SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK
COUNTY OF NEW YORK: CIVIL TERM : PART 17
IN THE MATTER OF JANON FISHER,
Petitioner,
Index No.
FOR JUDGMENT PURSUANT TO ARTICLE 78
157755/2021
OF THE CIVIL PRACTICE LAW AND RULES
-against
THE CITY OF NEW YORK OFFICE OF THE MAYOR,
Respondent.
OFFICIAL ADDRESS: New York Supreme Court 60 Centre Street New York, New York 10007 December 1, 2022

B E F O R E: (Via Microsoft Teams)
HON. SHLOMO S. HAGLER, Justice of the Supreme Court

A P P E A R A N C E S: (Via Microsoft Teams)
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THE CLERK: We'll start with the petitioner. Please state your name, firm, agency and address. I direct your attention to our court reporter, Ms. Laura Ludovico for your appearances.

MS. NEITZEY: Christina Neitzey representing Petitioner Janon Fisher. Today I'm with Cornell Law School First Amendment Clinic. The address is Myron Taylor Hall, Ithaca, New York 14853.

And today I'm supervising certified law student Connor Flannery, who will be arguing today.

MS. SMITH: Good morning.
Marlena Smith on behalf of the City and the respondents, 100 Church Street, New York, New York 10007, Corporation Counsel's office.
(Brief pause in the record.)
THE COURT: Okay. So, counsel, would you like to argue the petition?

MR. FLANNERY: Yes, Your Honor.
THE COURT: Please do so.
MS. SMITH: Thank you.
MR. FLANNERY: Thank you. Good afternoon.
May it please the Court. My name is Connor Flannery. I'm a certified law student appearing on the -I'm appearing as a certified law student with the consent of the First Department and this Court on behalf of

Petitioner Janon Fisher. And I just want to take a moment and say thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

THE COURT: Before you start, $I$ just want to note that it's a very valuable experience that you're doing. I, myself, was an intern and $I$ wish I did what you're doing. I interned for various private and public institutions and I applaud you for your courage and for the work in this case. Obviously, this won't affect one way or the other. I just wanted to note that it's always a pleasure seeing a student thriving and trying to do his or her best in law school. So, I wish you all the best in the future.

Now you may begin.
MR. FLANNERY: Thank you, Your Honor.
Your Honor, may I please request two minutes for rebuttal at this time?

THE COURT: Yes.
MR. FLANNERY: May it please the Court.
Petitioner made a FOIL request for all uniform judicial questionnaires for applicants currently under review by the Mayor's Advisory Committee on the Judiciary. Disclosure of these questionnaires is required under FOIL. All records held by agencies like the MACJ are presumed open to the public unless records or portions of those records fall within one of FOIL's enumerated exemptions.

Disclosure in this case serves dual fundamental

Laura L. Ludovico, SCR
purposes. First, assessing the qualifications and fitness of candidates and nominees for New York City's Civil, Criminal and Family Courts. Second, ensuring the transparency of the selection process itself. It is crucial that the public understand and be able to assess the integrity of the process to ensure that the judicial appointments are made on merit.

Respondent has failed to meet its burden to show that the requested information falls squarely within a FOIL exemption. Respondent has categorically denied petitioner's request and opposes disclosure of the questionnaires for three reasons; safety of public interest, privilege and privacy.

With respect to privacy, respondent has failed to show that the candidates or nominees have a privacy interest in withholding the questionnaires. Respondent must demonstrate why each component of the questionnaires falls squarely within a FOIL exemption and those exemptions are construed narrowly.

FOIL compels disclosure, not concealment.
Whenever the agency fails to demonstrate, an exemption applies. Respondent claims, but fails to demonstrate, that disclosure of information would be an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy, but these unsupported assertions are not enough; there must be evidentiary support. Information
in the questionnaires is not expressly exempt. Employment history is not expressly exempt when a position requires certain levels of education and prior work experience. And the references of the candidates and nominees are not expressly exempt.

