



pennsylvania

OFFICE OF OPEN RECORDS

FINAL DETERMINATION

IN THE MATTER OF

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**BRIAN BUSH,
Requester**

v.

: Docket No: AP 2019-2186

**RANSOM TOWNSHIP,
Respondent**

INTRODUCTION

Brian Bush (“Requester”) submitted a request (“Request”) to Ransom Township (“Township”) pursuant to the Right-to-Know Law (“RTKL”), 65 P.S. §§ 67.101 *et seq.*, seeking a list of employees, positions and salaries. The Township partially denied the Request, providing only the names and title of employees. The Requester appealed to the Office of Open Records (“OOR”). For the reasons set forth in this Final Determination, the appeal is **granted**, and the Township is required to take additional action as directed.

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

On November 4, 2019, the Request was filed, seeking:

...current list of all first and last name of employees and subcontractors, positions held, and current salary. The information that I am requesting can be found in the following documents either in a form of Payroll, Employee contact information, audit purpose or insurance or any workers comp.

On November 4, 2019, the Township partially denied the Request, providing the names and title of employees and subcontractor information, but stating that no other information exists in the possession, custody or control of the Township in the format requested.

On November 12, 2019, the Requester appealed to the OOR, challenging the denial and stating grounds for disclosure. The OOR invited both parties to supplement the record and directed the Township to notify any third parties of their ability to participate in this appeal. 65 P.S. § 67.1101(c). Neither party made a submission.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

“The objective of the Right to Know Law ... is to empower citizens by affording them access to information concerning the activities of their government.” *SWB Yankees L.L.C. v. Wintermantel*, 45 A.3d 1029, 1041 (Pa. 2012). Further, this important open-government law is “designed to promote access to official government information in order to prohibit secrets, scrutinize the actions of public officials and make public officials accountable for their actions.” *Bowling v. Office of Open Records*, 990 A.2d 813, 824 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2010), *aff’d* 75 A.3d 453 (Pa. 2013).

The OOR is authorized to hear appeals for all Commonwealth and local agencies. *See* 65 P.S. § 67.503(a). An appeals officer is required “to review all information filed relating to the request” and may consider testimony, evidence and documents that are reasonably probative and relevant to the matter at issue. 65 P.S. § 67.1102(a)(2). An appeals officer may conduct a hearing to resolve an appeal. The law also states that an appeals officer may admit into evidence testimony, evidence and documents that the appeals officer believes to be reasonably probative and relevant to an issue in dispute. *Id.* The decision to hold a hearing is discretionary and non-appealable. *Id.*; *Giurintano v. Pa. Dep’t of Gen. Servs.*, 20 A.3d 613, 617 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2011). Here, the parties

did not request a hearing; however, the OOR has the necessary information and evidence before it to properly adjudicate the matter.

The Township is a local agency subject to the RTKL that is required to disclose public records. 65 P.S. § 67.302. Records in the possession of a local agency are presumed public unless exempt under the RTKL or other law or protected by a privilege, judicial order or decree. *See* 65 P.S. § 67.305. Upon receipt of a request, an agency is required to assess whether a record requested is within its possession, custody or control and respond within five business days. 65 P.S. § 67.901. An agency bears the burden of proving the applicability of any cited exemptions. *See* 65 P.S. § 67.708(b).

Section 708 of the RTKL places the burden of proof on the public body to demonstrate that a record is exempt. In pertinent part, Section 708(a) states: “(1) The burden of proving that a record of a Commonwealth agency or local agency is exempt from public access shall be on the Commonwealth agency or local agency receiving a request by a preponderance of the evidence.” 65 P.S. § 67.708(a)(1). Preponderance of the evidence has been defined as “such proof as leads the fact-finder ... to find that the existence of a contested fact is more probable than its nonexistence.” *Pa. State Troopers Ass’n v. Scolforo*, 18 A.3d 435, 439 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2011) (quoting *Pa. Dep’t of Transp. v. Agric. Lands Condemnation Approval Bd.*, 5 A.3d 821, 827 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2010)). Likewise, “[t]he burden of proving a record does not exist ... is placed on the agency responding to the right-to-know request.” *Hodges v. Pa. Dep’t of Health*, 29 A.3d 1190, 1192 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2011).

In its response to the Request, the Township asserts that it does not have the information requested in the format sought by the Requester. Section 705 of the RTKL states that “an agency shall not be required to create a record which does not currently exist or to compile, maintain,

format or organize a record in a manner in which the agency does not currently compile, maintain, format or organize the record.” 65 P.S. § 67.705. An agency need only provide the information in the manner in which it currently exists.” *Commonwealth v. Cole*, 52 A.3d 541, 547 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2012). An agency is not required to create a list or spreadsheet containing the requested information; however, “the information ... must simply be provided to requestors in the same format that it would be available to agency personnel.” *Id.* at 549, n.12.

Section 708 of the RTKL places the burden of proof on the public body to demonstrate that a record is exempt from disclosure. 65 P.S. § 67.708(a). In the present case, the Township states in its unsworn response that the records do not exist in the format sought in the Request. Under the RTKL, a sworn affidavit is generally competent evidence to sustain an agency’s burden of proof. *See Sherry v. Radnor Twp. Sch. Dist.*, 20 A.3d 515, 520-21 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2011); *Moore v. Office of Open Records*, 992 A.2d 907, 909 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2010). However, unsworn statements may not be relied upon as competent evidence records under the RTKL. *See Hous. Auth. of the City of Pittsburgh v. Van Osdol*, 40 A.3d 209, 216 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2012) (holding that unsworn statements of counsel are not competent evidence); *City of Phila. v. Juzang*, July Term 2010, No. 2048 (Phila. Com. Pl. June 28, 2011) (“Because the letter written by City’s counsel is a legal brief, it cannot be ... evidence at all”). Therefore, because the Township failed to provide any factual or legal support for denying access to responsive records or that no records responsive to the Request exists, the Township did not meet its burden of proof under the RTKL.¹ *See* 65 P.S. § 67.305.

¹ Section 708(b)(6)(ii) states, “nothing in this paragraph shall preclude the release of the name, positions, salary, actual compensation or other payments or expenses...” 65 P.S. § 67.708(b)(6)(ii).

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the appeal is **granted**, and the Township is required to provide the responsive information within thirty days. This Final Determination is binding on all parties. Within thirty days of the mailing date of this Final Determination, any party may appeal to the Lackawanna County Court of Common Pleas. 65 P.S. § 67.1302(a). All parties must be served with notice of the appeal. The OOR also shall be served notice and have an opportunity to respond as per Section 1303 of the RTKL. 65 P.S. § 67.1303. However, as the quasi-judicial tribunal adjudicating this matter, the OOR is not a proper party to any appeal and should not be named as a party.² This Final Determination shall be placed on the OOR website at: <http://openrecords.pa.gov>.

FINAL DETERMINATION ISSUED AND MAILED: January 15, 2020

/s/ Jill S. Wolfe

APPEALS OFFICER
JILL S. WOLFE, ESQ.

Sent via email to: Brian Bush;
Mark Hosterman, Esq.;
David Kraynik;
Jill Barbera

² *Padgett v. Pa. State Police*, 73 A.3d 644, 648 n.5 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2013).