms. Manuel-Crossman received Mr. Barker's January 19, 2024 request for public records no later than January 22, 2024.

33. Ms. Manuel-Crossman responded to Mr. Barker's request in her official capacity as the Custodian of Records for the Department.

34. In the alternative, Ms. Manuel-Crossman responded to Mr. Barker's request at the direction of and/or under the authority of the Department's Custodian of Records.
35. On January 22, 2024, Ms. Manuel-Crossman provided Mr. Barker with a two-page version of a document labeled "St. Louis Metropolitan Police Incident Report CN 20-022974." A true and accurate copy of this document is attached as Plaintiff's Exhibit 2.
36. This two-page version of the Incident Report included information in the fields designated for the name of the victim, his marital status, his resident status, and the injury type; it also identified the name of the officer that prepared the report, the name of his supervisor/commander, and the names of two assisting officers.
37. Although the two-page version of the Incident Report included fields for the victim's home address, race, sex, date of birth, age, social security number, and ethnicity, each of these spaces was blank in this version of the Incident Report.
38. In the space designated "Status/Date," the document provided on January 22, 2024, said "INACTIVE 06/08/2020."
39. Upon information and belief, this indicated that the Department had deemed the investigation into the incident reflected by Incident Report CN 20-022974 as inactive since about June 8, 2020.

40. On January 23, 2024, Mr. Barker sent an email asking Ms. Manuel-Crossman whether, apart from an unredacted version of Incident Report CN 20-022974, there were any other investigative reports related to his request.
41. The following day Mr. Barker sent Ms. Manuel-Crossman another message in which he invoked his right under § 610.023.4 for “a written statement of the grounds for denial of the investigative records of a closed investigation.”
42. In a message sent on January 25, 2024, Ms. Manuel-Crossman acknowledged the Department’s obligation to provide “a written statement of the grounds” for denying a citizen’s records request.
43. Ms. Manuel-Crossman’s January 25, 2024 message did not deny that the Department retained “investigative records” responsive to Barker’s request.
44. Instead, Ms. Manuel-Crossman stated that the Defendants’ “basis for denial has been provided to you.”
45. In the following weeks, Mr. Barker asked Attorney Dave Roland to help him follow up with the Defendants regarding his records request.
46. On March 19, 2024, Attorney Roland sent an email to Ms. Manuel-Crossman regarding Mr. Barker’s request. A true and accurate copy of that email is attached as Plaintiff’s Exhibit 3.
47. Roland’s email noted that the Defendants had provided Mr. Barker a copy of an incident report, but that it had not included statements from officers named in the report, nor did it acknowledge that the incident report had been redacted

in any way, nor did it indicate what kind of information might have been redacted or the legal basis for any such redactions.

48. Roland's email further emphasized that Mr. Barker had requested not only an "incident report," but also "investigative reports" related to the fatal fall in May 2020.
49. Roland's email asserted that "officer statements or narratives that might have been submitted in relation to the incident report" were public records that the Defendants were required either to produce to Mr. Barker or to "identify the specific provision of law that the SLMPD is relying upon to justify the redaction/withholding of that information."
50. Roland's email pointed out that the relevant investigation appeared to be "inactive," under which circumstances the investigative records related to the event would be open public records under the Sunshine Law.
51. Roland noted that "[f]ailure either to produce these records or to provide a written statement identifying the statutory basis for withholding them is a violation of the Sunshine Law."
52. Roland's email also explained the consequences § 610.027 provides for knowingly or purposefully violating the Sunshine Law.
53. When nearly a week passed without any response from the Defendants, Attorney Roland sent Ms. Manuel-Crossman another email, which included "a

formal demand pursuant to § 610.023.4 for ‘a written statement of the grounds’ upon which” the Defendants were denying Mr. Barker’s request.

54. On March 27, 2024, Ms. Manuel-Crossman provided Mr. Barker with additional documents.
55. The first of these additional documents was a five-page version of “St. Louis Metropolitan Police Incident Report CN 20-022974.” A true and accurate copy of this document is attached as Plaintiff’s Exhibit 4.
56. The five-page version of the Incident Report includes information that was omitted from the two-page version, such as information concerning the victim’s race, sex, age, and ethnicity.
57. The five-page version of the Incident Report also shows that information has been redacted concerning the victim’s home address, date of birth, and social security number.
58. The five-page version of the Incident Report also shows several pages’ worth of redactions having been made, which includes the names of the two “assisting officers” that were included in the two-page version of the Incident Report, and, upon information and belief, the redacted material includes the narrative reports provided by the police officers who responded to the incident.
59. The second of the additional documents Ms. Manuel-Crossman provided on March 27, 2024, is a two-page document labeled “St. Louis Metropolitan Police

Supplemental Report,” which is dated June 1, 2020. A true and accurate copy of this document is attached as Plaintiff’s Exhibit 5.