Once outside the enumerated exemptions, the Court must balance the interests of public access and individual privacy. Respondent manufacturers risk in an attempt to support their argument that this is an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy, but the real risk in this case is opacity. Lack of transparency in the judicial appointment process threatens to undermine public confidence in and respect for both governmental decision making and judicial authority. Even if respondent had demonstrated a privacy interest at stake, that minimal interest cannot possibly outweigh the dual public interest.

This Court has stated that the interest in confirming public officials posses the requisite qualifications necessary to perform their duties is fundamental and outweighs candidates' purported privacy interests. Accordingly, the questionnaires must be disclosed. The aspects that do not invade personal privacy must be released. And the public interest in the more personal aspects of the questionnaire outweigh any purported privacy interest.

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The positions at stake are positions of great authority. The information in the questionnaires speaks to candidates' fitness for the bench and the judge's ability to make impartial decisions about law. That's why the majority of states release this sort of information.

Secondly, the public interest in ensuring the selection process is transparent and decided by decisions on merit outweighs candidates' purported privacy interests. It is important that the public understand the entire process; what the original pool was, who was in the original pool, who made it past the original pool and why and even who was dismissed outright are all necessary for the public to understand the entire comprehensive process.

The questionnaires of those who are not ultimately nominated are just as important as those who are nominated because comparison of those questionnaires is the only way to ensure that the selection process is based on merit. Submitting a questionnaire results in giving up some privacy interest. That's the nature of public office. These are positions of great authority.

Next, respondent argues that the information should be exempt because of a public interest privilege, but the Court of Appeals has explicitly stated that the public interest privilege -THE COURT: Sir, let me stop you for a second.

Before you move on to the public interest privilege, let's stay with the privacy privilege now for the time being. Let me just understanded your position.

Are you saying that the entirety of the document must be disclosed because it does not in any way create an unwarranted invasion of privacy to the candidates?

MR. FLANNERY: Well, respectfully, Your Honor, it's the respondent's burden to show that each part of the questionnaire falls into an enumerated exemption and outside of those enumerated exemptions, the balancing test favors public access.

THE COURT: So, let me cite to you one of your documents, NYSCEF Document No. 15, which is a letter from the Committee on Open Government, which is dated March 26, 2021 to Mr. Fisher, petitioner herein. It goes through, at the very least, that the candidate's home address, date of birth and information relating to the candidate's children could be redacted on personal privacy grounds. In parentheses, these are just examples, not an all-inclusive list.

Would you want the respondent to provide, for example, the candidate's children? I'm not sure you want that information and why that would be relevant.

MR. FLANNERY: No, Your Honor, we do not want that information. Of course, there are parts of the

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questionnaire that can be redacted.
THE COURT: Okay, good. So, I wanted to make that clear because you're not asking for a wholesale production, you're asking for relevant production of the materials that could be released and certain information such as what I just explained on the record, and to me, I would not want, nor would I permit, the candidate's children to be involved in this at all. That would be an unwarranted invasion of privacy, as the Committee on Open Government suggested.

And there are case law out there that actually deals with that. For instance, the date of birth. You know, we know that as a matter of law you're not really supposed to ask on interview the date of birth and we all know that. And this is a candidate that is essentially seeking a job, so that may violate certain laws. So, obviously, that type of stuff must be redacted. Even the candidate's home address, why would the candidate's home address be necessary to evaluate whether or not the candidate's fit to be a mayoral appointment for office?

MR. FLANNERY: Right. Your Honor, we agree with that and $I$ believe we conceded in our briefing that we're happy to redact that information.

THE COURT: Okay, because I wanted to make that clear because the way you did your introduction, it seemed
to me that you may have backtracked from that position and that you -- as a matter of fact, you even stated that it's the burden upon the respondent, which you're correct, to enunciate the various exemptions to the FOIL law. It's presumptively -- there's a presumption in your favor that it should be released and then the burden is upon the respondent to come forward with the particulars of that exemption and I agree with that. I'm not shifting the burden. The burden is on the respondent, it's not on the petitioner. So, at the very least, you're conceding that there may be certain information within that questionnaire that may be redacted?

