

Sept. 25, 2024

## **Updated British Columbia news database shows the value of FOI law as October 19 election day approaches**

As British Columbians prepare to vote in their provincial election on October 19, they may wish to consider the value of their freedom of information rights, and ask which candidates would best protect and enhance these.

The FOI law ensures that we have the legal right to view records on health and education, or crime and the environment, or official spending and public safety - records whose production you paid for with your tax dollars, and were presumably created for your benefit.

To demonstrate its value, journalist and longtime transparency advocate [Stanley Tromp](#) has updated and posted a new version of his 2020 database of FOI news stories. These are 100-word summaries he wrote of media articles that were produced from records which journalists and others had obtained by using the B.C. *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (1992). These are arranged in 24 topic categories, and [it can read here](#).

Between Jan. 1, 2021 and Sept. 15, 2024, it shows a total of 334 FOI news stories were produced. The largest number, 114, were written by Bob Mackin for his *Breaker* website and other outlets. There are 85 outstanding samples collected in a [PDF file here](#).

This database is an extension of the [earlier](#) index of 1,900 B.C. FOI news articles from 1993 to 2020, plus 6,500 articles from the federal *Access to Information Act*.

These [well-reviewed](#) indexes were created to demonstrate the benefit of FOI laws to the public, and thus help built support for urgently needed law [reforms](#), plus providing a morale boost and story ideas for reporters and journalism students. The four purposes of the databases are explained [here](#).

Before we vote, we need to be made aware of the FOI democratic rights we risk losing. The system is under siege on so many fronts, starting with the three FOI black holes of oral government, FOI-exempt government-owned companies (plus secretive [student societies](#)), and the overbroad Sec 13 policy advice exemption.

New obstacles are added yearly, such as the Vancouver fire department now [charging the public \\$260](#) to view a single page fire investigation report, which the current FOI law permits it to do, with no right of appeal.

Then came *Bill 22* in 2021, the most bold and reckless assault on the public's right to know ever seen in B.C., a cynical betrayal of the fine legacy of NDP Premier Mike Harcourt, who passed the FOI law in 1992.

Its most pernicious feature was a section granting public bodies a right to charge a fee for applicant to requests records, now set at \$10. In January 2023, a [report](#) by B.C.'s information

commissioner found that in the first six months after the levy was imposed, the number of media FOI requests had dropped by a startling 80 percent during the same period a year prior. Yet this fee could be repealed in a day by cabinet order, a move that would be very popular with voters.

All this is coupled with devastating cutbacks to the traditional news media. Against all these long odds, good FOI journalism is still somehow being produced, as we can see here. Yet if our FOI law and practices were reformed up to accepted world standards, then that list of articles could easily have been twice as long.

FOI is a topic that transcends political parties and ideologies. No party in B.C. – neither the current ruling one nor the opposition - have a proud record on this democratic right. One can read all the B.C. parties' broken electoral promises of 2006-2021 on FOI law reform in [this file](#).

Candidates should explain exactly how they will preserve and enhance your FOI accountability rights, if they wish to earn your vote. The power of the ballot is yours.

*(This update was made possible by generous support from the B.C. Civil Liberties Association.)*

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### [Several Fine B.C. FOI News Stories, 2012-2024](#)

*[ Click on link above for fuller summaries ]*

= The Canadian Taxpayers Federation revealed that, after TransLink executives announced in 2021 they would all take a 10 percent pay cut, they later used government emergency COVID money to quietly reverse those pay cuts.

= Two years after FIFA named Vancouver's B.C. Place Stadium one of 16 North American sites of the 2026 World Cup, costing taxpayers nearly \$600 million, Pavilion Corporation finally revealed the contract to Bob Mackin

= Problems with fire alarms, extinguishers and sprinkler systems in Vancouver's downtown SRO buildings typically take over 2.5 months to get fixed. Three people were killed and hundreds were displaced last year because of fires in the single-room-occupancy buildings.

= The heat dome that scorched B.C. in June 2021 has been linked to the deaths of at least 651,000 farm animals.

= Animal traps set for wildlife were responsible for injuring or killing at least 173 cats or dogs over a five-year period in Canada

= Workers on the Vancouver Oakridge construction site reported multiple near-misses involving cranes in the months before a fatal incident that killed a worker, including a crane failure.

= The company operating one of the Washington State cancer clinics under contract by the B.C. government must refund millions of dollars to thousands of low income patients.

= Victoria police officers used their vehicles to intentionally hit people on bikes, scooters or on foot, at least 12 times in the last decade

= The newly hired Deputy Chief for the Surrey Police Service is making \$235,000 a year in salary and up to \$320,000 a year with benefits, more than the B.C. Premier, more than double the Mayor of Surrey, and more than senior RCMP officers.

= On about 170 occasions between 2021 and 2024, companies cut, damaged or destroyed forest - or removed timber from the forest - without provincial authorization

= The B.C. government doled out at least \$393 million to for-profit private surgery and medical imaging companies since 2015 to provide services within the public system, all while overlooking unlawful billing practices

= The B.C. government was aware of significant problems with dikes for several years before torrential rainfall pushed rivers over their banks and inundated the community in 2021.

= Health-care workers are facing a rising tide of violence in the Fraser Health Authority - 2,370 "Code Whites" in 2021–22, more than triple the number of calls from 2014–15.

= B.C.'s anti-gang agency has failed to stem the gang war that has resulted in dozens of murders and public shootings, said a report commissioned by the B.C. Public Safety Ministry

= There was a lack of understanding about infection control measures during a COVID-19 outbreak that killed 41 seniors at Vancouver's Little Mountain Place long term care home, as dozens of workers fell ill from the virus.

= B.C.'s health minister pledged to look into the circumstances of Covid-19 infections in long-term care homes, after a South China Morning Post investigation revealed 192 people had died in Vancouver homes where authorities did not declare outbreaks when an employee first tested positive for the virus.

= Months before B.C. officially ended the controversial practice of birth alerts, government lawyers advised the Ministry of Children and Family Development that the practice was "illegal and unconstitutional" and posed a "litigation risk."

= Almost five months after officials in Toronto and Washington state mandated masks to reduce the spread of COVID-19, B.C. finally required mouths and noses be covered at indoor public spaces in November 2020. But Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry resisted through much of the fall, just as she had in spring 2021 when she discouraged mask-wearing before reluctantly suggesting homemade versions.

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