60. The Supplemental Report identifies the officer who submitted it and her supervisor/commander; each of these names are different from those in similar fields in the Incident Report.
61. The first page of the Supplemental Report does not appear to include any redacted information, but the second page is redacted in its entirety.
62. The third and final additional document Ms. Manuel-Crossman provided on March 27, 2024, is a one-page document labeled “Redaction Log.” A true and accurate copy of this document is attached as Plaintiff’s Exhibit 6.
63. **Upon information and belief, the Redaction Log purports to identify the legal basis the Defendants relied upon in regard to each of the redactions made to the Incident Report and the Supplemental Report.**
64. The Redaction Log identifies only two statutes: § 610.100.1(4) and § 610.100.2(1).
65. Section 610.100.1(4) is the statutory definition of “incident report.”
66. Section 610.100.1(4) specifies certain information that must be contained in an incident report, including “the date, time, specific location, name of the victim and immediate facts and circumstances surrounding the initial report of a crime or incident, including any logs of reported crimes, accidents and complaints maintained by that agency.”

67. The text of § 610.100.1(4) does not authorize or require the closure of any particular type of public record, nor the withholding of any particular categories of information that might be contained in public records.
68. Section 610.100.2(1) simply states: “Each law enforcement agency of this state, of any county, and of any municipality shall maintain records of all incidents reported to the agency, investigations and arrests made by such law enforcement agency. All incident reports and arrest reports shall be open records.”
69. The text of § 610.100.2(1) does not authorize or require the closure of any particular type of public record, nor the withholding of any particular categories of information that might be contained in public records.
70. To the contrary, § 610.100.2(1) specifies that “[a]ll incident reports and arrest reports” are, by definition, open public records.
71. On April 11, 2024, Attorney Roland sent another email to Ms. Manuel-Crossman. A true and accurate copy of that email is attached as Plaintiff’s Exhibit 7.
72. Roland’s April 11, 2024 email noted that the Defendants’ responses to Mr. Barker had only addressed his request for an “incident report,” but did not address his request for “investigative records” nor account for the fact that the Department’s records showed that the relevant investigation was inactive.

73. Attorney Roland offered “one final opportunity to provide a written statement of the grounds for denying Mr. Barker’s request for ‘investigative records,’” stating that if the Defendants failed to comply with their obligation to explain why they were withholding investigative records related to an investigation that plainly was inactive, Mr. Barker would have no alternative but to ask the courts to enforce the Sunshine Law against them and to seek the maximum penalties available under § 610.027.
74. On April 16, 2024, Ms. Manuel-Crossman responded with an email that stated: “The requested report was released to Mr. Barker with redactions. As previously stated, you may disagree; however, we believe we have fulfilled our obligation under the statute.” A true and accurate copy of this email is attached as Plaintiff’s Exhibit 8.

VIOLATIONS OF THE MISSOURI SUNSHINE LAW

75. Mr. Barker incorporates by reference the allegations made in each preceding paragraph as if each allegation was set forth herein.
76. The records Mr. Barker requested from the Department fall within the definition of “public record” as established by the Missouri Sunshine Law. § 610.010(5).
77. In their communications with Mr. Barker and Attorney Roland, **the Defendants failed to identify any exception to the Sunshine Law that would**

have justified withholding any of the records – or any part of the records – responsive to Mr. Barker’s request.

78. The Sunshine Law expressly states that “all incident reports” are “open records.” § 610.100.2(1).
79. The statutory definition of “incident report” expressly includes the “immediate facts and circumstances surrounding the initial report of a crime or incident.”
80. Section 610.011.1 requires courts to construe the terms of the Sunshine Law liberally to promote the State’s express public policy that “that meetings, records, votes, actions, and deliberations of public governmental bodies be open to the public unless otherwise provided by law;” any exceptions to the Sunshine Law are to be “strictly construed” for the same purpose.
81. To the extent that a police officer’s narrative regarding the initial investigation of an incident is included in an “incident report,” that narrative necessarily reflects “immediate facts and circumstances surrounding the initial report of a crime or incident” within the meaning of § 610.100.1(4).
82. The Defendants’ Redaction Log cites *State ex rel. Goodman v. St. Louis Bd. of Police Comm’rs*, 181 S.W.3d 156 (Mo. App. E.D. 2005), as justification for part of its redactions.

83. Mr. Barker challenges whether *State ex rel. Goodman* properly applies outside of the narrow context of the facts and procedural posture of that case.
84. Mr. Barker further contends that even if *State ex rel. Goodman* is applicable to the context of this case, it was wrongly decided because the opinion in that case completely ignored the General Assembly's express instruction to interpret the provisions of the Sunshine Law liberally to advance the State's public policy of transparency and to strictly construe any exceptions to the Sunshine Law's requirements; he wishes to preserve the question of whether *State ex rel. Goodman* should be overturned.
85. In the alternative, if a police officer's narrative regarding the initial investigation of an incident is not included in the statutory definition of "incident report," that narrative would be an "investigative report" within the meaning of § 610.100.1(5).
86. Thus, whether or not the officer narratives withheld by the Defendants are considered part of an "incident report," the Defendants violated the Sunshine Law by withholding from Mr. Barker the officer narratives the Defendants redacted from both versions of the Incident Report and from the Supplemental Report.