MR. FLANNERY: Yes, Your Honor.
THE COURT: Okay, perfect. I wanted that for the record.

So, counselor, let's move on. Counselor. Sir, you may move on.

MR. FLANNERY: Thank you, Your Honor.
I'll move on to the public interest privilege, which is another reason that respondent opposes disclosure of these records, but the public interest privilege does not apply to the FOIL context. In fact, the court of Appeals explicitly stated that the public interest privilege cannot protect materials, which FOIL requires be disclosed from disclosure.

Plainly, respondent seeks to create a FOIL exemption out of whole cloth. The public interest privilege is not an enumerated exemption. And respectfully, Your Honor, if you read the entire statute and looked for the public interest privilege, you'd be looking in vain. Respondent cannot amend FOIL in this proceeding.

Further, the records sought here do not contain deliberative communications. The petitioner seeks purely factual information that is not exempt by FOIL.

And finally, moving on to the third reason, safety. Respondents fail to show that disclosure presents any risks to the judicial candidate's safety. Mere speculation is not enough, but again, speculation is all the respondent does. Disclosure does not increase the likelihood that candidates and nominees will be placed in jeopardy. There's insufficient detail in the questionnaires to be a risk and the respondent must demonstrate that the information falls into the exemption.

Petitioner does not intend to argue over information like residential addresses, phone numbers, names of family members or Social Security. Overall, we are seeking the questionnaires to the extent reasonable and in light of these arguments, we request the Court grant the petition in full.

Thank you.
THE COURT: Okay, thank you so much.
It's now my pleasure to hear from respondent's counsel.

MS. SMITH: Good afternoon, Your Honor.
Pursuant to the petitioner's FOIL request, they are seeking the job applications for every applicant under review by the MACJ. However, the Supreme Court of the United States has explained that FOIL's central purpose is to open the government's activities, not to disclose information about private citizens and that is precisely what the petitioners are seeking here. Highly personal information --

THE COURT: Let me stop you. Are you telling me that if someone puts their hand up, puts in an application to be a judge, that person is not committing to having scrutiny and that person remains an individual that's private? Like, for instance, myself, if I want to obtain a position, which obviously, I have now for Supreme Court, and I put in an application to a judicial screening panel, I may be a private person, but I'm seeking a public office, isn't there a greater need for the public to know that we have competent and the very best of the best that are serving the great state of New York?

MS. SMITH: Certainly, and that is taken into

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consideration with how this MACJ process unfolds. When you are applying for this position, certainly you're seeking public office, that's not refuted, but the point remains that disclosing all of these job applications, essentially because you're applying to a public office, all of these individuals, when one is selected, the balancing test here does not weigh in favor of releasing all of that private information for individuals who, after all of this, most remain private, only one is selected. So, balancing those two against each other, does not weigh in favor of releasing all of this information.

And the Court of Appeals has recognized the legitimate need for the government to keep some matters confidential. Applied here, there's no -- no reasonable person will agree that all of this very private information should be public because you are submitting this job application.

THE COURT: Let me stop you because I agree partially with you and I think that the petitioner also agrees partially with you. Certainly I don't think that the questionnaire should be released in its present form without redaction. And you heard concessions on the record and also in paper that they're willing to shield certain private personal information, for instance, children. There is no reason whatsoever that the petitioner, nor the

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public, should know about children. For instance, if I have children, why does it matter if I have children and I'm dealing with this case? Obviously, if it involves some type of children case, I may have a certain conflict, then, yes, but absent conflict or some unique circumstance, it shouldn't matter.

So, they're agreeing with that, but you're telling me a wholesale rejection because certain portions of the questionnaire are certainly private, and I think they conceded that. So, my question to you is not one of specific redactions, but would you be open to the notion that at the very least the public should know who these peoples' names are and there is public information that's out there. Why shouldn't the public know what -- that -I'm making up a name -- John Smith is a candidate for -and I'm making this up -- for Criminal Court? Why isn't the -- when you do the balancing test, the need for the public to know that John Smith is putting his name for a position that has huge responsibility and requires a great deal of expertise and involves the public welfare, that the mayor has an opportunity to appoint such and such a person and that the public can comment on that person.

