



July 24, 2017

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

FOIA Officer
Office of Government Ethics
Suite 500
1201 New York Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20005-3917
usoge@oge.gov

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear Freedom of Information Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552 *et seq.* and the implementing regulations of the Office of Government Ethics (OGE), 5 C.F.R. Part 2604, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

President Donald Trump has not eliminated his financial ties to the Trump Organization, a subject of significant media interest.¹ Consequently taxpayer dollars are being spent at Trump properties with the financial benefit of those public dollars inuring to Mr. Trump's benefit.² American Oversight makes this request for records to shed light on whether and to what extent the federal government is avoiding or encouraging the use of Trump Properties for public events.

Requested Records

American Oversight requests that OGE produce the following within twenty business days:

¹ Dan Alexander et al., *Trump Refuses to Divest Assets, Passes Control to His Sons*, FORBES (Jan. 11, 2017, 11:41 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chasewithorn/2017/01/11/donald-trump-will-hand-over-business/#3c8651a760d7>; Susanne Craig & Eric Lipton, *Trust Records Show Trump Is Still Closely Tied to His Empire*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/us/politics/donald-trump-business.html>.

² See Amy Brittain, *State Department Spent More than \$15,000 for Rooms at New Trump Hotel in Vancouver*, WASH. POST, July 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/state-department-spent-more-than-15000-for-rooms-at-new-trump-hotel-in-vancouver/2017/07/12/5eba5d0c-61bf-11e7-84a1-a26b75ad39fe_story.html?utm_term=.3f7a0713839f.



1. All guidance regarding using properties owned by the Trump Organization³ for government-sponsored conferences or meetings.
2. All emails with individual agencies regarding using properties owned by the Trump Organization for government-sponsored conferences or meetings.
3. All guidance regarding attending conferences or meetings at properties owned by the Trump Organization.
4. All emails with individual agencies regarding attending conferences or meetings at properties owned by the Trump Organization.
5. All guidance regarding reimbursement or payment for overnight stays at properties owned by the Trump Organization.
6. All emails with individual agencies regarding reimbursement or payment for overnight stays at properties owned by the Trump Organization.
7. All emails regarding federal employees' stays at the Trump International Hotel Washington, DC, including (1) the overnight stays of Gary Cohn, Director of the National Economic Council, Linda McMahon, Administrator of the Small Business Administration, and Steve Mnuchin, Secretary of the Treasury;⁴ (2) the wedding of Omarosa Manigault,⁵ Assistant to the President and Director of Communications for the White House Office of Public Liaison; and (3) the hotel block for the wedding of Mr. Mnuchin.⁶

Please provide all responsive records from January 20, 2017, through the date of the search.

In addition to the records requested above, American Oversight also requests records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used and locations and custodians searched and any tracking sheets used to track the processing of this request. If your agency uses FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe

³ Trump Organization properties include but are not limited to Mar-a-Lago, Trump International Hotel Washington, DC, Trump Tower New York, Trump National Golf Club Bedminster, and Trump National Golf Club Washington, DC.

⁴ See Julie Bykowicz, *Trump Hotel May Be Political Capital of the Nation's Capital*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, Mar. 5, 2017, <https://apnews.com/cc2e2c2b6b4d4417aff3aa5f768be10/trump-hotel-may-be-political-capital-nations-capital>.

⁵ Tara Palmeri, *Omarosa to Be Married at Trump Hotel*, POLITICO (Apr. 7, 2017, 9:30 PM), <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/omarosa-manigault-wedding-trump-hotel-237028>.

⁶ Kate Bennett & Jennifer Hansler, *Trump and Pence Attend Treasury Secretary Mnuchin's Wedding*, CNNPOLITICS (June 25, 2017, 12:47 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/24/politics/trump-pence-attend-mnuchin-wedding/index.html>.

how they conducted searches, we also request any such records prepared in connection with the processing of this request.

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record,” “document,” and “information” in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files is subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.⁷ **It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; American Oversight has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.**⁸

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered OGE’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**⁹ Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Agency (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form

⁷ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

⁸ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work-related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

⁹ Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

that is reasonably likely to be more complete than individual custodians' files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but OGE's archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that OGE use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. American Oversight is available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption” or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”¹⁰ If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight requests that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA.”¹¹ Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”¹² Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”¹³

In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.¹⁴ Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

You should institute a preservation hold on information responsive to this request. American Oversight intends to pursue all legal avenues to enforce its right of access under FOIA, including litigation if necessary. Accordingly, OGE is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

To ensure that this request is properly construed, that searches are conducted in an adequate but efficient manner, and that extraneous costs are not incurred, American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or

¹⁰ FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

¹¹ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

¹² *King v. U.S. Dep't of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223–24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphasis in original).

¹³ *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep't of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

¹⁴ *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and OGE can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in electronic format by email or in PDF or TIF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street, NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on rolling basis.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 5 C.F.R. § 2604.503(c), American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way.¹⁵ Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁶

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of government activities and operations.¹⁷ Mr. Trump continues to benefit financially from the Trump Organization, including its for-profit clubs and hotels,¹⁸ and the public would benefit from knowing whether, how, and to what extent tax dollars are being used to enrich the president. American Oversight seeks agency records regarding how the federal government is recommending the selection of venues for conferences and meetings, selecting lodging accommodations for employees on official travel, and developing protocols for reimbursement. Moreover, the agency records will reveal how the federal government is encouraging or discouraging the expenditure of public dollars at Trump properties. The use of taxpayer dollars to financially benefit the president is of serious concern. The requested records will shed light on how the fact of the president's financial interest in certain meeting venues and lodging accommodations affects how the federal government spends tax dollars.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁹ As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight's financial interest. American Oversight's mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and

¹⁵ 5 C.F.R. § 2604.503(c).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ 5 C.F.R. § 2604.503(c)(1)(i)-(iv).

¹⁸ Dan Alexander et al., *supra* note 1; Craig & Lipton, *supra* note 1.

¹⁹ 5 C.F.R. § 2604.503(c)(2)(i)-(ii).

promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.²⁰ American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney,²¹ American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.²² As another example, American Oversight has a project called "Audit the Wall," where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.²³

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Cerissa Cafasso at foia@americanoversight.org or (202) 869-5246. Also, if American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,



Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight

²⁰ American Oversight currently has approximately 11,100 page likes on Facebook, and 33,400 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited July 20, 2017); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited July 20, 2017).

²¹ *Vetting the Nominees: Solicitor General Nominee Noel Francisco*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/our-actions/vetting-nominees-solicitor-general-nominee-noel-francisco>.

²² *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/news/francisco-travel-ban-learned-doj-documents>.

²³ *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, www.auditthewall.org.