87. The Defendants violated §§ 610.011, 610.015, and 610.022 by redacting certain information from the five-page version of the Incident Report, including the victim's home address and date of birth, and the names of the two "assisting officers" that were included in the two-page version of the Incident Report, because the Defendants did not identify any statute that authorized them to redact this information.
88. The Defendants violated §§ 610.011, 610.015, and 610.022 by redacting unspecified information from the Supplemental Report without identifying any statute that authorized them to redact this information.
89. Additionally, the Defendants violated § 610.023.4 by failing to provide a written explanation for denying Mr. Barker's request that specifically addressed his request for "investigative reports" as opposed to his request for "incident reports."
90. The Defendants never claimed that the requested records were "closed" on the basis that the relevant investigation was "active."
91. The Defendants' own records showed that the investigation into the relevant incident was "inactive."
92. Nonetheless, even though Mr. Barker and Attorney Roland both asked the Defendants to explain their denial of Mr. Barker's request for "investigative records," the Defendants offered no such explanation.

93. Each of the above violations of the Sunshine Law were, at a minimum, knowing because the Defendants had actual knowledge of what the Sunshine Law required and they knew that their handling of Mr. Barker's requests was not consistent with those requirements. See *Strake v. Robinwood West Community Improvement Dist.*, 473 S.W.3d 642, 645 (Mo. banc 2015).
94. At all times relevant to this lawsuit the Department was aware that it was subject to the requirements of the Sunshine Law. See *Farber v. Metro. Police Dept. of St. Louis*, 558 S.W.3d 70 (Mo. App. E.D. 2018) (affirming judgment holding Department liable for knowing violation of Sunshine Law); *Chasnoff v. Mokwa*, 466 S.W.3d 571, 584 (Mo. App. E.D. 2015) (Department held liable for knowing violation of Sunshine Law); *State ex rel. Goodman v. St. Louis Bd. of Police Comm'rs*, 181 S.W.3d 156 (Mo. App. E.D. 2005) (Department subject to Sunshine Law, but did not violate it).
95. In the alternative and upon information and belief, the Defendants' violations of the Sunshine Law were purposeful because they manifested a conscious design, intent, or plan to violate the Sunshine Law and they did so with awareness of the probable consequences for doing so. *Id.*
96. Although § 610.027 authorizes courts to award civil penalties to plaintiffs who prove a knowing or purposeful violation of the Sunshine Law, the Plaintiffs wish to make clear that they are pursuing this case solely for the purpose of holding the Defendants formally and publicly accountable for their knowing

and purposeful violations of the Sunshine Law rather than for any personal gain; they are not asking the court to award them any civil penalties as a consequence of these violations.

WHEREFORE the Plaintiffs ask the Court to enter judgment in his favor and against the Defendants, and to:

- 1) Declare that the Department is a public governmental body within the meaning of § 610.010(4);
- 2) Declare that Ms. Manuel-Crossman is the Custodian of Records for the Department;
- 3) Declare that the records Mr. Barker has requested are open public records within the meaning of § 610.010(6);
- 4) Declare that the term “incident report,” as defined by § 610.100.1(4), includes officer narratives that are included in or attached to an incident report;
- 5) Declare, in the alternative, that officer narratives included in or attached to an incident report are “investigative reports” within the meaning of § 610.100.1(5);
- 6) Declare that the Supplemental Report is either an “incident report” or an “investigative report” within the meaning of § 610.100.1;
- 7) Declare that the Defendants did not in their communications with Barker identify any statute that might authorize or require the closure of any particular type of public record, nor the withholding of any particular

- categories of information that might be contained in the records responsive to Barker's request;
- 8) Declare that the Defendants violated §§ 610.011, 610.015, and 610.022 by improperly withholding from Mr. Barker open public records or parts of open public records;
 - 9) Declare that the Defendants violated § 610.023.4 by denying Mr. Barker's request for "investigative records" without providing a written statement of the grounds for such denial that cited the specific provision of law under which the access was denied;
 - 10) Declare that the Defendants' violations of the Sunshine Law were "knowing" within the meaning of § 610.027.3;
 - 11) Declare that the Defendants' violations of the Sunshine Law were "purposeful" within the meaning of § 610.027.4;
 - 12) Enter an injunction requiring the Defendants to provide the Plaintiffs unredacted copies of the Supplemental Report and the five-page version of the Incident Report;
 - 13) Award the Plaintiffs attorney fees and costs of litigation as authorized by § 610.027; and
 - 14) Grant the Plaintiffs such other and further relief as is just and proper under the circumstances.

Respectfully submitted,



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