MS. SMITH: Indeed. Well, I understand what you're saying regards to potentially -- if you're saying a name is up for appointment for one specific office, but
that is -- it is still our position that the entirety of it should not be released. I feel -- as for how this process does play out, when a nominee is selected by the mayor, there is a public hearing, there is availability for public input and at that point, when the public hearing is held and people are able to put in their input, the nomination committee can go back and decide to change its mind after that, but as for getting up to that point, the process should remain confidential, as it's set out in the Executive Order, and for those reasons, that is why it is still our position that the entire questionnaire should remain private.

Again, once it gets to the point where the mayor has selected someone, they are coming more into that public spotlight, they are having a public hearing, others are able to put in their input for why or why not John Smith should be selected for this criminal appointment. At that point, all of the reasons that you're noting can be addressed.

And additionally, when again, for instance, John Smith has this public hearing, there is a release of the qualifications that MACJ selected and looked at as to why they were selected for this position. So, all of these qualifications and things like that have an opportunity to be heard before the public.

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THE COURT: So, you did the affirmative response, but how about the negative, the reverse. Let's say, for instance, Mayor de Blasio has Jane Smith that's a good candidate, she's a woman of color and she's a great candidate and Mayor de Blasio, for some reason, doesn't want that candidate or let's make it a Republican mayor, it doesn't have to be Mayor de Blasio, don't you think the public has the right to know that maybe that person was qualified and for certain political reasons -- and I'm not saying this does occur -- that the public would say I think this would have been a great candidate and voice support for that candidate, rather than being negative? So, it goes both ways.

I understand that eventually the candidate that's selected by the mayor is then vetted through a public process. I think that's self explanatory. We all know it happens. And quite frankly, I've actually had various groups send me letters on various candidates that were selected by certain committees and they came in front of me to determine whether or not they were competent and you know, the usual questions that are asked and I've done that process and quite frankly, I've sat on those committees, too when $I$ was in private practice, vetting candidates.

So, the question is what you're doing is limiting it only to those that were selected. Why can't the public

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know those people who were not selected? And I'm not trying to cast aspersions, what I'm saying is that doesn't that open up the doors? The political process allows the sunshine to come in and see who is a candidate and whether that candidate is proper or improper or for whatever reason, should not be a judge --

MS. SMITH: Certainly. So, for --
THE COURT: -- or should be a judge. I'm trying to keep it positive. I'm not going on the negative, I'm going on the positive side.

MS. SMITH: Certainly. There's two parts of my response for that. The first of that, that candidate can seek a judicial appointment via an election, which is all outright right from the beginning. This is not the only avenue to become a judge, this is just the avenue when there's a vacant position that needs to be filled, you know, until the next election. So, for this specific context, outside of this context they do have that exact opportunity. Jane Smith --

THE COURT: No, there's actually not -- you're actually not stating the full picture. There are many appointments by the mayor that continue for decades. Family Court, for instance, correct, they're not elected, right? The mayor selects that person and that is a permanent position. So, that's not really accurate. Even

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though there are instances where you can fill a temporary Civil Court spot, I do maintain that that would be a temporary position, but certainly, Family Court. I actually sat in Family Court myself filling in for certain judges as a Supreme Court Judge. So, I know the process of election.

Just because there is another method by which a candidate may obtain office via election and not by appointment, it doesn't preclude the public to know how the appointment process goes. The election process, we all know is open to the people, and the sunshine is there already. Why not allow more sunshine, more rays of hope that people would, say, okay, I see the process and I know it's a credible process, and they say, okay, I want to be that person? I think this is a valuable goal, a valuable service to our community, and it would encourage people to apply rather than discourage because they know that it's open to everyone. And I see certain people may not want to do that because let's say they have a very high profile job with some big firm making a lot of money and maybe they hear that you put your name in, then they have some consequence, I hear that, too. I don't dispel the possibility that it may in some way harm a candidate that doesn't want his or her identity to be known.
I'm going to let you finish. I already took up
some of your time.
MS. SMITH: It's okay.
THE COURT: I'll give you a few minutes uninterrupted.

MS. SMITH: Okay. So, just continuing with this, with how -- first off, we do cite to the public interest exception, so $I$ will start with that and how the courts have repeatedly recognized confidentially as a valid balancing consideration, specifically, in the judicial nomination process. The Court of Appeals under Cirale, that the hallmark of the public interest disclosures is that it is applicable when the public interest would be harmed if the material were to lose its cloak of confidentiality. Confidentiality in the judicial nominating process here is very important and the First Department has recognized that the public interest privilege applies to the MACJ. It held that because of the public interest of petitioner's request, unbridled discovery could conceivably do more damage to the usual functioning.

Additionally, the petitioners cite two cases that are -- in support of their argument cite to cases that essentially are requesting personnel records of a city employee in support of their argument. This does not help the petitioner's argument either because here they are not
seeking personnel records of a city employee, but rather, applications from private candidates, specifically, candidates that are still under review. Their request specifically asks for the questionnaires for individuals under review.

The information sought by the petitioners, they claim will allow citizens to assess candidates and will allow the public to better understand the qualifications for the MACJ and the mayor, but this -- petitioner's claim to argue on behalf of the public interest, but this interest can also be served by keeping certain government documents privileged. The Court has found that the necessity of confidentiality is necessary as it applies to the Mayor's Committee on the Judiciary.

And as to the second, the invasion of personal privacy, this request is an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. The test of whether an invasion of personal privacy is unwarranted could require the balancing of the privacy interest at stake against the public interest of disclosure. Again, the central purpose of FOIL is to open the government's activities, not to simply disclose information about private citizens.

And the information contained within these questionnaires includes names, addresses, information about everyone applicant lived with, every residence for the last

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ten years, all employment and why they left, financial and tax history, certain romantic relationships, even litigation, including matrimonial information.

THE COURT: Ms. Smith, I'm agreeing with you. All of that information could be redacted. That doesn't mean that you can't give certain pertinent information. That was my point. And you keep on highlighting what needs to be redacted and it's troubling that you harp on that even though it's been conceded that that information should not be public and that would invade the privacy of those individuals.

MS. SMITH: Perhaps it would help me to tailor my argument if I knew then, because it was my understanding, based on petitioner's initial request, that they were seeking the entire questionnaire, so I'm trying to show why this questionnaire, piece by piece, as is my burden, is not required.

THE COURT: So, let me make it simple because I don't like that argument. That argument doesn't hold and you heard me interrupt the petitioner, for lack of a better word, counsel, and say do you want me to give it wholesale? And he said very clearly on the record, you heard him, and I wanted to make that perfectly clear that certain information such as the addresses he already said he doesn't want, Social Security number, doesn't want that,
financial information, doesn't want it -- I'm not sure if he said financial information, but I'm not allowing the financial information -- date of birth, children information. All that can't be released. I think we all know that. There's no reason for it whatsoever. Medical issues, for instance, I wouldn't allow that, too, but there comes a point in time where the public can get the information and at the same time safeguard the private information.

So, I am not addressing a wholesale release of the questionnaires. That $I$ won't do. I think that would be inappropriate, improper and would not serve the purposes of the mayoral committee, as well as the -- and would invade the privacy of those individuals, but $I$ think we can do that balancing test. And once you do the balancing test in terms of the prejudice and which one outweighs which, is it the individual need versus the public need, and certainly, when $I$ do that balancing test with regard to the information $I$ just said, $I$ think the individual wins, but with regard to the other stuff, I think the balancing test favors the petitioner.

MS. SMITH: And to that $I$ think that it simply comes down to, I suppose, what we are looking at within the questionnaire. That is where we're at and ultimately goes back to sort of your initial explanation with John Smith

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applying to a certain criminal appointment. That would be, I believe, a completely different instance than needing to get into the nitty-gritty of this entire questionnaire.

THE COURT: You left out Jane Smith. That's the argument that's a better one.

MS. SMITH: I'm sorry, the positive one, Jane Smith.

THE COURT: Yes.
MS. SMITH: I believe that that would be an entirely different argument and discussion if we're looking at, for instance, a list of individuals that are seeking an appointment for a certain judicial position versus, you know, their entire application, which is what we're discussing here. I do agree with you that that's completely different.

THE COURT: I agree with you, Ms. Smith. I don't think that it's warranted to provide a wholesale disclosure of the questionnaire without appropriate redaction. I'm agreeing with you and I think your adversary is agreeing with you, too. I think there's no dispute on that. They don't want all of it. They want pertinent, relevant information that would give the public the sunshine, the information that is permissible.

I keep on using the word sunshine. Remember that the burden is upon you, even though you're the respondent.

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There's a presumption that records with the governmental entity, the respondent is subject to disclosure unless there are specific enumerated reasons for the privilege to be asserted and here you've enumerated the privacy grounds and I think it's a worthy one, but albeit not completely.

And let's move on from privacy because -- did you finish your privacy argument because -- and I know you went into public interest. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about in public interest and then $I$ want to get to safety because I'm running out of time?

MS. SMITH: No, sir, we could go ahead to safety. THE COURT: So, what's the safety concern? If we redact the addresses of the applicant, what safety concern would there be?

MS. SMITH: With the addresses, I believe there's still other areas of this questionnaire that raise safety concerns. For instance, any litigation that's been involved with either an attorney or a judge, that information, along with their name, I believe that that does raise safety concerns.

THE COURT: How? It's public information. When you file a case there's public information. Maybe I misunderstood you. You're saying that there was litigation by this individual? Let's call it -- let's pick on John Smith again. If John Smith sues -- you want to -- are you

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talking about -- the City of New York, let's say, for instance. I can't help it, I'm picking on the City, too. So, John Smith sues the City of New York and he has -there's a pothole in the street and the car runs over it, he breaks his tire. Thank God, he doesn't get hurt, but he totaled his car. As a matter of fact, that happened outside the courthouse one day. It's a famous case. It wasn't a pothole, it was like a sinkhole and it was actually a judge that fell right in -- that the whole car fell into the sinkhole right in front of the Court. It's a famous case and he did sue, so that's what I'm thinking of. It just popped up.

So, let's say John Smith sues the City of New York and he doesn't get a sinkhole, he has a pothole, and he breaks his tire and it causes him to careen into a light and totals his car and thank God, he comes out unscathed, it's a miracle, so that should be shielded? I don't understand what you're saying.

MS. SMITH: Well, certainly not in that instance. Again, $I$ believe that since we've already discussed the fact that household addresses to, you know, match someone up with is not on the table here, I can understand what you're saying in that type of litigation.

THE COURT: So, tell me, what type of litigation would there be confidentiality?

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MS. SMITH: Well, it's not just, for instance, civil litigation, it's also matrimonial, which is highly personal and should not be included.

THE COURT: Fair enough. You're right. I would not permit the matrimonial. It's irrelevant whether or not they're going through a matrimonial. Also, if there's a Family Court case, you're not entitled to that, too. I agree with that, but that's a sector -- we can carve out exceptions. Remember, there's a rule, but sometimes there's more exceptions to the rule than the rule. You know, the hearsay rule no matter how many exceptions you have?

MS. SMITH: Absolutely.
THE COURT: We can work on that.

MS. SMITH: And I agree with what you're saying, but I think that there are additional safety concerns that also just go to -- well, not so much safety. This would be me going back to the privacy concern, but I'll just stay on safety in that there are just other issues going through the questionnaire that raise safety concerns. There are also the issues, as you mentioned, risk of embarrassment with your current employer. There are other issues that will arise and that may even -- you say that that will encourage -- petitioner may say that that will encourage, you know, the openness, but it would also discourage

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individuals from applying for a position while you're at your current position.

THE COURT: It's a balancing test.
MS. SMITH: Yes. Again, it is a balancing test.
THE COURT: That's not safety. That's not
safety, right? It wouldn't be unsafe. No one is going to put a gun to his head, God forbid, and say you have to stay at this big law firm that I'm at because he has a right to leave. He may not fare well there; his partner will say I thought you were happy here, he may have an unpleasant conversation. I don't want that, but that's very far from the exemption of safety, right?

MS. SMITH: Certainly, it's not safety. That's why I said I was starting to kind of go back to the privacy, but keeping it on the safety, you're correct.

THE COURT: So, we all know that the real thrust of the argument is privacy. The other two really are minimally connected to this case. I can't see any safety issues if you redact the addresses so no one is coming to that house of that individual. That's not necessary and they don't even want it. In fact, when a judge puts in a petition for office, the address is on there, quite frankly. I have to let you know that. For instance, my address is on the petition when I went to Supreme Court and every other judge. So, that's public information, I hate
to tell you.
So, I'm saying even in this situation you can redact it. Even that is subject to disclosure. It's required by law that the name and address be put on there for very good reason, because if you're a candidate for office, let's say in New York County, they should know that you have an address in New York County and that would occur in any other jurisdiction as well. There's a very good reason for it.

I digress, but let me let you finish up. I want to give counsel a few minutes for rebuttal.

MS. SMITH: Well, we've gone through all the exceptions, $I$ believe, that still in summary, the release of this questionnaire and this information will chill the candor of applicants, which is a very big portion of this entire process and that candor and confidentiality are valid considerations in the applicable balancing test.

THE COURT: Okay. Let me just ask you one last question. I think $I$ know the answer to the question, but $I$ want to clear it up. The respondent is not raising the issue that the respondent is not an agency that would be subject to disclosure under FOIL. You're saying you are an agency and that you're not an advisory organization that would merely be giving advice rather than an agency, you didn't raise that argument, correct?

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MS. SMITH: Right. Correct, we did not make that argument.

THE COURT: Okay, good, because that's a major argument within the litigation that $I$ looked at and it's also part of the letter, Committee on Open Government, whether you are or you are not and they obviously found that in New York, that the respondent is an agency under the FOIL law.

Okay. Let me allow for rebuttal and then I'll make a decision.

MR. FLANNERY: Just trying to make sure I was unmuted.

THE COURT: Always a good idea.
MR. FLANNERY: Thank you.

Your Honor, in their argument respondent once again, makes claims and assertions without providing evidence or support. By issuing categorical denial of the entire questionnaire, respondent effectively asked the Court to either amend FOIL in this proceeding or to ignore precedent and uphold that categorical denial. The respondent failed to demonstrate the disclosure of the qualifications, names and pertinent information, is an unwarranted invasion of privacy and they failed to demonstrate that disclosure will endanger the candidates and nominees.

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Again, FOIL compels disclosure, not concealment whenever the agency fails to demonstrate an exemption applies and accordingly, we again, request the Court grant the petition in full.

THE COURT: Okay, thank you very much.
This is actually a very interesting issue and I have researched and researched and researched to see if I could find any case law that you haven't found and quite frankly, you found it all. I have meticulously reviewed the judicial questionnaire. It's a very lengthy one. I'm quite familiar with it because the judicial questionnaires that $I$ filled out in my prior experience is similar to this, so $I$ am quite familiar with this application.

Let's address the lesser exemptions. Let's address safety first. Quite frankly, when $I$ read the argument, I couldn't understand what the safety concern would be. Counsel is correct, petitioner is correct, it's sheer speculation that release of this information would cause a safety to those individuals. Quite frankly, if you redact the home addresses, that would probably resolve much of it. Again, it's quite ironic that many candidates for judicial office have to put down their addresses, including myself, so $I$ just make that as an aside. So, there is really no exemption for safety.

Now, let's go in reverse order; public interest
exemption really does not exist. Really, what you're trying to do is a balancing test, which I really want to get into when I deal with privacy. The respondent, because they play such a function, doesn't get to make up exemptions really out of whole cloth. There is none at all. It's really subsumed in the invasion of privacy. So, what you're really saying is the same thing.

So, I really want to get the heart of the matter, which really is one exemption; does it provide for a unwarranted invasion of privacy? And let me just repeat what I said, which is obvious. The burden is squarely on the respondent and the questionnaire is presumptively to be released unless the respondent comes forward with the enumerated exemption. And the only one that possibly can attach is invasion of privacy.

And quite frankly, I read the Committee on Open Government determination and it sat well with me. I think what they said is correct and even before I read the letter, that was my personal opinion after reading the case law. Remember that we have to do a balancing test and you have to balance the interests of the individual versus the public need to know and given that FOIL is there to be -the FOIL laws were there to provide for that sunshine that I keep on referring to, that it should be provided unless there is an exemption. The preference is to release and
the exemption is there only to guard against the various possibilities that occur, hence, the invasion of privacy.

Now, let's speak to that. There are several cases that were cited and the ones that speak to me the most are Kwasnik, $\mathrm{K}-\mathrm{W}-\mathrm{A}-\mathrm{S}-\mathrm{N}-\mathrm{I}-\mathrm{K}, \mathrm{versus} \mathrm{City} \mathrm{of} \mathrm{New} \mathrm{York}$, 262 AD2d 171 [1st Dept. 1999]. While this is not on all fours, however, the First Department noted that certain information should be released, for instance, the dates of attendance at academic institutions. That's one thing. And the Committee on Open Government also provided for other information that quite frankly, is within the public sphere and there is no invasion of privacy.

Education. There is no reason why a candidate's education, where he or she went to college, to law school, licensure, whether or not they're licensed to practice law, I think that's a given. I don't even think that should even be discussed. I don't think the mayor's office would permit.

And whether or not they have public employment; do they work for the City of New York, do they work for the state? Things like that can be released. It just doesn't make any sense to shield this in secrecy, in darkness. There must be sunshine. There really must be sunshine in the process. However, that doesn't mean that the entirety of the questionnaire must be released.

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Therefore, this Court grants the petition to the extent that the respondent must redact all personal information and must provide, at the very least, the public information. And I'll allow counsel to do so and if it's not appropriate, we'll have the second round because I'm not going to second guess what the respondent will do and if I have to do in camera inspections or I have to deal with it in categories, $I$ will do so at a later time.

At this juncture I'm only ruling on the principle, overriding principle; is this subject to privacy? Possibly. Should it be completely withdrawn from the public sphere? The answer is categorically, no. Does it invade the privacy of the individual? Possibly. And you may redact that information. And again, I don't think it should be that complicated.

Public information, things that are necessary for the qualifications that within the public sphere has to be released, things like dates -- the addresses of the candidates, dates of birth, Social Security, financial information. And counsel made a good point. If they're in litigation in a matrimonial matter, that doesn't get released, you know, if there's a Family Court matter, that doesn't get released, it involves the children. However, the names, $I$ don't see how that would be an invasion of privacy. They're not cloaked with that privacy. If you do

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the balancing test, the need for the public to know, and I'm dealing with this in a positive way, I'm not casting aspersions, then maybe the public wants to know that this was this candidate that was a great candidate and for some reason was not chosen. And then vice versa, it could happen to a candidate that was chosen, but that we know, because that would be revealed already when they are vetted through the judicial process.

Therefore, this Court grants the petition to the extent set forth on the record. Please submit an order and I will have another return date. Please contact my clerk if you wish another return date after the redaction. If you believe that the redacted version is a good and accurate redaction based upon this Court's order, it will be a final order and if you need further -- if you need further rulings, $I$ will be ready to do so at a later time.

So, how do you want to work this, do you want me to give you a date now or you just upon request ask the Court for another date?

MS. NEITZEY: I think just upon request works from my perspective, Your Honor. Thank you.

THE COURT: Ms. Smith, is that fine?
MS. SMITH: Yes, that's fine.
THE COURT: And remember, you're an officer of the Court, please try to work out your differences before
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